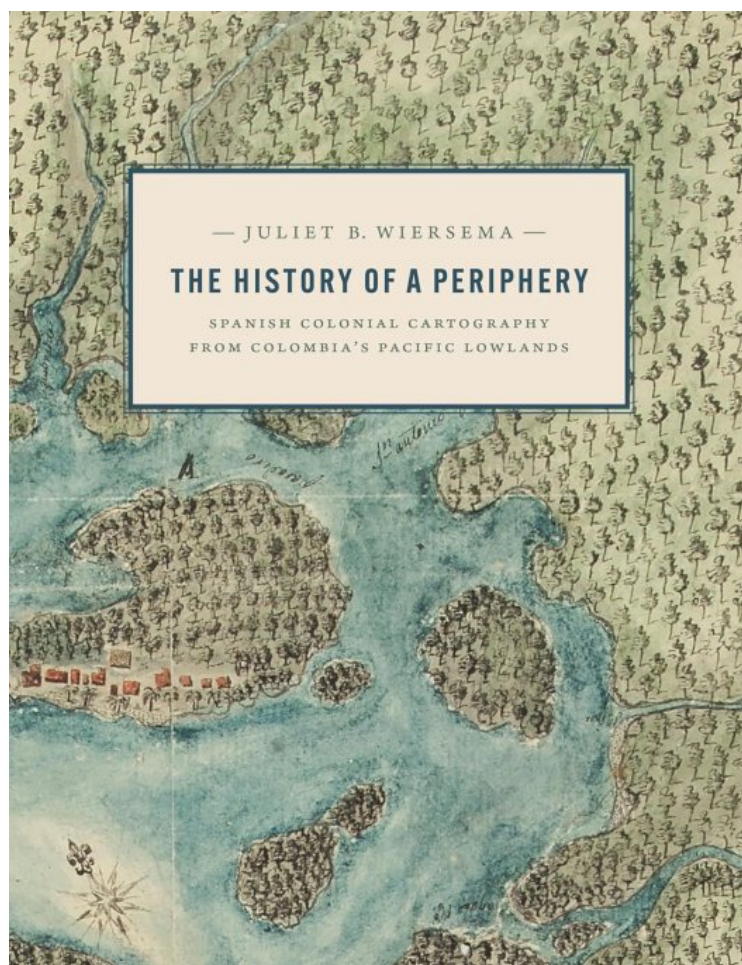




[< issue toc next >>](#)

Book Review: The History of a Periphery: Spanish Colonial Cartography from Colombia's Pacific Lowlands.

reviewed by Susan M. Moore



Wiersema, Juliet B. *The History of a Periphery: Spanish Colonial Cartography from Colombia's Pacific Lowlands*. First edition. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023.



xii, 168 p., 8 unnumbered plates. \$60.00 LC: 2022-051898 ISBN: 978-1-4773-2774-6

We draw maps for multiple reasons. Some are created to help in finding ways to travel to other destinations, some are drawn to inform others of places of significance, some are drawn to lay claim to territory, and some are drawn to be decorative. The cartography that Juliet B. Wiersema analyzes was created primarily to try to influence the Spanish crown through the various colonial administrations to support the development of the Pacific lowlands now part of Colombia, at the time a part of the viceroyalty of New Granada. The maps she investigates are manuscript maps, since the area wasn't reflected on printed maps until the nineteenth century. These manuscript maps were drawn for specific purposes and the mapmakers were often being paid by individuals who wanted some things emphasized or being drawn by the individuals themselves.

Wiersema's initial purpose in writing this book was to present a broad overview of multiple manuscript maps of the lesser-known sections of New Granada. As she did her research in Colombia's national archive's map collection, she found that many of the manuscript maps were originally accompanied by letters of explanation or other documentation that would put the map in context. However, in the 1960s, the maps and the documents were separated to facilitate the care and conservation of the maps. There was an attempt by the archives to document the connections between the maps and the accompanying documents but some of those connections were lost over time. Wiersema sought to reconnect the ones that had been disconnected. Her study then became an analysis of a small subset of the maps, gathering information from the Colombian archives as well as other Spanish colonial archives. She selected four manuscript maps of the Pacific lowlands, each of which tells a different part of the history of the Pacific lowlands of Colombia.

To provide some context, the area that Wiersema is focused on is the northwestern part of Colombia. This region remains to this day a very biodiverse area, with sections of the region annually receiving the highest amount of rainfall in the world. Thus, it is covered by dense rainforests and has numerous rivers, swamps, and mangroves. The lush, tropical vegetation continues to make travel in the area difficult. Wiersema provides a brief history of the viceroyalty to also provide some background on the maps she analyzes. She lists the defining characteristics of the region as topography, demography, and economy. There were three mountain ranges between the Pacific lowlands and the seat of the viceroyalty government in Santa Fe de Bogota. This made travel to the area and governing the lowlands fairly difficult. Regarding demography, the Spanish did try to bring the indigenous



population under the control of the Spanish crown and convert them to Catholicism, as they did in other colonial lands. The indigenous tribes in the region tended to live in family groups and not in pueblos so they were resistant to being moved into settlements. Lacking the ability to draw upon the labor of the people native to the area, the Spanish brought in enslaved Africans to mine for gold along the multiple rivers in the region.

With the context set, Wiersema selected four maps to analyze in depth. Color plates of the maps analyzed are included in the book and the chapters covering each map have multiple images used to illustrate the points she was making in the text. The first map she explores is of the area of the settlement created by the Spanish for the Cuna Indians that they had requested. They remained in the settlement until conditions were no longer in their favor and they left. There were still unconquered Cuna Indians in the area and the map shows the area not controlled by the Spanish as well as the space nominally under Spanish control. Wiersema gives a brief history of the settlement, based on the accompanying documents and other maps and documents concerning the area. The map also shows the Atrato River which was the main way to travel any major distance, though the Spanish crown had closed the river to commerce.

The second map she analyzes is of the area around the bay of Cupica. This map and many documents try to make the case to the government in Santa Fe de Bogota for the creation of a port in the bay. While apparently well situated to serve as a connecting port between the Pacific and the Caribbean. Until the site of the Panama Canal was selected, Cupica was considered a potential site for the canal. Wiersema provides the history and some insight as to why the port was never established.

The third map is of the Dagua River region and was drawn to support the land claim of a businessman and mine owner who wanted to claim the land owned by another businessman so as to give him good agricultural land. The map he had drawn thus emphasizes his holdings but does show some other features of the area, including a settlement created by free people of African descent. Wiersema provides some information about how the enslaved people were able to obtain their freedom and the important roles they played in the region. The fourth map and its accompanying documents stand in testimony to an indigenous tribe that was decimated by the arrival of the Spanish. While the map shows a tribe well placed along the Yurumangui River that could be exploited by the Spanish, in actuality the tribe was in decline at the time the map was drawn. Wiersema connected this map to a lengthy case file and was able to create as thorough a history as possible of this



now extinct tribe.

Wiersema has created a brief, well-researched monograph on an area of the world that, to this day, is not well-known or well mapped. The color plates of the maps are well done and the black and white images used to highlight points in the text are well-chosen, though not always well placed. She provides insight into the reasons behind the creation of these manuscript maps and the biases that the maps reflect. The book is recommended for those interested in Spanish colonial history, historical cartography, and South American history.

Susan M. Moore
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA

[< issue toc next >>](#)