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Philip P. Arnold, *Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan*

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Book Reviews

Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan. By Philip P. Arnold. (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1999. xvii + 287 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.)

With their practice of ritual cannibalism, the Mexica have gained notoriety as some of the most violent diners in history, and yet they ate a basically vegetarian diet of corn and beans. Philip P. Arnold emphasizes, in the title of this book, that these Native Americans recognized the violence they committed to the land in the simple act of feeding themselves tortillas. Unlike the carnivorous Spaniards, who assumed a biblical mandate to subdue the earth and all its occupants, the Mexica believed that they had to perform human sacrifices in order to restore the natural resources they had stripped away from the soil through agriculture. By making landscape the focus of his investigation, Arnold opens new vistas both on Mexica religious practices and on the Spanish colonial lens through which modern observers perceive them. This historical perspective of the Valley of Mexico in the sixteenth century becomes, in turn, a mirror for viewing contemporary society and its colonial relationship to the natural world.

Arnold bases his study both on Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's ethnographic descriptions of the Tlaloc fertility cult and on the topographic surveys of the Valley of Mexico conducted in the 1960s by Jeffrey Parsons, William Sanders, and others. This novel combination clearly shows how ritual practices conveyed Mexica beliefs about the correspondence between humans and the landscape, both natural and supernatural. For example, the festival *Heui Tozoztli* (great vigil) demonstrated the relationship between the circulation of blood, water, and animistic energies. The festival began atop Mount Tlalocan with the sacrifice of a male child and concluded in canoes at Pantitlan, where the lake supposedly drained, with the death of a female child. These locations reflected both the Mexica belief that Tlaloc stored water underground, especially in mountains, and their distinction between rushing, "masculine" stream water and placid, "feminine" lake water. The ceremony thus inserted human blood into the hydrological cycle of the valley to assure rain for the crops. Another festival, *Etzalcualiztli* (eating bean and maize stew), mediated the boundary between humans and the lake, as priests made a procession around the shore before entering the chilly waters to imitate birds, splashing about for days while making bird calls. Possessed by nonhuman spirits, they performed random acts of violence representing the

capriciousness of nature, while at the same time forging a link between humans and Tlaloc's realm.

According to Arnold, the intimate relationship between the Mexica and their landscape contrasted sharply with the outlook of Sahagún, whose goal was to create an otherworldly New Jerusalem in the Americas. The origins of the Franciscan order—as a reaction against the material world emphasized by the late-medieval profit economy—shaped the ethnographic account within the Florentine Codex, and by juxtaposing these radically different views of the same land, Arnold achieves a new understanding of both cultures.

This book contains excellent maps illustrating the Mexica landscape, but a calendar correlating pre-Hispanic and Gregorian months with the agricultural cycle would have helped even further. Such a calendar might also have assisted in reaching a more accurate count of the monthly festivals dedicated to Tlaloc (p. 78). But this is no easy task, for the fertility cult indigenous to the Valley of Mexico overlapped with Mexica tribal rituals as well as with ceremonies legitimizing the Aztec state. By concentrating on Tlaloc, Arnold may well have exaggerated the distinctions between the Spanish colonial ethic of occupation and that of the Mexica, who also occupied the Valley of Mexico through conquest. Nevertheless, he has succeeded in making geography, like astronomy, an essential tool for all who seek to understand the Aztec world.

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