

The 'Paper Khipus' of the Early Colonial Andes

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NINO, Leiden (2020/21)

Abstract

Among the most distinctive aspects of the early-colonial Andes was the recording of numerical information in multiple media—in written documents by the Spanish, and in *khipus* (knotted-string devices) by former Inka subjects. This “khipu-paper colonial interface,” as Frank Salomon has called it, was perhaps most visible from the 1550s in the colonial *audiencias* (high courts), in which Andean claimants seeking compensatory damages from the estates of their former *encomenderos* presented khipu-based oral testimony. In such cases, evidentiary khipus, once “read” aloud by native cord keepers, were translated and entered into writing by scribes as so-called *paper khipus*. Acknowledging the highly mediated conditions of their original production, the author’s digitization and syntactic annotation of the surviving transcriptions raises the possibility of corpus-level linguistic inquiries into khipu-based legal testimony. Following a brief survey of khipu use in the early-colonial Andes, including its gradual replacement by alphabetic writing as the official means of Andean recordkeeping, I consider the evolution of part-of-speech usage in a corpus of paper khipus, with particular focus on verb diversity. It is argued that transcribed verbs offer a glimpse into the transformations in khipu recording practices that accompanied the introduction of Spanish monetary tribute and written administrative records. Paper khipus emerge as more than structured legal transcripts, embodying the alphabetic collision of the early-colonial Andes.