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Escribano-Páez, Jose M. *Juan Rena and the Frontiers of Spanish Empire, 1500-1540*. New York and London: Routledge, 2020. ISBN: 9780367460815. 248 pages. Hardcover \$160.00.

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Jose M. Escribano-Páez's new book is a meticulous investigation of the ways that Spanish imperial administration functioned on new frontiers in the early sixteenth century. In an insightful and edifying move, he examines the work of middle-level agents below the rank of territorial governors. Adopting an "actor-based approach" (4), the author focuses particular attention on the *cursus honorum* of Juan Rena, a Venetian-born cleric who served the Spanish crown in North Africa, Navarre, the imperial court, and the central Mediterranean successively. Figures like Rena took on responsibility managing a variety of administrative activities including finances, military logistics, construction projects, provisioning, transport, and other crucial duties. To help him accomplish these tasks, Rena tapped into social ties, and he himself formed a nexus of networks in each of these frontier settings. Though Rena never reached the upper echelons of policy-making, Escribano-Páez argues he still brought his voice and "agenda" to the theaters of operations under his charge. Ultimately Rena stands in for a stratum of other middle-level officers who were effectuating imperial rule on the peripheries of the realm.

Through an examination of these agents and their experiences, Escribano-Páez seeks to elaborate on "frontier political culture." For the author, frontier was not so much physical territories or boundaries as it was a "vibrant political space where a multiplicity of figures interacted to shape power relations" (1). Though the characteristics of this culture varied according to each setting, an underlying attribute was the agency of various figures "wielding and combining different kinds of power with the defensive needs of the empire" (4). In these liminal settings, the crown often contracted administration and defense to military entrepreneurs such as the Alcaide de los Donceles Diego Fernández de Córdoba, who served as captain general of Oran and viceroy of Navarre, and the Genoese Andrea Doria, who held the position of admiral of the imperial fleet in the central Mediterranean. These commanders then worked with a range of subordinates whose proffer of service helped enfold them into the culture and likewise enabled them to play roles, assert authority, and pursue agendas.

Rena was one of these subordinates, and the first chapter introduces the agent in the setting of North Africa. Starting in the late 1400s, Spanish fighters seized a string of coastal enclaves in the area. While scholarship tends to credit Spain's force of arms to explain the conquests, Escribano-Páez investigates negotiations that were also undertaken to coax the towns' capitulation to Spanish suzerainty. Rena's own service began in 1504, and the author argues that the diplomacy conducted by the Venetian and his network of merchants took place in the context of a "common language of violence" and mutually-understood "rules governing siege and

conquest” (41). Derived from a long history of Christian-Muslim interaction in the western Mediterranean, this shared frontier political culture helps disrupt prevailing notions that the Spanish garrisons came to be merely beachheads isolated from the hinterland and points to enduring ties of contact and commerce. North Africa continues to occupy attention in Chapter 2, and here the author expands the connectivity of the frontier to include a swath of southern Spanish territory from western Andalusia to Valencia, lands from which critical supplies, monies, and soldiers supporting the outposts were sourced. To assemble these resources, a variety of royal, municipal, seigneurial and other local officials attempted to wield authority. By examining Rena’s work in this web of rivalries, Escribano-Páez investigates the competitive development of jurisdictional claims as part of frontier political culture away from the imperial center.

After service in North Africa, Rena followed the Alcaide de los Donceles to Navarre where the two collaborators helped effectuate the conquest of the Pyrenean kingdom in 1512 and secure its defense and occupation until 1525. In Chapter 3, Escribano-Páez discusses Rena’s role helping incorporate Navarre into the Spanish crown. He did so as royal paymaster (among other titles) working with local merchants who were willing to provide loans for military defense; supporting the sporadically defiant Agramontese faction’s attempt to win preferential treatment from the crown; and advocating that Navarre’s defenses be funded from Castilian rather than local monies. Rena facilitated these ties and policies to knit key groups, whose disquiet about Spanish occupation persisted in the years after the conquest, more tightly to the Catholic Monarchy. In 1525, Rena ascended to court and then in the early 1530s he was dispatched to Genoa to serve as commissioner general mobilizing an imperial navy to counter the Ottoman Empire in the central Mediterranean. The fleet was commanded by the Genoese Andrea Doria, whose alliance and contribution of galleys were critical to the emperor Charles V’s strategy. However, the amalgamation of Spanish and Genoese administrative practices to support the joint force was left to agents like Rena. By examining Rena’s work, Escribano-Páez reveals how Charles acquiesced to Doria’s requisition of war booty; use of the fleet for furthering the interests of his supporters; and application of opaque accounting methods that bypassed the need to justify expenditures. Though he encountered particular difficulties, Rena contributed to policies of incorporation in the Mediterranean and Navarre that aligned regional elites to the Spanish empire and helped formulate the administration and rules governing these engagements.

Escribano-Páez’s book follows the career paths of individuals (in this case one man) to take readers to North Africa, Navarre, and the central Mediterranean and examine the development of imperial administration in the Spanish realm. This is an effective narrative structure, and it bears some resemblance to work that came before. His project stands solidly on a substantial foundation of archival data. Of central importance is the Archivo Real y General de Navarra and its recently reorganized Archivos Personales, Fondo Rena. As might be expected, a collection held in Pamplona would have much to say about Navarrese history. However, it is both a testament to the geographic span of Rena’s career and the interconnectedness of affairs in the Spanish empire that these papers can also supply a wealth of information on North Africa and the Mediterranean. Escribano-Páez mines other, similarly underutilized, repositories such the Archivo General de Andalucía (for reproductions of the Archivo Ducal de Medinaceli’s House of Comares collection), Archivo Histórico Nacional-Sección Nobleza (for the Osuna papers), and the provincial and/or municipal archives of Granada, Málaga, and Córdoba. Even when

perusing the Archivo General de Simancas and Biblioteca Nacional, institutions of reference for the study of early modern Spain, vital and illustrative details are consistently uncovered. Many of them are procured from the Registro General del Sello, Contaduría Mayor de Cuentas, and the Contaduría del Sueldo, some of the more technically challenging sections of Simancas to study.

A work as engaging as this one naturally sparks additional flights of thought and stimulates a desire to learn more. For example, Escribano-Páez ascribes Rena's administrative success to "trust" and "reputation," and these qualities incite the reader's curiosity about more personal aspects of the agent's life. Documents from Fondo Rena and Simancas do offer revealing, albeit fleeting, glimpses in this respect, and such details could help flesh out the man even more. Likewise, the origins and attributes of the "social capital" that helped launch Rena's career in North Africa, and which he seemed to immediately tap into in each setting, remain mysterious. More exposition in this regard might serve to explain how Rena resolved some of the complicated socio-political scenarios he may have faced. For instance, how did the officer help rehabilitate and win favor for Agramontese rebels without apparently alienating the rival Beaumontese loyalists?

An additional query concerns the role that women played in shaping frontier political culture. Much of Rena's work seemed to depend on his service and social ties, including with territorial governors. In the case of Navarre and elsewhere, there were instances when aristocratic wives were left as substitutes while their viceregal husbands left for court or their estates. These women and also their daughters formed households that enfolded uprooted figures like Rena into social and affective ties. A final question relates to how frontier political culture endured over time. If Escribano-Páez locates this culture in mid-level agents working in collaboration to develop nascent administrative practices, what was the fate of both the culture and the networks after key officials left the scene or died, as Rena did in 1539? These thoughts and questions are meant to take a few additional steps down the path that Escribano-Páez has already expertly guided us on, rather than detract from this fully realized and deftly researched study. Overall, Escribano-Páez has delivered an important contribution to understanding the early development of Spanish administration on imperial frontiers, and it is a particularly significant next step in the advancement of Spanish-North African and Navarrese histories.

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Author's Response

The author was provided with an opportunity to respond to the review, but declined.