



Kris Lane. *Potosí: The Silver City That Changed the World*. California World History Library Series. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. Illustrations, maps. 272 pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-28084-7.

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Kris Lane's *Potosí: The Silver City That Changed the World* is a high-level, chronological history of the Villa Imperial—the Spanish imperial town of Potosí—and the silver mining center it served. The individual chapters explore the specific topics of state power and activism, mining innovations, environmental change, baroque culture and attitudes, and Potosí in the age of revolution. Throughout, Lane weaves in specific stories of the real *potosinos* who inhabited the city. He achieves that rare balance, an imminently readable and enjoyable history with a strong narrative overview and archival specifics. In the process, Lane refocuses our conceptual map; in his view Potosí is not “peripheral” in the early modern or colonial world but rather is a “center” in a world history context and an American, largely Indigenous, city. His approach creates a balanced history of the city's residents: Indigenous, African, Mestizo, Spanish, male, and female.

Andean-born Diego Gualpa discovered silver in 1545 in the Cerro Rico, the rich hill, in the high desert of what is now Bolivia. Soon thereafter builders constructed nearby Potosí from the ground up to house the mine owners and workers involved in extracting, refining, and accounting for the silver produced. Potosí grew quickly to become the Western Hemisphere's largest city in the

early seventeenth century. It was a silver boomtown, a Spanish colonial city, and yet as Lane argues, always a profoundly Indigenous city. By 1592 the Cerro Rico produced half the world's silver, at a time when powerful dynasties in the East and West hungered for hard currency. The silver flowing from the Cerro Rico created a turning point in world history by facilitating trade in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia that funded the production of goods and arms, territorial expansion, city building, the African slave trade, and proselytizing missions. Potosí became a symbol of vast wealth around the globe but also a symbol of vast suffering caused by human exploitation.

Lane crafts a comprehensive narrative of Potosí and the nearby mining center in a 280-year timeframe from the Cerro Rico's discovery in 1545 to independence from Spain in 1825. The book analyzes Potosí's role as a silver producer for the early modern global economy, builds on Peter Bakewell's work (*Silver and Entrepreneurship in Seventeenth-Century Potosí* [1987]) in chronicling changes in mining technology over time, and presents a clear and nuanced overview of the *mita* system, the compulsory labor draft of Indigenous villagers that fueled silver production throughout the colonial period. Lane masterfully weaves into the narrative archival evidence of individual

men's and women's experiences in the city and mining center, creating a vivid sense of the "character" of Potosí but without overwhelming the reader with detail.

The book's most significant contribution is bringing non-elite *potosinos* into the forefront, including women, Africans, and especially native Andeans. Lane argues that Potosí began and remained an Indigenous, Andean city, even under the "thin veneer" of Spanish colonialism (p. 29). Building on Jeffrey Cole's work on Andean silver refiners, *azogueros* (*The Potosí Mita, 1573-1700* [1985]), Lane demonstrates the centrality to silver production of Indigenous mine owners, mine workers, refiners, and mint workers, especially in the early years.

Lane's history reveals *potosinos* striving to build a better life, whether their lane of opportunity was wide or narrow. Andean men and women made the most of their own resources and developed a surprising number of entrepreneurial or commercial opportunities that kept the city humming with activity, goods, food, and drink, and provided individuals with some measure of autonomy over their own fortunes. Lane, and Jane Mangan before him (*Trading Roles: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Urban Economy in Colonial Potosí* [2005]), recounts the industriousness of Indigenous and mixed heritage *chicheras*, women who sold *chicha* or maize beer in Potosí. Other examples of commercial initiative abounded, even in a city and industry dominated by unfree labor; the *mita* sent thousands of Indigenous men to dangerous mine work on the Cerro Rico each year, while hundreds of African slaves toiled in mining and other occupations in Potosí.

Lane focuses particularly on the practice of *kajcheo*, or high-grading, where mineworkers kept for themselves small amounts of some of the best quality silver ore from each week's mining. Miners sold the ore to primitive refineries and traded it to Indigenous sellers of food, drink, and goods in an informal market economy. *Kajcheo*, detailed in

previous work by Enrique Tandeter (*Coercion and Market: Silver Mining in Colonial Potosí, 1692-1826* [1993]), allowed mineworkers more autonomy over their work and some extra compensation. The practice reminds us that even in circumstances of systematic human exploitation men's and women's ingenuity created spaces where hard work resulted in a little extra for subsistence. The acquiescence to this illegal practice by Spanish mine owners and Crown officials indicated the miners' strength in numbers and the corresponding limits of state power. It also lured some Andean villagers away from village life and rotational *mita* service to paid mine work and city life in Potosí, dramatically altering life paths for *mitayos*, their families, and their descendants.

Lane's narrative takes us to the familiar territory of the colonial state in the viceroyalty of Peru and three main aspects of the Spanish colonial state: early modern activism to create efficiencies and maximize revenue, the exploitation of natural and human resources in the colonies, and the practical limits of Crown power on colonial subjects living half a world away. Viceroy Francisco de Toledo's innovations to mining industry technologies and the bureaucracy that supported it from 1569 to 1580 resulted in a peak in silver production in 1592, at the apex of Asian trade through the Manila galleons. Toledo set the precedent for drastically altering the environment surrounding the Cerro Rico by building a series of artificial lakes and holding ponds, a precedent that would lead to environmental failure in the seventeenth century but that also reflected a modern confidence in man's ability and right to dominate the natural world. Toledo's most notorious innovation in production was the imposition of the *mita* system, which required Andean villagers to give one year's labor in the silver mines every seventh year, mostly at their own subsistence. Lane provides an excellent overview of the deadly consequences for Andean men, families, and villages from this most efficient but cruel, systematic, exploitation of Indigenous labor. The *mita* system, persisting until

independence in 1825, was the most striking example of Spanish colonial oppression and the source of intense denunciations from within by Spanish clergy and without by Spanish enemies.

Lane also demonstrates the limits of Crown power, particularly in the seventeenth century, and the reality of local control of Potosí's economic and civic life. Crown reforms lapsed or were diluted through local pressure in long periods of neglect. When the Crown periodically tried to get things in hand by sending investigators to root out corruption, locals fought back, as when two such investigators died under mysterious circumstances, presumably murdered.

Lane's chapters are thematic, while also moving the narrative chronologically. Chapter 1, "Bonanza," discusses the discovery of Potosí by Gualpa in 1545, the building of the new imperial villa and the forming of Potosí's dichotomous global image as the site of vast riches and as the "mouth of hell" (p. 32). Chapter 2, "Age of Wind, Age of Iron," argues that Potosí's mining production began largely as an Indigenous Andean enterprise, with the use of Andean technology (wind furnaces or *guairas*) and Andean control of mines and refineries for the first three decades after discovery. Chapter 3, "The Viceroy's Great Machine," describes the incredible modern project of Viceroy Toledo to increase silver production and Spanish tax revenue through new infrastructure, hydraulic mills, mercury amalgamation, laws and bureaucrats, and a mint. It also describes the incredible human toll of this endeavor, through the *mita* system. Chapter 4, "An Improbable Global City," gives a 360-degree view of the city and its inhabitants—Andean, Spanish, Mestizo, and African—describing the occupations, businesses, and churches that dominated city life, and noting the cosmopolitan nature of a city that survived as a result of global commodities. Chapter 5, "Secret Judgments of God," exemplifies one of the paradoxes of an early modern city. With all its modern elements—belief in ingenuity and improvement, introduction of new technolo-

gies, environmental manipulation, and a state bureaucracy—the city itself not only was profoundly religious at its core but also believed God smote the city in the seventeenth century with three catastrophic events: warfare, flood, and scandal. Chapter 6, "Decadence and Rebirth," gives a snapshot in time view of Potosí in the late seventeenth century, focusing on its global reputation for inexhaustible wealth, even as the mining center and city struggled to find new technologies to maintain production from harder-to-access veins of silver. Chapter 7, "From Revival to Revolution," discusses the pressure building for change with the Andean rebellions in the late eighteenth century, amid Potosí's general stance of remaining loyal to the Crown. In chapter 8, "Summing Up," Lane concludes by discussing Potosí's competing claims: it was the world's greatest silver deposit and produced untold wealth for Spain and for individual miners, yet, as Eduardo Galeano discussed in the 1970s (*Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* [1973]), it was also a great consumer of men's lives—as Lane put it, "the world's worst case of imperialist greed" (p. 181). "Epilogue: Potosí since Independence" chronicles mining innovations, foreign investment, and the revolutionary state from Bolivian independence to Evo Morales's rule.

Potosí could easily serve as the one indispensable book for nonspecialists, a comprehensive history of Potosí and silver mining at the Cerro Rico in the colonial period. Lane's stated purpose of synthesizing existing historiography into a readable, unifying narrative is accomplished. He also demonstrates many of the "paradoxes of global modernity," as he intended, if having to force a bit (p. 182). After all, Lane convinces the reader throughout that Potosí was not a typical early modern city: it was unique in its boomtown flavor, its geographical isolation, and its Indigenous population and character. Overall, Lane achieves through his history a vivid depiction of the colonial city, with its human vibrancy but also its tragedy. It was a place of immense promise for some, with the

Cerro Rico as a huge physical manifestation of untapped riches within sight of the city. Yet the Cerro Rico also represented millions of lives interrupted or tragically lost to compulsory mine labor and displacement. Lane strives for and achieves a satisfying sense of balance in his history. As he wrote, “if Potosí was an environmental disaster and a moral tarpit, it was also a monument to human ingenuity and survival” (p. xvi).

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