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“What happens if, rather than focusing on the processes that drove colonization—the ways the colonial state was formed and consolidated and the interests associated with this project—we instead focus on the limitations of the colonial state?” (p. 4). Stephanie Joy Mawson’s revisionist history of the Spanish empire in the Philippines in the seventeenth century is an experiment in doing just this. The limits of empire that *Incomplete Conquests* examines are spatial as well as economic, cultural, and social. In bringing these to the fore, Mawson aims to disrupt what the author identifies as the tendency of a generation of historians to grant “the colonial state a semblance of power, coverage, and scope that it simply did not have” (p. 8). If other studies have emphasized the environmental origins of a weak Spanish empire in Asia, including the vast distances separating the Philippines from America, and the special difficulties faced in governing islands, Mawson’s account underscores human agency. Local communities’ determination to evade empire was the greatest single threat to the realization of Spanish designs on the islands.

Among historians of the Philippines and among Filipinos, it is widely known that the Spanish never succeeded in conquering the entire archipelago. The highlands of northern Luzon, home to peoples whom early modern Spaniards called “Igorots,” and Mindanao and Maguindanao in the South, which Spaniards described as being “infested” by “Moros” (Muslims), have long been recognized as spaces where the Hispanic monarchy and its agents failed to establish a sustained presence, let alone dominate. Multiple military campaigns to impose colonial rule at these sites were frustrated by fierce local resistance. *Incomplete Conquests* makes a compelling case that these familiar unconquered regions were unexceptional, and there were many more zones like them across the seventeenth-century Philippines. Chapter 5 centers on mountains. Moving beyond the history of res-
istance made famous by William Henry Scott’s book *The Discovery of the Igorots* (1974), Mawson argues that “persistent resistance of autonomous mountain communities” manifest across Luzon and the Visayas (p. 104). We learn of reports extant in the colonial archive of numerous people who fled lowland villages and the burdens of tributary labor to mountainous zones including in Laguna de Bay, Tayabas, and Pampanga, provinces that were geographically close to Manila and home to the empire’s most important Indigenous allies. Mawson advances and expands archeologist Stephen Acabado’s findings in his 2018 article “Zones of Refuge” that populations inhabiting high-altitude zones of refuge in the seventeenth century not only comprised peoples descended from those who had lived upland for many generations, but also fugitives who migrated there to flee the Spanish empire.[1]

Although plural mountainous zones of refuge were beyond the realm of colonial control, they were not isolated. Uplanders sustained contact with lowlanders, and Mawson argues that these safe havens shaped the contours of colonialism. Peoples across the Cagayan Valley and Pampanga rose up in rebellion against the Spanish knowing that they could retreat to the mountains to evade brutal punishment. This is a book where the colonial state still looms large. Proof of numerous communities abandoning their lowland homes for the mountains in an effort to escape empire attests to its real and disruptive impact on countless lives. The price for escaping Spanish subjugation was seemingly high.

Fitting for a study that seeks to move attention away from Manila to other places and peoples in the Philippines, *Incomplete Conquests* leaves the capital until last. “Manila, the Chinese City,” is the subject of chapter 7, the book’s final chapter. It traces the development of the urban capital of the Spanish colony and its codependence on the city’s large Chinese population, and reminds us that Manila’s fortunes were shaped by events in Fujian in southeastern China. The colonial state’s reliance on Chinese workers in the capital did not avert mass killings of the Chinese, with the 1639 government-decreed pogrom resulting in some 24,000 Chinese deaths. “Purging the city of the Chinese threat was the only way that the Spanish could truly impose their authority over the city” (p. 171). While this particular episode of mass killings is extreme in scale, the book demonstrates that the colonial government’s use of force against Philippine *indios* (Indigenous peoples) and Chinese settlers characterized colonial rule.

In addition to expanding the known geographical limits of the Spanish empire in the Philippines, the book reveals the cultural, social, and economic limits of Spanish colonial rule by highlighting the persistence of pre-Hispanic traditions long after the first Spanish conquistadors arrived in the islands. Chapter 3, “Contested Conversions,” analyzes evidence of the survival of pre-Hispanic beliefs and rituals that Catholic missionaries and colonial officials were unable to suppress through preaching and brute force. In several cases Babaylans (native priests) emerged as the leaders of revolts against empire, underscoring how limited Christianization could undermine colonial rule.

One of Mawson’s most novel and important arguments is that the debt-based political economies of the pre-Hispanic Philippines survived the seventeenth century largely intact. Chapter 2 explains that debt underpinned hierarchical social relations in the islands, with indebted people compelled to perform labor for *datus* (chiefs), including agricultural work and military service. Datus understood that if debt disappeared, so too would their authority, and thus were motivated to preserve the debt economy. Spanish colonial officials relied on datu allies and existing systems of debt servitude to mobilize Filipino workers to pay tribute (often in rice), to build trade and war ships, and to fight against the empire’s enemies in battle. These officials resolved to “deliberately restrict the supply of coins in circulation to prevent a trans-
ition to a currency-based economy within Philip-
pines barangays” (p. 43), including through with-
holding wages owned to Indigenous tributary 
workers, to preserve debt. Furthermore, Mawson 
argues that because captive taking and slavery 
was central to this debt economy, these practices 
were also preserved in the Philippines despite the 
Crown's efforts to eradicate the enslavement of its 
Indigenous subjects in the Atlantic and Pacific 
worlds.

Whereas Mawson concludes that the failure or unwillingness of the Spanish to replace these 
local systems is proof of empire's fundamental 
limits, their perseverance might alternatively be 
understood as evidence of adaptation that ulti-
mately permitted the development and longevity 
of Spain's Asian empire. Certainly, the Spanish em-
pire's reliance on datus in the Philippines was a 
source of vulnerability because, as this study illus-
trates, these regionally powerful rulers could and 
did withdraw their support for the colonial state 
and back armed revolts against it. However, they 
also channeled resources to the state that proved 
critical to its survival in the seventeenth century 
and beyond.

This study draws on extensive multisited 
archival research, illustrating the richness of writ-
ten records that are available to historians who 
want to study the history of the early modern Phil-
ippines. In contrast to scholarship that has relied 
extensively on published missionary chronicles 
and Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander 
Robertson's early twentieth-century volume of 
primary sources, Incomplete Conquests makes use 
of the voluminous papers pertaining to the islands 
in what survives of the archives that Spain created 
to govern its global empire. These include the 
Archivo de Indias in Seville, Archivo Histórico 
Nacional in Madrid, and Mexico's Archivo General 
de la Nación in Mexico City, in addition to the 
archives of Catholic missionary orders that were 
active in the Philippines. Mawson interprets the 
reports of priests and governors with caution, not-

ing that these actors were motivated to present 
themselves and the empire in the most favorable 
light, overstating their successes and downplaying 
their defeats. The author also engages with ar-
chaeological evidence, and thinks with immersive 
site visits and folklore to fill the gaps and silences 
that characterize the colonial archive. Future stud-
ies would benefit from following Mawson's creat-
ive use of these less traditional archives.

Note

[1]. Acabado, “Zones of Refuge: Resisting Con-
quest in the Northern Philippines Highlands 
through Environmental Practice.” Journal of An-

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