S-115 – Colonies as spaces of knowledge

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Abstract:
The study of the relationships between past empires and the sciences has attracted the attention of historians of science for a long time. First, the emphasis was put on contacts and links between the colony and the metropolis, with the former generally viewed as some kind of passive space, "awaiting" to be known for the benefit of the latter and by its agents. In this way, colonized territories - and their inhabitants - have been considered mainly as objects or sources of knowledge for naturalists, cartographers, physicians, chroniclers, missionaries and so on. In many cases this view has been able to go beyond the the traditional, diffusionist models of "colonial science", even if only to highlight the not-so benign dimensions of scientific knowledge and its purported centrality in the processes of empire building and colonial domination. However, in recent years, colonized spaces have started to receive a great deal of attention as "places of knowledge" in themselves, without necessarily denying their importance as objects and sources of valuable knowledge for metropolitan interests (but nuancing this dimension, at times). The aim of this symposium is to focus on colonial territories precisely in this capacity of spaces able to produce and use knowledge of and by themselves, and in landscapes of circulation that are not from the start dominated by the political, economical and military powers that impose the colonial rule on them. This can entail focusing on "continental", inland circulation rather than on overseas exchanges, or on exchanges between neighboring territories under different colonial rules, or between different parts of an overseas colonial empire. This can also entail looking at the circulation of knowledge at a local or regional, rather than global, scale and therefore shedding light on actors whose range of action and movement is shorter than that of those who travelled between Europe and the rest of the world. In this way, the symposium intends to serve both as a balance of this newer trend in the science and empires field, and as a way to address the core theme of the 25th ICHST, i.e., “Science, technology and medicine between the global and the local”.

Keywords: Colonial knowledge – Science and empires – Spaces of knowledge – Circulation of knowledge – Local/regional scales.

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