



The Economic and Missionary Influence of Jesuit Estates in Itata Valley, Chile (1612-1697)

La influencia económica y misionera de las estancias jesuitas en el Valle del Itata, Chile (1612-1697)

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Abstract

This article focuses on the impact of Jesuit estates in the Itata Valley from 1612, with the onset of the defensive war, until 1697, the year that Colegio de Naturales de Chillán was established, emphasizing how strategic land acquisition bolstered the economic robustness of the order in the region. Furthermore, it investigates the significant role Jesuits played in evangelizing local indigenous communities. Employing an interpretive approach and an in-depth case study, the analysis unveils the modes of acquisition, geographic location, and territorial extent of the Jesuit estates, as well as the advanced agricultural practices they employed. Analytical categories include the dynamics of interaction between the Spanish and indigenous peoples, the socioeconomic influence of the estates on local society, and specific missionary efforts related to evangelization.

Keywords: Jesuits, defensive war, Itata Valley, economic and missionary activities, Chile.

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en el impacto de las estancias jesuitas en el Valle del Itata desde 1612, con la instauración de la guerra defensiva, hasta 1697, año en que se fundó el Colegio de Naturales de Chillán, destacando cómo la adquisición estratégica de tierras reforzó la solidez económica de la orden en la región. Además, se investiga el rol significativo de los jesuitas en la evangelización de las comunidades indígenas locales. Utilizando un enfoque interpretativo y un estudio de casos detallado, el análisis revela las modalidades de adquisición, la ubicación geográfica y la magnitud territorial de las estancias jesuitas, así como las prácticas agrícolas avanzadas que implementaron. Las categorías analíticas incluyen la dinámica de interacción entre españoles e indígenas, la influencia socioeconómica de las estancias en la sociedad local y los esfuerzos misioneros específicos relacionados con la evangelización.

Palabras clave: Jesuitas, guerra defensiva, Valle del Itata, actividades económicas y misioneras, Chile.

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Introduction

The Battle of Curalaba in 1598 stands out in history as an emblematic confrontation in which the cacique (Mapuche leader) Pelantaro and his forces won a decisive victory, defeating Governor Martín García Óñez de Loyola, his army, and the Indigenous auxiliaries who accompanied him. This confrontation marked a crucial turning point in relations between Spaniards and Indigenous peoples and left a profound imprint on the region's history (Barros Arana 1872; Encina 1940; Góngora 1970; Góngora 1980; Mellafe and Morales 1975; Goicovich 2007; Sánchez 2015).

From an Indigenous perspective, the victory at Curalaba amounted to the expulsion of Spaniards from their territory, an achievement of great significance (Boccarra 2002). According to Sergio Villalobos (1995), for Spaniards the battle was a painful defeat that brought several consequences: the destruction of most towns south of the Biobío River, the withdrawal of Spanish forces to the river's north bank—which thereafter served as a clearly demarcated frontier—the prohibition of Spanish entry into Mapuche territory, the loss of access to the region's alluvial gold placers, and the need to maintain garrisons along the Biobío's northern frontier to protect it (Góngora 1980; Villalobos 1995; León et al. 2003).

This historical episode had a profound political impact (Bechis 2008), as well as economic and cultural repercussions, and it helped define the region's trajectory during the seventeenth century (Mellafe and Morales 1975; Jara 1990). The belief that the frontier would disappear after conquest faded in the face of Indigenous uprisings in 1598 and again in 1655, which reintroduced instability to the region (Pinto 1996; Cerda 1996; Zavala 2008). In response, at the close of the sixteenth century colonial authorities implemented military and political reforms to confront Indigenous groups, initiating the so-called *guerra offensive* or offensive war (1601-1612) (Hanisch 1972; Sottorff 2014).

Although the Spanish Empire had many frontiers, only in Chile was a permanent, professional standing army deemed essential, prompted by the 1598 uprising and a Dutch privateer raid on Chiloé in 1600 (Carvallo 1876). Its principal architect was Governor Alonso de Ribera (1601-1605), whose strategy relied on the gradual occupation of Indigenous territories to reinforce Spanish control along the frontier. Despite the intensity of this campaign, it failed to achieve the intended results: subjugation remained elusive, and colonial forces did not significantly penetrate Indigenous lands (Villalobos 1995).

Evangelization was also conceived as a collective obligation among Spaniards. According to Rafael Gaune (2012), the *Guerra Defensiva* or Defensive War (1612–1625) led by Father Luis de Valdivia¹ promoted a process of cultural integration that fostered the interweaving of both societies (Astrain 1912; Hanisch 1972; Sottorff 2014; Gaune 2012; Díaz and Gaune 2014). Its principal aim was the conversion of Indigenous people, pursued through the missions organized by religious orders and through the direct involvement of Spanish society as a whole (Ortiz 2015).

A significant milestone in this effort was the founding of Chillán in 1580, which served as a hub for both economic undertakings and evangelizing work (Olivares 1875; Muñoz 1921). The Itata Valley became a strategic locus of Spanish colonization thanks to its environmental advantages—especially fertile soils—which offered favorable conditions for agricultural development (Bravo 2008; Castro 2020).

In this context, the Church, through the Jesuits, implemented a range of evangelization strategies. These efforts included the establishment of estates or *estancias* that played a key role in organizing social life and promoting the religious conversion of Indigenous people. In 1697, the Colegio de Naturales was founded in Chillán, becoming an essential instrument for evangelization in the region (Enrich 1891; Muñoz 1921).

Against this backdrop, the research problem centers on examining how the Jesuit *estancias* in the Itata Valley contributed to strengthening their economic and missionary influence during the period under study, even in the face of the adversities and challenges encountered in the region between 1612 and 1697. Although extensive research exists on the Jesuit presence in Latin America, there is a notable lack of studies focused specifically on their economic enterprises in the Itata Valley during this period (Cartes and Arriagada 2008; Castro 2020). The purpose of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the dual economic and missionary role the Jesuits played in this particular region.

The working hypothesis is that, through land acquisition and the promotion of economic and missionary initiatives, the Jesuits were able to consolidate their presence in the Itata Valley during the period under study, despite geographic constraints and hostilities from Indigenous groups. The objective is to analyze the effect of Jesuit *estancias* in the Itata Valley between 1612 and 1697, evaluating how

1 The Jesuits arrived in Chile in 1593 with the aim of contributing to the process of evangelization.

land acquisition strengthened the Jesuits' economic stability in the area and examining their missionary work in the valley, as well as its impact on the evangelization of Indigenous peoples.

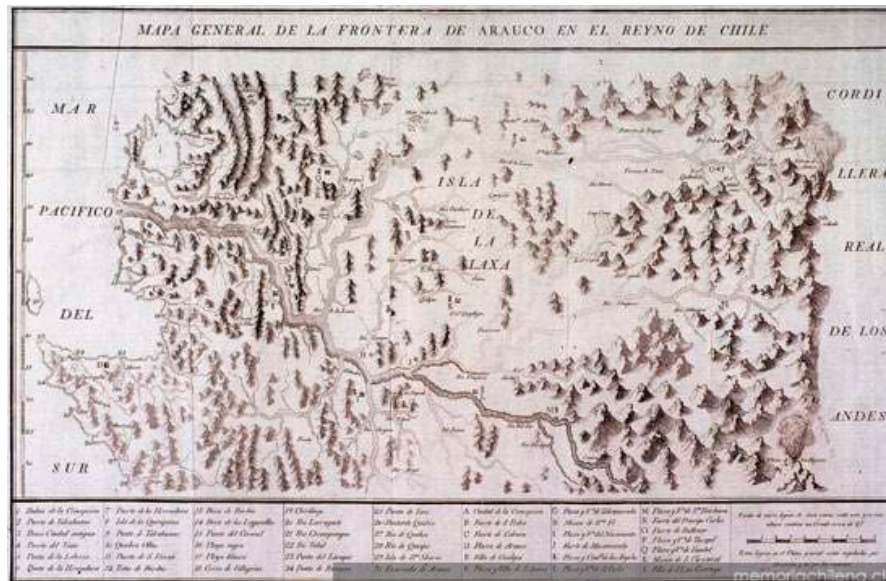
For this analysis, the study followed a methodology centered on a review of pertinent literature related to economic and missionary dynamics in the Itata Valley. A range of sources was selected, with emphasis on primary documents such as chronicles, the Colección de Historiadores de Chile and other materials concerning national history, letters regarding the Arauco frontier, and Jesuit funds. These sources made it possible to assess economic and missionary developments in the selected area. Data analysis used an interpretive approach based on a case study. The methodology included defined stages: identification of Jesuit estancias, documentation of how the Jesuits acquired them (including donations and purchases), geographic location and extent of each estancia, and examination of the productive methods employed by the Jesuits, determining whether they aligned with the practices of *encomenderos* of the period.

This methodological framework facilitated the evaluation of relevant categories that addressed, among other aspects, (a) interaction between Spaniards and Indigenous peoples, (b) the socioeconomic impact of Jesuit estancias, and (c) missionary and evangelizing activities. Through this approach, the study effectively responds to the proposed hypothesis and research objectives, as well as to the research questions posed.

Interaction Between Spaniards and Indians

The ceaseless conflicts of the sixteenth century culminated in the demarcation of a frontier along the Biobío River in the following century. This boundary stipulated that Indigenous peoples remain to the south and that Spaniards refrain from crossing it (Goicovich 2007; Sánchez 2015). Even so, the mere existence of this territorial barrier did not quell tensions, and clashes between the two sides persisted.

The course of the Arauco War broke into several phases, each marked by its own policies and military maneuvers, reflecting ongoing Spanish efforts to subjugate Indigenous populations. These phases included the Offensive War (1601–1612), the Defensive War (1612–1625) (Gaune 2012; Díaz and Gaune 2014), and the period of frontier life (Villalobos 1982; Bechis 1994). These periods not only entailed different approaches to interaction between Spaniards and Indigenous groups but also deeply shaped the region's sociopolitical development.



Source: Molina (1795).

Figure 1. General Map of the Arauco Frontier in the Kingdom of Chile

The offensive phase began after the setback at Curalaba and is closely associated with Governor Alonso de Ribera, who introduced sweeping reforms to military operations by establishing, for the first time, a regular standing army in place of the temporary militias composed of *encomenderos*. His strategy centered on the gradual occupation of Indigenous lands to fortify the frontier zone (Villalobos 1995; Venegas 2014).

To sustain this permanent military apparatus, the *Real Situado* was instituted, a financial system that transferred funds from the Spanish Crown to the Viceroyalty of Peru to pay soldiers' wages and provisions. According to Daniel Stewart (2015), these resources also affected the local economy, since officials used them to purchase goods and services from *haciendas* and *estancias* north of the frontier.

In parallel, in 1604, after intense debate between political and ecclesiastical authorities, controversial legislation authorized the legal enslavement of rebellious Indigenous people. Once apprehended, they were sold to *estancia* owners in the north, with the expectation that this punishment would deter resistance. Contrary to those expectations, the measure did not secure Indigenous submission, and it did not facilitate military incursions into their territories.

The offensive strategy produced a marked escalation of violence on both sides. Spaniards carried out continual raids into Indigenous territory in search of

captives and provisions, while Indigenous groups struck Spanish frontier posts to seize metals and other spoils of war. This dynamic turned the war into a profitable enterprise for both parties (Stewart 2015).

Nevertheless, this cycle of violence was interrupted by the introduction of an alternative strategy promoted by Father Luis de Valdivia. The Defensive War aimed to subdue Indigenous groups through persuasion and nonviolent means, a doctrine consistent with the principles of Bartolomé de las Casas.

In 1604, Luis de Valdivia argued that it was illegitimate to wage war for the purpose of politically subjugating Indigenous peoples or converting them to Catholicism. He maintained that they were the rightful owners of their lands and possessors of their freedom, and that only through their explicit consent could they accept Spanish sovereignty and receive baptism (Díaz and Gaune 2014). This position gave Father Valdivia considerable influence, even surpassing that of the regional governor (Hanisch 1972; Valdés 1980; Sottorff 2014).

According to José Manuel Díaz Blanco and Rafael Gaune Corradi (2014), the measures proposed by Father Valdivia beginning in 1612 with the establishment of the Defensive War included maintaining the frontier at the Biobío River and granting exclusive authorization to priests to cross it for missionary purposes. The army was restricted to defensive operations, and attacks on Indigenous territories were prohibited. The plan also emphasized the abolition of *encomiendas* and the enslavement of rebels, thereby demonstrating to Indigenous groups the advantages of integration into the Spanish system (Góngora 1970; Hanisch 1972).

Unfortunately, this attempt at pacification and coexistence quickly collapsed. The first missionaries who crossed the frontier were killed, Spaniards continued their search for captives, and Indigenous communities remained steadfast in preserving their traditions and resisting domination.

The absence of a coherent strategy on the part of the Habsburg Crown regarding its American frontiers created significant dependence on inhabitants of distant regions such as Chile to construct their own political and cultural frameworks (Gascón 2011; Nacuzzi 2014). Both Spanish colonists and Indigenous groups, as well as local authorities, were not interested in ending the Arauco War, since all found mutual benefits in the exchange of goods and the looting of resources.

Spanish authorities also resorted to *parlamentos*, such as the one at Quillín in 1641, as forums for dialogue between the governor and the Indigenous chiefs or

caciques, with the aim of establishing terms of peace, arranging prisoner exchanges, and agreeing on strategies to foster better coexistence between the two societies (Zavala 2015). In fact, the Arauco War was characterized more by trade and negotiation than by armed confrontations (Villalobos 1982). Without the persistent threat posed by the war, Spaniards would have lost the financial support provided by the viceroy, while the Araucanians would have been deprived of the cycle of gifts and commerce essential to their political stability and economy (Ortiz 2015).

After the 1655 rebellion, clashes between Indigenous groups and Spaniards began to diminish in both frequency and intensity. This shift was consolidated by a Real Cédula at the end of the seventeenth century that abolished Indigenous slavery, leading to a drastic reduction in regional conflict.

Interaction along the frontier began as a war of conquest, with both sides attempting to subjugate the other. However, once a balance of power was reached, Spaniards and Indigenous peoples chose to sustain the Arauco War throughout much of the seventeenth century, turning it into a prolonged confrontation. For the Spaniards, eliminating the frontier through colonization would have been a more effective strategy, but they lacked both the will and the resources to carry out extensive settlement south of the Biobío. Although Jesuit and Franciscan presences existed in the region during the seventeenth century, their activities were limited to occasional missions departing from the main Spanish settlements.

The Socio-Economic Impact of Jesuit Estates

Before 1612, the cities of Concepción and Chillán were undergoing a period of profound economic and spiritual crisis, aggravated by the continuous ravages of war. However, this situation began to change in 1605 with the arrival of the Jesuits in Concepción. From that moment on, both cities became fundamental pillars of the “defensive war” strategy (Díaz, 2011). Father Luis de Valdivia identified Concepción’s strategic position as a crucial bulwark in the protection of the frontier. Its location not only facilitated the deployment of officers in the Itata Valley, but also fostered a network of connections along the frontier territory—vital for the evangelizing mission and for stimulating agricultural and livestock production (Vergara, 1938; Góngora, 1960; Hanisch, 1972; Pacheco, 2003).

Figure 2 shows the extent of the Itata Valley, emphasizing its strategic importance as a vital connection between northern and southern zones, and as a landscape shaped by complex social interactions. Benefiting from a Mediterra-

nean climate, this valley was key to the subsistence of farming and pottery-producing Indigenous groups such as picunches, chiquillanes, and pehuenches (Orellana, 1992), who established settlements there and prospered through hunting and fishing.

The native flora and fauna of the valley included canelo, hazel, boldo, and oak trees, as well as foxes, pumas, and a wide variety of birds concentrated along the Cholguán River, which flows from the Andes. With the arrival of the Spanish, the agricultural landscape was transformed through the introduction of wheat, legumes, fruit trees, and livestock (Bibar, 1558 (1966); Góngora and Marmolejo, 1862). These changes not only enriched the region's diet but also introduced new agricultural and pastoral practices, offering fresh economic opportunities and significantly reshaping Indigenous ways of life, especially through the incorporation of the horse for transportation and warfare (Letter from Alonso de Ribera to His Majesty, 18 September 1605). Within this configuration, the estates emerged as an essential component in guaranteeing supplies for both the army and the cities to the north.



Source: Tomás López (1777). Map of a part of Chile, which includes the land where the famous events between Spaniards and Araucanians took place.

Figure 2. The Itata Valley

In accordance with Jesuit regulations, any institution they founded was required to be financially self-sustaining. This meant that each residence, school, estate, hacienda, or mission had to possess the resources necessary for its own

economic maintenance (Chevalier, 1950; Cushner, 1983; Stewart, 2015; Page, 2019a). From this perspective, Concepción and Chillán, located on the frontier, became central hubs in Valdivia's and the Jesuits' strategy for confronting the Arauco War, while at the same time advancing their evangelizing work in the region (Díaz, 2011). Concepción's privileged position, reinforced by the establishment of the Colegio San Francisco Javier in 1614, not only fostered social flourishing—particularly during major religious festivities—but also became decisive in the economic administration of the estates (Contreras, 2014). These developments underscore the intricate relationship between military, religious, and economic objectives in territorial governance and resistance during the colonial period.

In accordance with Jesuit regulations, they established the condition that any institution they founded had to be financially self-sustaining. This implied that each residence, , ranch, or mission had to have the resources for economic sustainability (Chevalier, 1950; Cushner, 1983; Stewart, 2015; Page, 2019a). Under this prism, Concepción and Chillán, located on the frontier, became central axes in the strategy of Valdivia and the Jesuits to confront the Arauco War, while, at the same time, promoting their evangelizing work in the area (Díaz, 2011). The privileged position of Concepción, reinforced by the establishment of the Colegio San Francisco Javier in 1614, not only favored social flourishing, particularly during major religious events, but also became decisive in the economic administration of the estates (Contreras, 2014). These developments highlight the intricate relationship between military, religious, and economic objectives in territorial management and resistance in colonial times.

Table 1. Donations and sale of land given to the Jesuits in the Itata Valley

Donations and land sales						
Persons	Year	Terrain			Extension (Squares)	Location
Diego Molina		House Vineyard	Donation	----	----	Ñuble River
Juan García de Alvarado	1617	Estate				Itata River
Luis Chacón		Estate		----	----	Cato River
Juan Ventura de Larma y Castilla	1727	Cuchacucha		----	2.400	Itata
Pedro García de Alvarado	-	Merced Magdalena		----	1.700 1.700	Itata Itata
Miguel Quiroz	-	Hacienda		----	6.000	Coelemu
Cornelio Baeza	-	Chacras		----	400	Guanquegua
José González de Espinoza	-	Chacras		----	1.000	Itata
Pedro de Córdoba	1710	Cato Ranch				Cato and Ñuble Rivers
Josefa García Sobarzo	1643	Caimacaquín	----		1.000	
José Gatica	1729	Walnut	----	Buy	58	Partillo Chillán

Source: Olivares (1875); Barros (1872); Sánchez (2009); Archivo Histórico Nacional Santiago. Fondo Jesuita, hereinafter (ANHS. FJ), vol. 26, foja 65, 1788; ANHS. FJ, vol. 63, foja, 156, 1772.

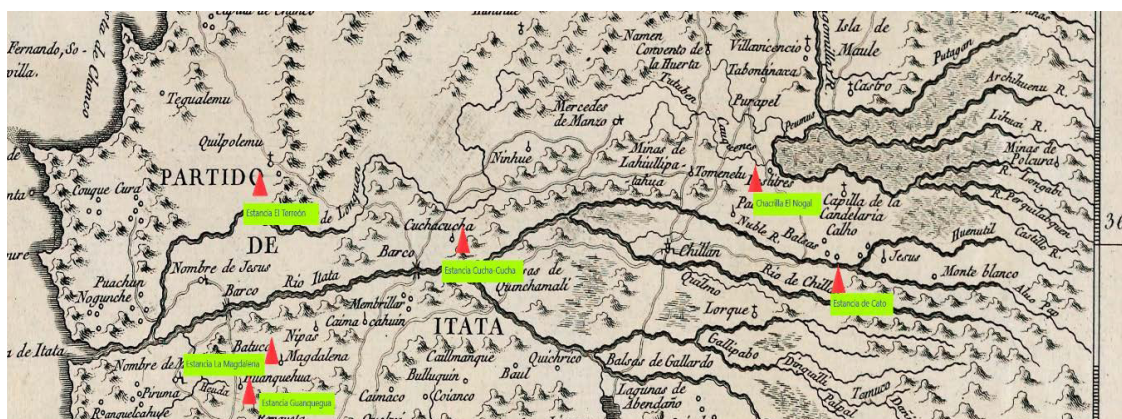
Despite the decline of the “defensive war” policy around 1625 and the profound impact it had on the Itata Valley—which sustained the complexity of social relations and sharpened the challenges faced by *encomenderos* in the context of ongoing belligerence and territorial disputes (Barros Arana, 1872)—the spirit of generosity did not waver. Soldiers, officers, and residents donated and sold parcels of land to the Jesuits in the Itata Valley (Reyes, 1991), as detailed in Table 1. These contributions were crucial for supporting the Jesuit mission in the extensive area between the Maule and Itata rivers and for meeting the need of the inhabitants of Chillán to have priests devoted to their spiritual care (ANHS. FJ. Vol. 63, folio 156, 1772).

Through these acquisitions and donations, the Jesuits of Concepción were able to build up an impressive portfolio of properties, essential for sustaining the Colegio de Concepción. This, in turn, fostered an increase in the number of members of the order and its subsequent expansion into areas such as Arauco, Yumbel, Rere, and Chillán. For example, in Chillán, Captain Diego de Molina offered his house, a vineyard, a mill, and some lands, while Father Luis Chacón secured title to lands near the Cato River, which facilitated the presence of Jesuits in the area (Olivares, 1875).

However, this period of cooperation and support for the Jesuits' evangelizing work in the Itata Valley was abruptly cut short by the uprising of 1655. The rebellion led to the devastation and depopulation of Chillán, forcing its inhabitants to seek refuge near the Maule River (Muñoz, 1921; Cartes and Arriagada, 2008). There they found shelter thanks to the mediation of Father Nicolás Mascardi. This episode highlights the fragility of peace in the region and the central role played by the Jesuits in mediating conflicts and providing spiritual and material relief in times of crisis.

According to Marco Reyes (2009), in 1664 Chillán underwent a second foundation, led by Governor Ángel de Peredo. This significant act made it possible to restore civil and religious structures that had previously been razed by Indigenous groups. This revitalization played a crucial role in enabling the renewed presence of the Jesuits in the Itata Valley and marked the beginning of a phase of economic and missionary activities promoted by this religious order (Mellafe, 1981).

A fundamental milestone in this process was the founding of the Colegio de Naturales de Chillán in 1697 (Muñoz, 1921; Contreras, 2014; Leal and Moreno, 2018), an institution that became a key agent in the administration of local estates. Among these estates were Cuchacucha, La Magdalena, El Torreón, Guanquegua, and Caimacaquin, all located in the Itata district. In addition, in the Chillán district there were prominent estates such as Cato and El Nogal. These establishments marked an important period in the territorial and economic management and organization of the region.



Source: López (1777, cited in Parada, 2023).

Figure 3. Location of Jesuit estates in the Itata Valley

The districts of Itata and Chillán were under the jurisdiction of the Bishopric of Concepción. According to Raúl Sánchez (2009), the estates in the region had an efficient administrative structure headed by procurator priests. These clergymen, answerable to the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, were responsible for ensuring the proper management of assets. It is worth noting that each hacienda and estate enjoyed autonomy in temporal affairs, as Valdés (1980), Bravo (2008), and Sottorff (2014) point out. This independence facilitated the marketing of productive surpluses in both local and international markets.

In the specific case of the estates in the Itata Valley, an extensive model of expansion predominated. There were vast pasturelands devoted to fattening livestock, large tracts set aside for wheat cultivation, as well as orchards and extensive fallow areas.

The estates, in turn, specialized in particular products. While some focused on cattle raising, others were oriented toward viticultural activities. This specialization was crucial for the supply of wheat, flour, wine, and livestock products, not only for local consumption but also for the Peruvian market (Barros Arana, 1872; Castro, 2020).

Table 2. Economic activity of the Jesuit estates

Estate	Extension (blocks)	Economic activity				
		Vineyard plants	Buildings	Animals	Number	Activity
Cuchacucha	2.400	28.070	1 Winery	Cattle Yoke of oxen Mule mares Mule mares Trajín horses Foals Mules Bighorns Sheep	162 7 71 22 18 7 8 740	Wines and Spirits
Magdalena	6.000	68.626	1 winepress 1 cellar 1 mill	Goats Sheep	500 1.000	Tannery *cueros de ca- bros (cordobanes)
Torreon	6.000	-		Cattle Heifers Bulls Sheep	230 26 24 960	
Guanquegua	400	20.284	1 mill			
Caimacaquín	1.000	25.023	1 Cellar 1 Winery	Mare Sheep	15 160	

Continue...

Cato	5.700		1 Mill	Cattle Yoke of oxen Mares Mares Mansas Donkeys Horses Sheep	319 22 ½ 85 18 33 18 47 1.700	Tannery
Walnut	97		1 Mill			

Sources: ANHS. FJ, vol. 63, foja 155, 1771; vol. 39, foja 163; vol. 39, foja 1163; vol. 32, foja 7; Olivares (1875); Sanchez (2009).

The Jesuits, despite facing significant challenges such as impassable roads, a stagnant domestic market, and fluctuating territorial control, did not lose heart. On the contrary, these difficulties spurred them to undertake impressive initiatives: they succeeded in acquiring land for agriculture and livestock raising, maximized the use of water resources, imported and developed agricultural tools, and implemented both irrigated and dry-farming methods (Vergara, 1938).

Although these commercial activities generated substantial profits, they were not directed toward the creation of large-scale industries or the expansion of far-reaching trade routes. Instead, revenues were used primarily to acquire additional estates and to expand properties in both urban and rural areas (Chevalier, 1950). This strategy led to the emergence of an economic fabric that fostered growth in the Itata Valley from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century.

The advancement of the Jesuit estates has been attributed to the adoption of European improvements, such as the introduction of select seeds, the expansion of livestock herds, and the use of more advanced farming implements. A prominent example was the estate of Cuchacucha, known for its significant wine production, with a total of 28,070 grapevines. Both Cuchacucha and La Magdalena operated a river transport service using rafts on the Itata River, which facilitated the distribution of their goods (ANHS. FJ, vol. 28, folio 68).

In the case of Chillán, commercial activity focused on intensive cattle and horse breeding, the latter being essential for transportation. Large herds of goats were also raised for tallow and hides, and sheep whose high-quality wool was used to produce a variety of textile goods in most provincial households (Carvallo Goyeneche, 1876).

The activities of the estates, however, were not limited to livestock. At the estate of La Magdalena, a processing system was established that enabled the production of fine leather, specifically cordovans, which found a market as far away as Peru (Barros Arana, 1872). This same estate was equipped with facilities for wine production and storage (Olivares, 1875).

Estates such as La Magdalena, Caimacaquín, El Torreón, El Nogal, and Cato had extensive plantations whose output was destined for export. In addition, the cultivation of vineyards in places such as Cuchacucha and Guanquegua made it possible to produce alcoholic beverages—including different types of wine and spirits—for both domestic consumption and export (Barros Arana, 1872).

The Jesuits had a significant influence on the regional economy of Chile, notable for their productive specialization and their active participation in the trade of agricultural products, manufactured goods, and tools.

Among their various investments, the Jesuit estates focused particularly on viticulture, producing two main varieties: muscatels and common wines. Jorge Gilbert Ceballos (2014) notes that the Jesuit agricultural complexes in the Bishopric of Concepción were especially prominent in the wine industry, producing wines of superior quality compared to others in the kingdom.

Trade in these wine products took place mainly along the Biobío frontier (Vergara, 1938), supplying military settlements, urban centers, and Indigenous communities, as well as provisioning ships in need of supplies. In Concepción, the Jesuits operated four pulperías (general stores), where they sold products derived from their agricultural, livestock, and viticultural activities, all obtained from their own haciendas and estates (Grez, 2015).

In an effort to diversify and optimize production, the estates of Cato and El Nogal built mills that were later leased to residents of the Itata and Chillán districts, thereby boosting the production of pulses and cereals (Jesuit Archives, vol. 32, folio 7).

The network that interconnected Jesuit agricultural properties was fundamental in enhancing the efficiency of livestock production. From cattle they obtained products such as charqui (dried meat), sole leather, tallow, and cordovan leather used in shoemaking. Sheep provided fresh meat, fat, and additional tallow (Pacheco, 2003; Menadier, 2012).

Missionary and Evangelizing Activities

The relationship between the administration of Jesuit estates and the evangelization of Indigenous people associated with the Colegio de Naturales de Chillán (O'Neill and Domínguez, 2001; Leal and Moreno, 2018) is complex and multifaceted. It involves territorial management, cultural and religious education (Rosales, 1969; Rondón, 1997; Page, 2021a, 2021b), as well as the broader politics of the colonial period (Astrain, 1912; Muñoz, 1921).

According to Cristian Leal and Rodrigo Moreno (2018), the Colegio de Naturales de Chillán, an initiative promoted by Father José González de la Rivera y Moncada, represented a strategic effort to establish an educational and cultural point of contact with Indigenous caciques (leaders). The Royal Decree of 11 May 1697 was fundamental, as it instructed the Jesuits not only to evangelize but also to respect the rights and autonomy of Indigenous people. This decree protected Indigenous territories by prohibiting the confiscation of land and upholding the authority of the caciques, including their control over labor (Parada, 2020). However, in 1723, due to an Indigenous uprising, the Colegio de Naturales was relocated to Santiago, and in 1786 the institution returned to Chillán under Franciscan administration.

The founding of the Colegio de Naturales in Chillán had a dual purpose: to educate the sons of caciques and to integrate them into Christian doctrine and Spanish ways of life, while maintaining a fundamental respect for their traditions and rights. This education aimed to foster mutual understanding and peaceful integration, thereby facilitating the Christianization and “pacification” of the territories (Muñoz, 1921; Leal and Moreno, 2018).

Chillán was chosen for its strategic location: close enough to Indigenous territories to facilitate contact, yet far enough from military forts and the potentially negative influences of Spanish settlements. The aim was to protect Indigenous students from bad examples and from the possibility of being used as hostages in the event of conflict. In addition, this distance was meant to preserve the purity of the religious and cultural instruction provided at the school (Minutes of the session of the missions board at which the Colegio de Naturales of Chillán for caciques was provisionally founded in 1699).

The Jesuit-administered estates, including the estate of El Nogal, were more than centers of agricultural and livestock production; they were also cultural and economic meeting points. Through efficient administration and labor on these

estates, the Jesuits demonstrated advanced agricultural practices and models of community management that benefited both Indigenous people and Spaniards. They also promoted self-sufficiency and fair economic exchange, key elements for peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

Amid persistent Indigenous uprisings, cultural and territorial resistance underscored the complexity of the frontier as an epicenter of ongoing tension. In this context, Concepción and Chillán emerged as key centers during the Arauco War, embodying not only a defensive role but also becoming hubs of evangelization. Despite their strategic value and notable contribution to the region's socioeconomic fabric, they were not spared the challenges and adversities of their time, a reality dramatically underscored by the events of the 1655 uprising, which destabilized the Itata Valley.

At the same time, the estates of the Itata Valley, under the administration of the Colegio de Naturales de Chillán, stood out as vital forces in the regional economic landscape and in the expansion of the Society of Jesus. The estates of Cuchacucha, La Magdalena, El Torreón, Guanquegua, Caimacaquín, Cato, La Chacrilla, and El Nogal formed a network of properties that fostered local economic development and testified to the Jesuits' ability to weave relatively harmonious forms of interaction with the surrounding communities.

It is essential, however, to approach this history through a critical lens. While the Jesuits emerged as astute administrators and cultural mediators, their efforts were embedded in a broader colonial agenda that at times infringed upon the rights and autonomy of Indigenous peoples. Evangelization policies and administrative practices, although framed as promoting integration and cultural exchange, were not exempt from the power asymmetries and coercive dynamics inherent to colonial rule.

The historical trajectory of the Colegio de Naturales de Chillán and its network of estates thus encompasses the duality of cooperation and coercion. It represents a chapter of concerted efforts to forge a peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence with Indigenous communities within a colonial order, even as it reveals the conflicts and contradictions that arise when navigating the currents of colonial power and Indigenous self-determination. This legacy, therefore, calls for

ongoing reflection on how stories of cultural convergence are narrated and interpreted, recognizing both the advances achieved and the tensions they carry.

Archives

Claudio Gay Archive

National Historical Archive Santiago Jesuit Fund of Chile

Documents

Minutes of the session of the junta de misiones in which the colegio de caciques de Chillán was provisionally founded in 1699.

Letter from Governor Don Tomás Marín de Poveda to the Spanish monarch Charles II, dated June 2, 1696.

Letter from Alonso de Ribera to His Majesty, September 18, 1605. Royal Decree of May 11, 1697.

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