



A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900

By Lauren Benton

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A Search for Sovereignty maps a new approach to world history by examining the relation of law and geography in European empires between 1400 and 1900. Lauren Benton argues that Europeans imagined imperial space as networks of corridors and enclaves, and that they constructed sovereignty in ways that merged ideas about geography and law. Conflicts over treason, piracy, convict transportation, martial law, and crime created irregular spaces of law, while also attaching legal meanings to familiar geographic categories such as rivers, oceans, islands, and mountains. The resulting legal and spatial anomalies influenced debates about imperial constitutions and international law both in the colonies and at home. This original study changes our understanding of empire and its legacies and opens new perspectives on the global history of law.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Lauren Benton's book is sure to remap how we think about the geography of world history. Elegantly written, theoretically sophisticated, and impressively documented, this book challenges the common view of sovereignty as the result of spreading laws and extending territorial claims, as if the world rested on a divide between lawful and lawless lands. According to Benton, these divides were the artifice of legal ideologies that obscured the common features of violence and uncertainty that pervaded empires from their hinterlands to their cores."

Jeremy Adelman, Princeton University

"Empires usually appear expansive, implacable, and all-encompassing, but *A Search for Sovereignty* portrays them instead as uneven, tentative, and riddled with gaps and contradictions. The novel topics and surprising juxtapositions in this strikingly original book comprise a vision of world history that is as convincing as it is unsettling. Its achievement confirms Lauren Benton's stature as one of the most creative historians writing today."

David Armitage, Harvard University

"Lauren Benton has shown, with immense erudition and considerable flair, how central the concern with sovereignty was for all the European overseas empires throughout their long and complex histories. She has shown also how closely tied law was to the concept of space, in ways that will have an enduring impact not only on how world history is conceived but also on how we understand the current tangled conflict over international jurisdiction. *A Search for Sovereignty* is a brilliant, innovative, and timely book."

Anthony Pagden, Distinguished Professor of Political Science and History, University of California, Los Angeles

"Canvassing legal archives over large reaches of the early modern world, Benton discerns striking correlations between the practice of geography and the practice of law - and between discrete categories of space and recurring types of threat to state sovereignty. The resulting account calls for a new map of imperial space - one replete with gaping holes and alarming lumps, a viscous and uneven medium that has eluded cartography to date. This is a superb book that will make a splash among historians, geographers, and social theorists alike."

Kären Wigen, Stanford University

"In this examination of the relation between law and geography in European empires between 1400 and 1900, Benton argues the Europeans constructed sovereignty in ways that merged ideas about geography and law."

Law and Social Inquiry

"... a book of the first importance."

Eliga Gould, H-Soz-u-Kult

"Benton's most notable contribution is to show that sovereignty is indeed a geographical discourse but one comprised and constitutive of multiple spaces, sites, and places, rather than simply the supposedly fixed, bounded and homogenous spaces of territorial states."

Nisha Shah, Political Geography

"Lauren Benton's deeply imaginative monograph rethinks the relationship between law, geography, and jurisdictional politics in European overseas empires ... Readers who follow Benton upriver, across oceans, and to islands and mountains with eyes trained for legal posturing and jurisdictional politics will see European empires in a new and arresting way."

Law and History Review

"... succeed[s] in presenting a compelling set of reasons for questioning teleological accounts of sovereignty ... [Benton] provides many points of entry for further elaboration on the ways in which empire disrupts the narrative of a steady convergence of sovereignty and bounded territory culminating in the present international legal order."

Kate Purcell, British Yearbook of International Law

About the Author

Lauren Benton is Professor of History and Affiliate Professor of Law at New York University. Her book *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400-1900* (Cambridge, 2002) won the Law and Society Association's James Willard Hurst Book Prize, the World History Association Book Prize, and the PEWS Book Award from the American Sociological Association, Political Economy of the World Systems Section.

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