

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Aram, Bethany, principal investigator. An ARtery of Empire: Conquest, Commerce, Crisis, Culture and the Panamanian Junction (1513–1671). Other.

Evan Haefeli

Volume 43, numéro 4, automne 2020

Spaces of Power of the Spanish Nobility (1480–1715)
Les espaces de pouvoir de la noblesse espagnole (1480–1715)

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076834ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36390>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)
2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Haefeli, E. (2020). Compte rendu de [Aram, Bethany, principal investigator. An ARtery of Empire: Conquest, Commerce, Crisis, Culture and the Panamanian Junction (1513–1671). Other.] *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(4), 223–226. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36390>

enjoyed learning from my colleagues and fellow researchers which databases they find most useful and why. I found myself over and over feeling less lonely as I read the reviews I'd commissioned—thinking, “oh, so you had that same problem?” or “I guess I'm not crazy after all (or at least this doesn't prove it).”

As I write this, we are still in the throes of COVID-19 shutdowns worldwide. Our only excursions are to the park or the grocery store, and our only professional contact happens via Zoom. There could be no timelier moment to highlight the often-thankless labour that goes into preparing digital projects. I along with just about every scholar I know will have to rely on them almost exclusively for the indefinite future. I know I speak for all the generous colleagues who responded positively to my request to review a digital project that any criticism offered in these pages is meant to be constructive; it is in our best interest to preserve and improve the valuable online projects we have, in addition to launching innovative ones.

We are grateful to the creators of these projects who sacrificed years of their professional lives to make research materials more accessible to all of us—whether in the throes of a global pandemic or merely amid the tug-of-war of juggling personal and professional obligations (it's harder to visit the archives wearing a baby in a front carrier). Digital projects such as these make our lives easier and enrich our research and teaching in immeasurable ways. It is my hope that reading about some of the initiatives already out there might also encourage younger scholars to dream up new projects. Our global network today extends farther than Spain's empire ever did.

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36389>

Aram, Bethany, principal investigator.

An ARTery of Empire: Conquest, Commerce, Crisis, Culture and the Panamanian Junction (1513–1671). Other.

Seville: Universidad Pablo de Olavide, 2015. Accessed 19 May 2020. upo.es/investigacion/artempire.

Early modern Panamanian history has not received much attention from scholars, in no small part because it ended in disaster. Panama City was the first European outpost on the Pacific Coast. Founded before the Spanish conquest of Mexico, it flourished for over a century as a key node in Spain's evolving global

trade network, with links to Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, as well as Europe. All of that came to a dramatically devastating end in 1671, when English buccaneers led by Captain Henry Morgan pillaged and burned down the city. The Spanish abandoned the site, rebuilding the city a short distance away. Unintentionally, by doing so, they preserved an incredible time capsule of the early modern colony which has only now, with the ARTery of Empire project, begun to reveal its story.

Given Panama's importance to the history of early globalization, this project will have much to offer a wide range of individuals. It was completed by an international group of investigators, involving scholars from Colombia, Spain, Italy, and Germany, who represent an interdisciplinary mix of archival historians, archaeologists, and geneticists. These researchers have analyzed a broad range of sources to surprising effect. Human remains found buried within the cathedral reveal that Panama was inhabited by people from Latin America, Europe, and Africa. It was a mixed society with a surprising amount of social mobility. Judging by the prominence and contents of the burial sites, individuals of African and Indigenous origin could attain positions of social prominence—usually, as the documentary archive confirms, through their connection to prominent Spanish men.

The mix of archaeological and documentary evidence assembled by this project reveals Panama's important connections locally and overseas. Founded in Indigenous territory, Panama quickly drew in Indigenous people from around the region, making it a cosmopolitan community in American terms alone. Isotope analysis shows how individuals' diets changed from a primarily Indigenous American one in their youth to a more meat-heavy European diet, presumably after they arrived in Panama. An important African-American community from an early date, Panama also became the source of African-American communities across western South America. One of the historical researchers has shown that Panama and its merchants had formed an important hub of the Atlantic slave trade, taking in enslaved Africans from various merchants working across the Caribbean and passing most of them on to Peru.

This project, funded by the European Research Council, has only recently been completed. Its findings are being published in a variety of media, all of which are listed on its website. So far, these deliverables have included articles, dissertations, a short documentary film providing an overview of the project, and various articles in news outlets. Most recently, the Spanish newspaper

ABC hosted a scholarly discussion about the project and its implications for our understanding of early modern globalization, “Nuevas visiones sobre la América española del siglo xvi,” available on YouTube (youtube.com/watch?v=_CVN-gNB1OE).

The project’s website provides a brief overview of the project in English. It includes links to the biographies of the fourteen different researchers who worked on the project and its six advisors, the list of publications, a calendar of activities related to the project, and press information about it. Each of the listed publications has a link that allows the viewer to access a digital version of the research output. Fifteen different articles published over the previous eleven years provide an excellent survey of the sort of interdisciplinary research performed by this project, and the variety of conclusions it has made possible, including studies in bioarchaeology, paleoepidemiology, and economic, legal, social, and political history.

The website also contains a link to a large database that functions as an interdisciplinary bibliographical record of the research completed by the project. This online database is open to the public and ends up being perhaps the project’s most valuable digital contribution. Visitors can look up and review the various primary sources used by the scholars for their publications. It is an interdisciplinary collection of source material, from archival documents to remains of pottery and even teeth. Carefully catalogued charts allow the viewer to see what (if anything) the investigators were able to learn from these bits of evidence.

The database is divided into four sections: History, Archaeology, Isotopes, and DNA. A search engine allows the viewer to survey the entire collection. Alternatively, one can work piecemeal through each section. There are about thirty separate archaeological excavations documented, several isotope collections, and several DNA samples. Each sample is well catalogued, showing where it was collected and analyzed. The archaeological digs are likewise precisely documented by providing coordinates and the occasional photograph.

For the majority of researchers, the most accessible and useful part of this database will probably be its archive of hundreds of documents. The documents are not digitized, but they are carefully catalogued, showing where they were collected and what sorts of documents they are. Arranged in chronological order, each comes with a summary of its contents. The more interesting sources have been transcribed in whole or in part. In each case, the most relevant portions of the documents for the story of early Panama’s society are highlighted.

The documents run from the mid-fifteenth to the early eighteenth century. They are frequently of the mundane sort out of which the strongest social histories have been built: wills, bills, and other accounts indicating who was in Panama, how much property they had, and whom they were connected to. These primarily legal, ecclesiastical, and commercial sources shine light on Panama's social and economic life, including its slave trade. They are not word-searchable, but the sources can be searched by type, archive, and collection.

Overall, the interface, although fairly basic, is accessible. Visitors can easily get a quick overview of this fascinating project or pursue its findings in much greater depth. Working through the website is like seeing the raw frame of a potential book. It does a good job of presenting the project and its conclusions, along with the foundations on which it rests. It represents a compelling case for the ability of larger, interdisciplinary teams to uncover and analyze otherwise obscure early modern societies, demonstrating the effective possibilities of a mix of the latest technologies with traditional research. It is especially to be commended for finding ways to bring to life Indigenous and African individuals who are otherwise marginalized in the documentary record. I imagine it could easily become a prototype for similar projects working on other corners of the early modern world—especially those, like Panama, sadly obscured by the misfortunes of history.

EVAN HAEFELI

Texas A&M University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36390>

Castellanos Garijo, María de los Llanos, president of the National Patrimony of Spain, and José Luis Rodríguez Gómez, librarian for the online database. Bibliographical Database of the Collection of the National Patrimony of Spain (Ibis).

Madrid: Patrimonio Nacional, Biblioteca Real, 1992. Accessed 9 March 2020. patrimonionacional.es.

Ibis is an electronic database, freely available on the Internet, containing bibliographical information about the books, manuscripts, maps, and other holdings of the National Patrimony of the Spanish Crown. Specifically, it contains