
Abstract:
This article introduces readers to one of the most richly documented, yet poorly understood regions in colonial Latin America, the colonial Province of Tunja in the New Kingdom of Granada (modern Colombia). Inhabited by more than 500,000 Chibcha-speaking Indians (the Muisca), Colombia’s Eastern Highlands attracted large numbers of Spanish settlers. However, the region boasted none of the profitable gold and silver mines that drew Europeans to other parts of the Americas; instead, the history of early-colonial New Granada was dominated by the various attempts to regulate and control the region’s most important commodity, its people. Not surprisingly, colonial officials made numerous attempts during the first century of Spanish rule to record the region’s tributary population. Detailed records exist from general inspections conducted in 1560, 1562, 1571, 1600, and 1636, making Colombia’s Eastern Highlands one of the best documented regions in Spanish America. What follows is a careful examination of the nature and quality of Tunja’s early-colonial population data, and a critical assessment of the previous attempts to reconstruct the region’s Indian population based on them. Despite their inherent flaws, population figures recorded in New Granada’s early-colonial inspections are surprisingly accurate reflections of the region’s tributary population.

Subjects: Columbia; Tribute records