

RESEÑAS Y COMENTARIOS BIBLIOGRÁFICOS

Frances F. Berdan and Michael E. Smith. 2021. *Everyday Life in the Aztec World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 259 pp.

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In their recent volume, the authors Frances F. Berdan and Michael E. Smith successfully pull the everyday lives of Aztecs out of abstraction and invite them to gather around the *tenamaztli* hearth. Relying on archaeological, image-based, and alphabetic evidence, the authors compose narratives of Aztec lives according to profession and then weave them together by elaborating on major life events such as births, marriages, and death ceremonies. Berdan and Smith precisely explain citing the historical record and then eloquently dramatize in fictional characters the daily and the special events in the lives of Nahuas before the arrival of Europeans. Following in the footsteps of Jacques Soustelle (1961), Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Pablo Escalante Gonzalbo (2004), and Manuel Aguilar-Moreno (2007), the authors provide a holistic sense of and how Aztecs spent their days. This general interest book uses ethnohistorical sources, anthropological evidence, and the excavated record to examine the everyday of six lives and four major life events from Aztec society.

Based on their life-long study of Aztec culture, Berdan and Smith constructed these six fictional characters as entry points into broader elements of daily life in that society before the Spanish-led invasion. The book has an inventive structure: the first part explores people's lives according to their societal role and the second portion weaves these individual accounts into an interconnected narrative anchored by four major life-cycle events.

The exploration of intersecting lives, or the ways Nahua society functioned is a particular strength of this work. The authors choose occupations from all strata of society, and even include geographic variability as many of the characters are from locales outside of Tenochtitlan. The first person introduced is the *tlatoani*, or leader of Tenochtitlan, a character firmly based on evidence depicting the life of the eighth Mexica ruler Ahuitzotl. The



ruler is presented as a crafty politician whose successful conquests enriched the people of Tenochtitlan, but his singular failure of the aqueduct was so expertly handled that it resulted in an overwhelming positive surviving collective memory. The rest of the *macehualli* or regular people are summoned from a *mélange* of sources revealing the lives of the elites from the priest, the featherworker, and the merchant followed by that of the commoner roles of the farmer and the slave. Illuminating a particularly fascinating role, the section on the feather artisan features visual sources of the most beautiful pieces of the genre. The merchant description expounds his duties of connecting the capital city through networks of trade; it reveals, as well, the diplomatic and economic functions these men and women performed. Each character receives a name in Nahuatl with a summary based on historical texts followed by lively fictionalized quotidian scenes. The struggles faced by the priest, to choose a particular service by following strict training and to provide for the most spectacular displays of devotion, successfully humanize the role often depicted as oblivious to anything but their cosmovision. The imaginative rendering of the farmer's ruminations also exemplifies this strength. Smith and Berdan write that the farmer they name as *Icnoyotl* reflects on his possible yearnings by stating, "while the gods presented good people like himself with a hard life of rain, dirt, weeds, and rocks stuck here in the village, some of those lucky city-dwellers got to head off to adventures in Huaxacac [Oaxaca], the western [Pacific] coast, or even distant Xoconochco" (p. 106). The authors base these vignettes on life-cycle events that consist of a birth and naming ceremony, outings to the market, formal judgement at the palace, and military ventures.

This book exists squarely in the center of the sources paradox that afflicts any work attempting to understand Indigenous lives before contact with the Spaniards. It is forced to extrapolate cultural significance from abundant archaeological evidence but also heavily benefiting from colonial alphabetic and visual texts while somewhat-regretfully acknowledging their hybridity. Such incongruities are worsened by the chronological elision in the narratives that begin with pre-contact life, then the consequences faced during encounters with the Spaniards, that are followed by a contemporary reference. One such elision appears in the descriptions of the evolving nature of the location of Ahuitzotl's palace that concludes with the following: "Today the space is occupied by the National Lottery" (p. 33). Another example comes from the chapter on the enslaved person that marshals evidence from excavation sites located in Copilco and Morelos, texts from

late sixteenth century manuscripts, and photographs of a modern Nahua weaver (p. 132-135). While such identifications can be useful to understand amazing societal continuities and certainly speak to their long-standing expertise, they can add to the temporal dislocation.

Everyday Life in the Aztec World is an eminently accessible volume and an excellent guide for anyone new to the study of the Nahuas. As an entry-level guide to everyday in an ancient and oft-considered inaccessible world, it brings together an extensive source base to illuminate the struggles and joys of being a Nahua person on the eve of contact across the Atlantic. Although the violent and disruptive nature of the Spanish-led invasion is impossible to ignore, Berdan and Smith carefully unearth the lives of people before and after the infamous moment of contact.

References

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