

5-2019

## Review: Frontiers of Evangelization: Indians in the Sierra Gorda and Chiquitos Missions

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### Recommended Citation

DeLorenzo, Chris (2019) "Review: Frontiers of Evangelization: Indians in the Sierra Gorda and Chiquitos Missions," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 8 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol8/iss1/8>

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**Review: *Frontiers of Evangelization:  
Indians in the Sierra Gorda and Chiquitos Missions*  
by Robert H. Jackson**

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Robert H. Jackson. *Frontiers of Evangelization: Indians in the Sierra Gorda and Chiquitos Missions*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. 198 pages. \$36.95 (hardcover).

In this highly detailed demographic study, Jackson compares the Franciscan missions in the Sierra Gorda mountains of Mexico with the Jesuit Chiquitos missions in present-day Bolivia from the late sixteenth to the late eighteenth century. The book deals with the urban planning, evangelization techniques, and economy of the missions, as well as patterns of birth, epidemic mortality, and migration among mission populations. Jackson builds on a long career of research into the mission histories of Mexico, California, Texas, and lowland South America.

In the introduction, Jackson lays out the contrasts between the missions of the Sierra Gorda and the Chiquitanía. In the Sierra Gorda, the Augustinians, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits dealt with non-sedentary indigenous groups, particularly the Pames and Jonaces, attempting to congregate them on the missions and induce them to lead a settled agricultural lifestyle. Finally, the Franciscans who trained at the Apostolic College of San Fernando in Mexico City took over the task. Meanwhile, on the Chiquitos missions, the Jesuits gathered together and evangelized sedentary, clan-based natives. Jackson hypothesizes that non-sedentary people were more resistant to settlement and evangelization on the missions and more prone to demographic catastrophe.

Chapter one lays out the history and geography of missionary activity in Mexico and lowland South America during the colonial era. Jackson begins by summarizing the establishment of missions in central Mexico in the sixteenth century, among sedentary indigenous people used to living under states. He moves on to examine the efforts of four religious orders to evangelize the non-sedentary peoples to the north, emphasizing the failure of

methods that had worked in central Mexico. The Augustinians, Dominicans, and Franciscans faced rebellion among the Jonaces and difficulty translating Christian doctrine into indigenous languages in culturally relevant ways. Eventually, the San Fernando Franciscans took over the Sierra Gorda missions, using them as laboratories for policies later used on the missions of Baja California and California. Their methods were heavy-handed, especially their use of soldiers to forcibly congregate the Pames and Jonaces on the missions. The Jesuits were the last to arrive in the Sierra Gorda and largely copied the methods of the Franciscans, such as using food rations to increase indigenous dependence on the missions.

Toward the end of chapter one, Jackson turns to the missions of the Jesuit Province of Paraguay, located in parts of present-day Paraguay, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, focusing on the Chiquitos missions of eastern Bolivia. He emphasizes the multiethnic and multilingual nature of the Chiquitos missions, as well as the Jesuits' methods of governance and recruitment. Compared to the Franciscans in the Sierra Gorda, the Jesuits of Chiquitos afforded greater autonomy to the natives on their missions, allowing them to keep their clan chiefs and organize *cabildos*, or clan councils, to run internal affairs. Meanwhile, rather than sending troops to forcibly relocate indigenous people, the Jesuits in South America carried out expeditions to invite non-Christians to move to the missions.

Chapter two deals with mission urban planning, methods of evangelization, and mission economies. Jackson describes in great detail the construction of the churches, other structures, and the layout of the missions, emphasizing how their dense populations led to the spread of disease on

the Chiquitos settlements. However, evangelization forms the heart of the chapter. Jackson begins with the different methods missionaries used to convey Christian concepts to indigenous people in central Mexico, including picture catechisms, murals, the insertion of Spanish loan words into native languages, and attempts to adapt those languages to a Christian worldview. In spite of these attempts and indigenous people's formal confession and practice of Christian faith, pre-Hispanic religious practices persisted, and indigenous religious iconography made its way into central Mexican church art. Similarly, the Pames and Jonaces in the Sierra Gorda continued to worship pagan idols and practice traditional religious dances as they were forcibly relocated to the missions. Jackson's treatment of evangelization on the Chiquitos missions is quite brief but emphasizes the Jesuit strategy of targeting leaders and young children for conversion and baptism. The Jesuits used public theater and processions to teach doctrine. Here, too, traditional religious practices persisted, but the Jesuits were more tolerant of that fact than the Franciscans in the Sierra Gorda. Finally, Jackson turns to the economic organization of the missions. Both the Chiquitos and the Sierra Gorda missions employed a dual system of communal land and individual family subsistence parcels. However, the Jesuits allowed considerable economic autonomy to the Chiquitos, while the Franciscans in Mexico sought to make the Pames and Jonaces dependent on the missions. The Jesuits sold communal goods in the important cities of South America, especially the silver hub of Potosí.

Chapter three is a complex look at the demographic patterns on the Paraguay, Chiquitos, and Sierra Gorda missions. The missions of Paraguay were closer to navigable rivers and boasted militias that were periodically mobilized. As a result, these missions experienced catastrophic epidemic mortality during the late 1710s and the 1730s. However, these mission populations proved resilient—a fact Jackson attributes to the autonomy the Jesuits allowed them. Meanwhile, the more isolated Chiquitos missions were somewhat insulated from contagion, and high fertility led to steady growth even in the face of epidemics. Meanwhile, the coercive methods and cramped conditions of the

Sierra Gorda missions led to high epidemic mortality there. When the Franciscans copied the Sierra Gorda model in California, the results were catastrophic.

Jackson's work conveys a deep—even encyclopedic—knowledge of colonial missions in Mexico and South America. His knowledge of the local is admirable; the third chapter in particular is full of case studies of individual missions throughout present-day Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia. Jackson ably marshals a wide variety of sources, such as tribute censuses, archeological evidence, architecture, and baptismal, marriage, and burial records. Two appendices are brimming with even more demographic data about the missions of lowland South America and the Sierra Gorda.

I offer two main critiques here: The first is that *Frontiers of Evangelization* tends to focus more heavily on the Franciscans in Mexico than the Jesuits on the Chiquitos missions. Jackson devotes the bulk of the pages in most chapters to Mexico, filling them with copious pictures of churches and other structures, while the sections on the Jesuits in South America are shorter and mostly lacking images. The exception to this rule is chapter three, which focuses greater attention on South America. Secondly, Jackson uses words that will be unfamiliar to many readers, such as “*Chichimeca*,” “*Nezahacoyotl*,” “transhumance,” and “escheate,” without explaining these terms.

In spite of these limits, *Frontiers of Evangelization* offers much to scholars of Jesuit evangelization. Jackson offers an interesting comparison of the Franciscan and Jesuit approaches to missionary activity in colonial Latin America, arguing that the Jesuits avoided many of the Franciscans' mistakes. 