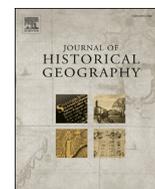




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# 'Wheat is the nerve of the whole republic': spatial histories of a European crop in colonial Lima, Peru (1535–1705)

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The history of the introduction, florescence, and collapse of wheat cultivation in colonial Lima, Peru has been mythologized, with different versions of the narrative highlighting ecological, cultural, religious, and political economic themes.<sup>1</sup> Most versions are anchored around two endpoints: The successful mid sixteenth-century introduction of wheat to Peru, as part of the Columbian Exchange and Spanish colonialism, and the late seventeenth-century 'collapse' of the crop in the Lima region.

Wheat was introduced shortly after the Spaniards established their capital city of Lima, called *Ciudad de los Reyes* (City of the Kings), in 1535. Versions of the foundational tale usually credit a Spanish woman of high social rank, who carefully cultivated the first few wheat seeds in her garden. Depending on the source, three different elite women are named, each among the first in Peru.<sup>2</sup> The introductions occurred by the early 1540s, and by 1550 wheat was

harvested in large quantities from irrigated fields around the city.<sup>3</sup> Over the next century, wheat production in the Lima region flourished, supplying the growing city as well as ships leaving Lima's port of Callao. Yet by the close of the seventeenth century, wheat production mysteriously and catastrophically failed.<sup>4</sup> Tales of the end of large scale, intensive wheat cultivation in Lima's rural hinterland have also achieved mythical status, with explanations by contemporary observers and historians variously citing earthquakes, plagues, political and economic maneuvering, and the hand of God. Consequently, this has become a significant topic in Peruvian historiography.<sup>5</sup>

Recent research trajectories on the Columbian Exchange, as well as transoceanic botanical exchanges more generally, highlight the importance of particularized information and of the development of detailed spatial histories to explain when, how, and why plants were moved from one place to another, and what biological, ecological, cultural, and political economic factors supported initial exchange as well as later adoption and sustained cultivation in new locations.<sup>6</sup> This spatial historical approach applies the 'analytical lens of *region formation*', and focuses on tracing spatial practices of everyday life especially as they pertain to relationships between city and countryside and to interregional flows of people, plants,

<sup>3</sup> D.W. Gade, Landscape, system and identity in the post-conquest Andes, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (1992) 465.

<sup>4</sup> Pérez-Maillaína, La fabricación de un mito, 69–88.

<sup>5</sup> A. Flores Galindo, *Aristocracia y Plebe: Lima, 1760–1830*, Lima, 1984, 21–29. See also D. Ramos, Trigo chileno, navieros del Callao y hacendados limeños entre la crisis agrícola del siglo XVII y la comercial de la primera mitad del XVIII, *Revista de Indias* 26 (1966) 209–321.

<sup>6</sup> J.A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*, Cambridge, 2001; J.A. Carney and R.N. Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*, Berkeley, 2009; H. Rangan, J. Carney, and T. Denham, Environmental history of botanical exchanges in the Indian Ocean world, *Environment and History* 18 (2012) 311–342; A. Sluyter, *Black Ranching Frontiers: African Cattle Herders of the Atlantic World, 1500–1900*, New Haven, 2012; J.A. Carney and H. Rangan, Situating African agency in environmental history, *Environment and History* 21 (2015) 1–12; A. Sluyter, How Africans and their descendants participated in establishing open-range cattle ranching in the Americas, *Environment and History* 21 (2015) 77–101; C. Watkins, African oil palms, colonial socio-ecological transformation and the making of the Afro-Brazilian landscape of Bahia, Brazil, *Environment and History* 21 (2015) 13–42; also, on Peru specifically, see D.W. Gade, Particularizing the Columbian exchange, Old World biota to Peru, *Journal of Historical Geography* 48 (2015) 26–35.

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'mythologized' is used to explain this as an idealized, reductive, repeated, and ultimately fictitious version of events. Previous authors have also applied this label to Lima wheat, including A.P. Whitaker, The Spanish contribution to American agriculture, *Agricultural History* 3 (1929) 1–14; P. Pérez-Maillaína, La fabricación de un mito: el terremoto de 1687 y la ruina de los cultivos de trigo en el Perú, *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 57 (2000) 69–88.

<sup>2</sup> B. Cobo, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, Madrid, 1956 [1653], volume 1, 406–408, records doña Inés Muñoz; Garcilaso de la Vega, *Comentarios Reales de los Incas*, Caracas, 1985 [1617], 407, credits doña María de Escobar; G. Lohmann Villena, La huella árabe en la cultura virreinal, in: L. Bartet, F. Kahhat, and D. Abugatás (Eds), *La Huella Árabe en el Perú*, Lima, 2010, 165–170, recognizes Beatriz Salcedo, also known as Beatriz la Morisca, who was the first woman, a moor, in Peru. See also B.T. Lee and J. Bromley (Eds), *Libros de Cabildos de Lima*, Lima, 1935–1964 [1534–1637], volume 16, appendix. On myths and oral narratives of seed introduction see J.A. Carney, 'With grains in her hair': rice in colonial Brazil, *Slavery and Abolition* 25 (2004) 1–27.

capital, and resources.<sup>7</sup> These research trends point to the need for information drawn from outside conventional, and often sparse, archival sources, as well as to the advantages of looking beyond traditional conceptions of European agency or ecological imperialisms.<sup>8</sup>

However, even when applied to a classic case of the Columbian Exchange in what is undeniably traditional and Eurocentric framing, and even while using well known documents produced by a branch of colonial government, this approach to particularized spatial histories of crop transfer yields new results that advance existing narratives. In the following discussion, such an approach is used to fill in the history of Peruvian wheat between the framing stories of introduction and collapse. Wheat was called ‘the nerve of the whole republic’,<sup>9</sup> and was one of the most iconic crops brought from Spain to Peru during the early colonial period. It was considered a key component of a culturally acceptable, nutritional, and healthful diet for Spanish consumers as well as being necessary to the Catholic ritual of communion.<sup>10</sup> Yet, remarkably little information exists on the changing patterns of production, exchange, and administration from the introduction to decline of wheat in Lima. By placing wheat in a spatial, landscape perspective and tracing the changing flows of this grain from producers to consumers, as well as how colonial authorities sought to control these flows, this article shows that while single events were significant, more gradual shifts in population, demand, sociospatial organization, and opposing economic interests were what actually dominated the process. This approach also allows for comparisons between grain supply institutions in Lima and other colonial Latin American cities.

### Historical approaches to the analysis of wheat in Lima

The Spaniards introduced wheat to the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as part of a broader array of agropastoral traditions intended to recreate European lifestyles in the New World.<sup>11</sup> In this context, studies of grain production, exchange, and administration have focused on urban settings, reflecting the challenge of provisioning growing Spanish populations.<sup>12</sup> Agriculture was practiced in the rural hinterland of Spanish towns and cities, but many sites came to rely on far reaching trade networks, with Panama and Potosí being two cities that especially depended on imports.<sup>13</sup> Crop failures and inadequate supplies were tangible

fears, and the Spaniards had varying luck with production of wheat and other crops in different regions of the new territories. Wheat was preferred, but maize was accepted when necessary and was particularly important in Mexico City and in New Spain more generally.<sup>14</sup> As will be shown in the following, maize was less important than wheat to the Spanish residents of Lima, at least in terms of municipal policies oriented towards securing food supply for the élite. Wheat also demanded important investments in land, labor, irrigation, and technology.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, it received a great deal of attention, mainly from municipal authorities, although also at times from the viceroys themselves.<sup>16</sup> These authorities sought to maintain the supply of good quality grain; prevent measurement fraud; and supervise granaries, farmers, middlemen, millers, and bakers.<sup>17</sup> The Lima case demonstrates similarities and differences to this general Latin American pattern, and provides a comparison for places like Mexico City and Potosí, for which a better developed literature already exists.

Less is known about the wheat provisioning system in Lima, perhaps due to the emphasis on the two endpoints of introduction and collapse described above, which in turn seems to have derived from the major primary sources usually referenced. The introduction of wheat is the territory of early colonial chroniclers, who provide variations of the story about the élite Spanish woman within broader accounts of the discovery and conquest of Peru. The decline of wheat production is most often explained using Pedro José Bravo de Lagunas y Castilla's political text, the *Voto consultivo* (Consultative vote). Bravo de Lagunas, a judge of Lima's *Real Audiencia* (Royal Audience, the highest court in the Viceroyalty of Peru), wrote in 1755 to advise the viceroy on the benefits of reestablishing wheat production in Lima's rural hinterland and lessening dependence on imports.

Several historians have suggested alternate explanations to this trajectory, mainly by drawing on spatial models of production and exchange. Chief among these is economic historian Carlos Sempat Assadourian, who examined the spatial organization of major wheat production zones and markets throughout South America. He argued that the Andean region had two major markets: Potosí and Lima, which acted as poles to attract products from diverse areas.<sup>18</sup> He described the complex wheat geography of Lima in general terms: it was able to produce much of its own grain, but also imported some grain by sea; neither was it self-sufficient, nor was it completely dependent, and for a time it was even an exporter. Peruvian historian Alberto Flores Galindo famously analyzed wheat in Lima specifically, arguing that the wheat collapse was due to a combination of political economic relationships that included imported wheat from Chile, Lima merchants and bakers, and the rise of Peruvian sugarcane.<sup>19</sup> Both historians present theoretical models that must be further examined with detailed local data. This challenge was taken up in recent work on

<sup>7</sup> Quoted and paraphrased from Rangan, Carney, and Denham, *Environmental history of botanical exchanges*, 318.

<sup>8</sup> Sluyter, *How Africans and their descendants participated*, 79–80.

<sup>9</sup> P.J. Bravo de Lagunas y Castilla, *Voto consultivo* (1755), *Que ofrece al excelentísimo señor don Joseph Antonio Manso de Velasco ...*, in: J.A. de la Puente Candamo (Ed), *La Emancipación en sus Textos: El Estado del Perú*, Lima, 1959, volume 2, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Gade, *Particularizing the Columbian exchange*, 30–31; R. Earle, ‘If you eat their food ...’: diets and bodies in early colonial Spanish America, *American Historical Review* 115 (2010) 688–713; L. Millones Figueroa, *The staff of life: wheat and ‘Indian Bread’ in the New World*, *Colonial Latin American Review* 19 (2010) 301–322.

<sup>11</sup> Whitaker, *The Spanish contribution to American agriculture*, 1–14; A.W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Westport, 1972; Gade, *Landscape, system and identity*, 460–477; J.C. Super, *La formación de regímenes alimentarios en América Latina durante la época de la colonia*, in: J.C. Super and T.C. Wright (Eds), *Alimentación, Política y Sociedad en América Latina*, Mexico City, 1988, 19–44; Earle, *If you eat their food*, 699–703.

<sup>12</sup> E. Florescano, *El abasto y la legislación de granos en el siglo XVI*, *Historia Mexicana* 14 (1965) 567–629. On European crops cultivated around Spanish cities see K.W. Butzer, *Spanish colonization of the New World: cultural continuity and change in Mexico*, *Erdkunde* 45 (1991) 207–212.

<sup>13</sup> J.C. Super, *Food, Conquest, and Colonization in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America*, Albuquerque, 1988, 18–19. On Mexico City, see Florescano, *El abasto y la legislación de granos*, 583–584.

<sup>14</sup> R.L. Lee, *Grain legislation in colonial Mexico, 1575–1585*, *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 27 (1947) 647–660; I. Vasquez de Warman, *El póstito y la alhóndiga en la Nueva España*, *Historia Mexicana* 17 (1968) 395–426.

<sup>15</sup> Florescano, *El abasto y la legislación de granos*, 583; Super, *Food, Conquest, and Colonization*, 32, A.J. Bauer, *Goods, Power, History: Latin America's Material Culture*, Cambridge, 2001, 87–90.

<sup>16</sup> Lee, *Grain legislation in colonial Mexico*, 647–660.

<sup>17</sup> Super, *Food, Conquest, and Colonization*, 35–39.

<sup>18</sup> C.S. Assadourian, *El Sistema de la Economía Colonial: Mercado Interno, Regiones y Espacio Económico*, Lima, 1982, 111–112, 146–150. See also B. Larson, *Cochabamba 1550–1900: Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia*, Durham, 1998; Super, *Food, Conquest, and Colonization*; Florescano, *El abasto y la legislación de granos*, 589–590.

<sup>19</sup> Flores Galindo, *Aristocracia y Plebe*, 21–29.

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