

The Jesuit and the Incas. The Extraordinary Life of Padre Blas Valera, S.J. Sabine Hyland, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003, 269 pp.

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Blas Valera (1544–1597) was a prominent member of the first generation of Jesuit missionaries in Peru and, crucially for the story told by Sabine Hyland, a mestizo. Until recently he was known primarily as the author of the *Historia Occidentalis*, a lost history of the Incas in Latin that was extensively quoted by Garcilaso de la Vega in his *Comentarios reales de los Incas* (1609). Valera was most valued by his superiors for his knowledge of Andean languages, and was involved in the translation of the official catechisms of the Third Lima Council (1582–83) into Quechua and Aymara. In 1583, however, he fell out of favor for reasons that were too delicate to express in the Jesuit correspondence and so serious that he was imprisoned for three years by his own order. He was eventually sent to Spain, where he died in 1597.

Blas Valera remained an obscure figure until the 1990s, when a group of Italian researchers gradually unveiled a corpus of rather spectacular Jesuit documents owned by a private collector in Naples, including one allegedly penned by Valera himself long after his reported death. They state that Valera was secretly condemned by his order for his radical pro-Inca beliefs, especially his heretical conviction that Inca religion was compatible with Christianity. Valera is also said to have preserved a secret Inca writing system involving a type of *quipu* (or *kipu*, a record made from knotted strings) that could fully record verbal texts—a sample quipu was included in the documents. After faking his own death in

1597 he returned to Peru and secretly wrote what is probably our most important source on colonial Andean culture, the *Primer nueva coronica y buen gobierno*—its official author, the revered Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, serving as a mere front who sold his name for a cart and a horse. While the Naples documents initially caused quite a stir, several leading Andeanists consider them modern forgeries, and there is widespread agreement that their contents, at the very least, cannot be taken at face value (see Guibovich Pérez 2003 for a recent discussion).

The Jesuit and the Incas seeks to resolve the various mysteries surrounding Blas Valera, especially the motives for his fall from grace and the fantastic claims made about him in the Naples documents. Hyland argues that the latter are in fact 17th century texts authored by a disgruntled Jesuit, but that they weave together Valera's real story with a series of fictions and forgeries. Valera's mysterious crimes were indeed his attachment to his maternal people, his radical condemnation of the Spanish conquest, and his belief that the Incas had independently understood the key Christian truths. In his efforts to complete the Christianization of native Andeans from within their own culture, Valera developed a new quipu system for recording verbal texts in Quechua through a syllabic code—this was the true origin of the phonetic quipus described in the Naples documents (ch. 6). His pro-Inca position became so radical as to border on heresy, and his superiors decided to cover up the problem by imprisoning him and claiming that he was being tried by the Inquisition for fornication (ch. 8). Hyland argues, however, that Valera's death in 1597 was real—he did not return to Peru and cannot be considered the true author of

Guaman Poma's chronicle. These and other claims contained in the Naples documents, together with the text apparently written by Valera himself in the early 17th century, were concocted by a fellow Jesuit sympathetic to Valera's cause (ch. ten).

The book is a laudable attempt to reconstruct the life of an important but shadowy player in the early Christianization process. It bears directly on one of the key issues that has been emerging in the literature: the depth of the conflicts that developed within the Church concerning the relation between Andean culture and Christianity (see Estenssoro 2003 and MacCormack 1991). It is also significant for its treatment of the Naples documents as "true lies" (partially falsified 17th-century texts rather than modern forgeries) and its attempt to work through their implications, when the prevailing tendency so far has been to deny them any historical interest. In this respect, it provides an interesting explanation for the surprising phonetic quipus of the Naples documents: Hyland explains them as a Jesuit invention which may nonetheless have had precedents among the pre-conquest quipu systems. These perspectives are especially timely considering the recent boom in quipu studies (e.g., Quilter & Urton 2002). *The Jesuit and the Incas* also has considerable potential for attracting attention from broader audiences because of its engaging style and readability.

Unfortunately, Hyland's portrait of Valera is not supported by sources other than the Naples documents, which by her own account contain numerous fabrications. The first eight chapters of the book were allegedly written with no recourse at all to them, so that in Chapters 9 and 10 she was able to approach them critically and distinguish the important truths and half-truths they contain. However, it is not an

exaggeration to say that most of the important and novel claims that Hyland makes about Valera in these eight chapters—including his creation of a phonetic quipu system—are either highly speculative or entirely unfounded with respect to the sources cited.

In particular, Hyland's argument that Valera was punished by the Jesuit order for his radical nativism is both implausible and unsubstantiated. None of the beliefs concerning the proximity between Inca religion and Christianity that Hyland attributes to Valera were heretical. They were certainly contrary to the prevailing doctrines and policies of the time, but it seems unlikely that they would have been dealt with so drastically and with such secrecy. The only documentary evidence provided to the effect that his trespasses were of a doctrinal rather than a moral—sexual nature is a single, ambiguous and decontextualized Inquisition document (transcribed in Appendix B) that does not bear the weight of Hyland's conclusions. Furthermore, it is not at all clear from historical texts other than the Naples documents that Valera actually held Inca religion in such high esteem. Hyland's key source in this respect—the anonymous *Relación de las costumbres antiguas de los naturales del Pirú*—cannot be attributed to Valera with any certainty (I would suggest that the evidence is largely negative).

For all the interest the book holds for students of the early colonial Andes, it is compromised by its unacknowledged reliance on a single, very questionable source. Hyland's Valera, who is essentially the Valera of the Naples documents minus his post-1597 exploits, is simply not visible in the remaining sources. As Hyland herself puts it, the Naples documents "present a very real mystery" (227). The fact that she was not

able to find a more convincing documentary trail to support her interpretation does not bode well for its eventual acceptance. But *The Jesuit and the Incas*, precisely because of its controversial content, will no doubt have the positive effect of stimulating further research on these problems and the broader issues that surround them.

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