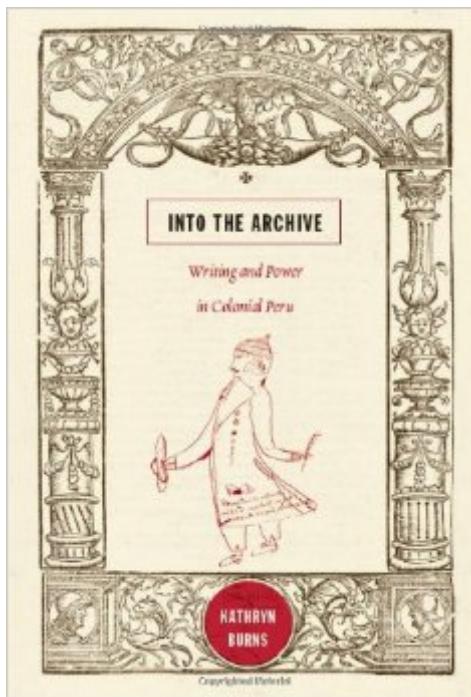


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Into The Archive: Writing And Power In Colonial Peru



Synopsis

Writing has long been linked to power. For early modern people on both sides of the Atlantic, writing was also the province of notaries, men trained to cast other people's words in official forms and make them legally true. Thus the first thing Columbus did on American shores in October 1492 was have a notary record his claim of territorial possession. It was the written, notarial word "backed by all the power of Castilian enforcement" that first constituted Spanish American empire. Even so, the Spaniards who invaded America in 1492 were not fond of their notaries, who had a dismal reputation for falsehood and greed. Yet Spaniards could not do without these men. Contemporary scholars also rely on the vast paper trail left by notaries to make sense of the Latin American past. How then to approach the question of notarial truth? Kathryn Burns argues that the archive itself must be historicized. Using the case of colonial Cuzco, she examines the practices that shaped document-making. Notaries were businessmen, selling clients a product that conformed to local custom as well as Spanish templates. Clients, for their part, were knowledgeable consumers, with strategies of their own for getting what they wanted. In this inside story of the early modern archive, Burns offers a wealth of possibilities for seeing sources in fresh perspective.

Book Information

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Into the Archive is a study of the work that notaries (scribes acquainted with legal conventions) did in colonial Peru, with a special emphasis on sixteenth-century Cuzco. Individual chapters explore notaries' work and reputation in medieval and Renaissance Spain, their role in Spanish America, the day-to-day dynamics of their work, how Spanish colonists could manipulate the written record, and

how historians might read the sometimes opaque or misleading documents that notaries created. "The point of these readings, and this book," writes Kathryn Burns, "is to enrich the way we read our sources. If we know how archives were made, and the ways people might use them to further their own ends, then our interpretations can go further" (p. 143). Anyone who plans to do original research in colonial Spanish American archives will find this book invaluable. Others may find it interesting as a work of social and cultural history: it illuminates aspects of literacy, the law, apprenticeship, and Spanish-Indian relations in colonial Peru. Well-written, crisp, and focused, technical yet also full of human interest, it is a model of historical scholarship.

This book is a great approach to the archives as history and a research question separate from the material housed within them. I recommend this book if you are a student of history and researching in any type of Spanish archive.

Brilliant research

Extremely readable account that opens up insights into the relationship between records and power. Turns out history isn't always written by the winners. Most often, it's written -- and shaped -- by their notaries and clerks.

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