

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 4
Issue 2 *Volume 4, Issue 2 (Spring 1995)*

Article 7

4-1-1995

José Cuello, El norte, el noreste y Saltillo en la historia colonial de México

Félix D. Almaráz Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

Recommended Citation

Almaráz, Félix D. Jr. "José Cuello, El norte, el noreste y Saltillo en la historia colonial de México." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 4, 2 (1995): 218. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol4/iss2/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

El norte, el noreste y Saltillo en la historia colonial de México. By José Cuello. (Saltillo: Archivo Municipal de Saltillo, 1990. 190 pp. Maps, notes. Price not available.)

José Cuello devoted sixteen months to a research project in which he sifted through a multitude of Spanish colonial records in Saltillo, the capital of Coahuila, trying to sort out similarities and contrasts between Mexico's northern frontier and the American Southwest. An apparent common denominator was the aridity of the region.

From the outset Cuello discarded Herbert E. Bolton's thesis of the Spanish borderlands as inadequate for his study. Its advocates, he argued, eagerly separated themselves from the rest of Latin America. Moreover, the specialization, at least in the beginning, focused on spectacular exploration, loftily missionary ideals, intrepid colonizers, and picturesque military cavalcades.

In the search for a suitable model, Cuello constructed a different theoretical framework to accommodate less narration and more analysis of

archival evidence. Catapulting beyond the territorial limits of the Spanish borderlands, the author rediscovered northern colonial Mexico which, he asserted, was an integral part of Latin America.

In the process of analyzing a plethora of research data, Cuello composed five closely related essays, presented at various conferences and subsequently published in a series of scholarly journals. Mexico's northern frontier, he avowed, is an ideal laboratory for comparative studies of colonial government. Administrative and political entities, for example, were much more extensive in the north than in the south due to the lack of population density. From another perspective, the objectives of the Spanish crown (promotion of law and order and the imposition of tariff duties) and those of royal government bureaucrats (profits and taxes) were similar in both regions. The role of political governors and town *alcaldes* (mayors) in the colonial economy has eluded serious investigation. Taking Saltillo as a case study, Cuello discerned that many of the *alcaldes mayores* were commercial merchants who extended credit to borrowers in agricultural areas and then used their official status to collect delinquent personal debts.

Throughout the five essays, the recurring theme is a plea for Mexican historians of the colonial era to overcome parochial boundaries and to develop new themes and methodologies, aimed at elevating the level of scholarship to respectable heights. The author's particular intent was to integrate the scholarship produced by historians of the southwestern United States with that published in northern Mexico.

The scope of Cuello's study of Saltillo, built upon the earlier work of Woodrow Borah, François Chevalier, William Taylor, Eric Van Young, and others, extended from a thorough examination of the myth of the colonial hacienda to a review of the tenacity of the *encomienda* and Indian labor as late as the eighteenth century. Another topic—the adaptation of Indians in the northeastern corridor to the Spanish labor systems in neighboring Chihuahua—embraced a variety of sub-themes (compulsory work, diseases, Tlascaltecos and the phenomena of *mestizaje*, diet, clothing, nuclear and extended families, religious indoctrination, and linguistic changes) that unquestionably reflected the breadth of the author's research.

Finally, Cuello investigated the impact of the Bourbon reforms upon the colonial economy of Saltillo during a period of imperial crisis in the late eighteenth century. The changes included political reorganization and the collection of revenues to offset expenditures in additional administration and frontier defense, which culminated in an internal crisis fomented by a second wave of consumer taxes.

In this study, José Cuello's contribution is more in the realm of conceptual design than in compact encyclopedic data to supplement the corpus

of general knowledge about Latin America. To be sure, wherever appropriate he has fleshed out the skeletal framework with a sufficient degree of relevant information, all of which enhances the study of a northern Mexican region with deeply entrenched colonial roots.

Félix D. Almaráz, Jr.
Texas State Historical Association