

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 5
Issue 3 Volume 5, Issue 3 (Summer 1996)

Article 8

6-1-1996

Linda A. Newson, Life and Death in Early Colonial Ecuador

Donald Ramos

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

Recommended Citation

Ramos, Donald. "Linda A. Newson, Life and Death in Early Colonial Ecuador." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 5, 3 (1996): 358. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol5/iss3/8>

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.

Life and Death in Early Colonial Ecuador. By Linda A. Newson. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. xii + 505 pp. Maps, tables, appendixes, glossaries, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.)

Life and Death in Early Colonial Ecuador, a very detailed study of the native population of the region which came to be called Ecuador, is a continuation of Linda Newson's examination of the ways in which different New World societies reacted to the arrival of Europeans. With this work, the

author fills an important gap in the historiography of New World societies by providing an impressive exploration of the complexities of the demographic history of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Ecuador.

The introduction and conclusion of this methodically complex work provide fascinating interpretative explorations of the multiple layers of issues involved in the demographic history of a region which underwent successive waves of change. The rest of the text is divided into three major sections: Ecuador prior to Inka (the spelling used by Newson) expansion, the consequences of Inka expansion, and the impact of the Spanish conquest. The first and last of these sections are subdivided into geographic/cultural regions: the Coast, the Sierra, and the Oriente. Each region is then divided according to cultural/tribal groups. For example, the coastal region on the eve of the Spanish conquest is divided into the following groups: Malaba; the Nigua, Cayapa, Campaz, and Caraque; Manta; Huancavilca; Puná; and Chono. Furthermore, it is important to note that these sections are not mechanical in form, as each is examined on its own terms with the author focusing on issues relevant to the group's circumstances.

The author concludes that the pre-Spanish population of Ecuador was 1.6 million people. She estimates population losses along the coast to be 95.3 percent; in the Sierra 80.4 percent; and, in the Oriente, 73.3 percent for the High Selva and 71.1 percent for the Low Selva. Also of interest is the detailed treatment of the early economic activities developed by the Spanish. Whether in urban economic activities in the Quito basin, agriculture in Cuenca and the northern Sierra, mining in Cuenca and Loja, or textiles (*obrajes*) in Riobamba, Otavalo, and Latacunga provinces, the native population constituted the essential resource, which was often sufficient reason for the creation of a Spanish community.

Life and Death in Early Colonial Ecuador makes several important contributions. Encyclopedic in scope, it draws on Spanish documents as well as archaeological, ethnological, and environmental sources, thus serving as a rich source for information regarding Ecuador's inhabitants. Second, this work treats the uneven expansion of Inka rule into the region as intrinsically significant and linked to the demographic collapse that would destroy the native populations of the region.

Furthermore, Newson demonstrates that not all native peoples suffered the same demographic experience, although, as she makes clear, all suffered substantially. A range of factors help explain the differences, such as the variation between native cultures like the Napo Omagua who lived in nucleated settlements along rivers and the Encabellado and Abijira who had more dispersed patterns of settlement. The type of environment also played a critical role, with the Coast, Sierra, and Oriente serving as broad definers. Other factors included the length and intensity of Inka rule, the political

organization of the native population, nutritional patterns, the magnitude and proximity of Spanish settlements, and the labor institutions imposed by the Spanish. Of special note is the significance of the use of natives to support the hundreds of Spanish expeditions which decimated native porters and foragers above and beyond those directly killed in the fighting. This complex of factors shaped the impact of Old World diseases on the native population and Newson's treatment of the interaction of these factors is both critical and enlightening.

Newson has attempted to marshal all available evidence using massive archival research. This provides *Life and Death in Early Colonial Ecuador* with considerable strength and at the same time gives it the sense of being a catalogue. When the evidence is not clear-cut or persuasive, Newson provides the issues in dispute and allows her readers to draw their own conclusions. This is a formidable work supported by a wide range of evidence painstakingly pieced together.

Donald Ramos
Department of History
Cleveland State University