Jean-Pierre Berthe, Thomas Calvo, and Águeda Jiménez Pelayo, Sociedades en construcción: la Nueva Galicia según las visitas de oidores, 1606-1616

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This volume is an edited collection of three visitas generales (general inspections) of the Guadalajara region of Nueva Galicia conducted during the first two decades of the seventeenth century. The editors who undertook the labor-intensive transcription of these three hefty surveys introduce the documents and provide biographical information about the individual audiencia oidores (judges) who conducted the visitas. Dividing this work into three distinct sections, each editor transcribed and introduced one visita: Thomas Calvo for Juan de Paz y Vallecillo (1606-1607), Jean-Pierre Berthe for Gaspar de la Fuente (1608-1609), and Águeda Jiménez Pelayo for Juan Dávalos y Toledo (1616). The volume does not include the visitas in their entirety, but only select sections. Calvo and Jiménez Pelayo have written a general introduction in which they discuss the characteristics of visitas in the Spanish tradition, provide a brief history of the visita in New Spain, and distinguish these inspections from other similar governmental inquiries, such as residencias and pesquisas. The editors have also compiled useful indexes of names and geographic locations, which facilitate comparative analysis.
Like most visitas, these documents contain extensive data on the regional economy (ranching and mining) and communities (local government, population, diversity). As the editors suggest, the visitas provide a series of glimpses into the formation of societies and communities in this corner of New Spain. While the inspections seemed to focus on agriculture, mining, and labor in their survey of the economic potential of the region, the documents also contain valuable information useful to the social and cultural historian. The oidores utilized their expertise to settle legal disputes, assessed governmental structures, and attempted to ensure that each community was well governed. Inspections also focused on population growth and migration, and thus provided insight into the development of Afro-Mexican, Spanish, and mestizo populations, in addition to indigenous communities. Church infrastructure—the number of priests, church and monastery construction, and the process of evangelization—also punctuates these surveys. While the focus on different populations had, as its principal purpose, the assessment of the availability of labor, these inspections also provide insight into the formation of regional communities.

The editors rightly contend that the visitas chosen for this volume have special value, in part because they document regional changes over a short and remarkably productive period of time. These visitas document a decade of tremendous growth in the Zacatecas mining district and, in turn, demonstrate how the increase in silver production affected regional growth and development outside of the mining areas. Visitas themselves are fairly rare archival discoveries. Rarer still are those visitas that cover the same region over such a brief period of time. These documents beg for comparative analysis.

Overall, this work lacks only a critical voice. The introduction does flesh out the background of the visita as an instrument of the Spanish royal bureaucracy, however, a critical evaluation of the documents would help to broaden the work. Problems with the use of visitas in historical writing, such as the reliability and accuracy of the information they contain and the self-interest of the official in charge of the visita, should have been addressed by the editors. The editors also neglect to comment on the extent to which the visita served as a disruptive intrusion into local affairs by royal or viceregal authorities. The very uniqueness of these documents also raises the question: Why did these massive inspections follow one another in such close proximity? A critical essay by the editors, all of whom have published extensively on this region, would have provided the reader with the necessary tools to understand the complexity of these useful and engaging documents.

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