

BOOK REVIEW

Stephanie Joy Mawson.

*Incomplete Conquests: The Limits of
Spanish Empire in the Seventeenth-Century
Philippines.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University
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The vibrance of the historical research in the last decades concerning maritime Asia ca. 1500-1800 makes one envisage the early modern Philippines from the sea. In reality the historiographical debates often revolve around Manila as a nodal point of transoceanic and regional axes of circulation. First and foremost, we think of commodities, port cities, commercial networks and trading communities either in the Transpacific context or in a spatial nexus that comprises insular Southeast Asia, the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan. Stephanie Mawson somehow recenters our gaze and focuses instead on the Philippines as “territory,” or as a geopolitical space that begs to be studied per se. Her work is about mainland Luzon and the Southern archipelago under Spanish rule: soldiers, officials and priests, rather than sailors, merchants and go-betweens, populate *Incomplete Conquests*. Still, the book’s real protagonists are those who lived in the Philippines prior to the foundation of Manila in 1571 and continued to live thereafter.

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The author is interested in assessing the limits of the Spanish control over the Philippines in the seventeenth century and she does succeed in complicating the dominant narrative. Mawson's endeavor goes much beyond the simple analysis of the colonial faults to alternatively underscore the importance of indigenous agency in its variegated forms: physical rebellion, spiritual resistance and simple flight have effectively restrained the colonial authority. In the same vein, she offers an intriguing reconsideration of the "indigenous ally," one that questions the common Eurocentric understanding of this figure.

Incomplete Conquests is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides a snapshot of the situation in the Philippines in the early 1660s. The indigenous turbulence in Northern Luzon (caused by the demise of the extant labor regime) is coupled with the Chinese pressure over Manila (triggered by the imperial aspirations of the Zheng family) to eventually accentuate the shortcomings of the Spanish colonization roughly one century after its beginning. The next chapter deepens the discussion about the excesses of labor regimes and its inevitable consequence – the rebellion of indigenous people, amongst other forms of rejection. Chapter 3 transitions from the material to the spiritual and focuses on conversion and its hardships. The flaws of religious dominion, a direct outcome of local and ingenious ways of appropriating Catholicism, just added to the overall limitations of political conquest. Chapter 4 deals with the Southern archipelago, namely Mindanao and Jolo, and shows how the Moro polities of the region (the Maguindanaos and the Sulus), with their slave raiding activities, managed to contain the colonial authority. The following two chapters bring us back to Luzon and go on to portray the island's mountainous areas – the Cordillera Mountains and the Cagayan Valley – as vital zones of refuge and resistance. Tellingly, Manila resurfaces only in the final pages of the book, but the real protagonist of Chapter 7 is the ever-tense Chinese city, not the Spanish center of power.

The present volume is extremely well-researched and artfully combines the study of the available written documentation – Spanish source material, for its most part – with an ethnohistorical approach, while not neglecting the role of geography and the importance of archaeology. In her conclusion, Mawson offers significant remarks on the colonial record and the ways in which European documents can be used to illuminate the seventeenth-century history of Philippines. These reflections are in line with current discussions about the silences of colonial archives and the need to read documents against the grain, along the grain, or a combination of both.

Incomplete Conquests is a rather complete work, for it comprises the local, the regional, the imperial and the global. At the ground level it is of obvious interest to specialists of the Philippines and will be particularly welcomed by Filipino scholars. In the following layer Mawson's work aptly addresses key debates in the history of Southeast Asia (e.g., the upland-lowland question), as its inclusion in the Southeast Asian Program Publications of Cornell University Press attests. Thirdly, it speaks to those who work on the Spanish Empire – and on

early modern European empires in general – and are used to see the early modern world from Madrid. Ultimately, this book is global because it bears the potential to elicit conversations with historians devoted to the study of a variety of comparable human landscapes of the period, from early America to colonial Brazil. But to return to Luzon, one will profit from reading *Incomplete Conquests* together with another, also recent and equally pathbreaking book: Mark Dizon's *Reciprocal Mobilities: Indigeneity and Imperialism in an Eighteenth-Century Philippine Borderland* (University of North Carolina Press, 2023). The points of possible convergence and dissonance between the two works are several. 2023 was a good year for the advancement of the field.