

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

The Aztecs Then and Now. By FERNANDO HORCASITAS. Mexico City: Minutiae Mexicana, 1979. Maps. Illustrations. Bibliography. Pp. 168. Paper. \$7.50.

This book is about how the Aztecs, in less than a century, carved out an empire that incorporated most of ancient Mesoamerica, about their conquest by the soldiers of Hernán Cortés, and about what happened to their descendants. Its author, Fernando Horcasitas, is a respected Aztec ethnohistorian and Mesoamerican ethnologist. The approach Horcasitas takes is descriptive. He tells the story of the Aztecs, from their earliest beginnings as a tribe in search of a homeland to modern times. The text is oriented to the lay reader. Thus, a background in Aztec archaeology and ethnohistory is not required to appreciate the feats of this remarkable people.

The Aztecs Then and Now is divided into seven parts. In the first, Horcasitas presents a brief summary of Basin of Mexico prehistory. His concern is not with describing the archaeological record. Rather, he wants to show how the earlier civilizations of Tula and Teotihuacán figured into Aztec cosmology and mythology. The Quetzalcoatl myth, in particular, is discussed in detail. Horcasitas then presents a history of the Aztec empire. He describes the Aztec migration from legendary Aztlán, their life as a subject people to Culhuacan and Azcapotzalco, the period of empire-building, especially during the reigns of Moctezuma Ilhuicamina and Ahuitzotl, and the conquest-period Aztecs of Tenochtitlán. Horcasitas takes care to point out that the Spanish forces were successful not so much because of technological superiority, but because the empire was only a loose collection of tributary provinces that turned against the Aztecs.

The remainder of the book describes what parts of their cultural heritage were preserved after the conquest, how Aztec culture was transformed during colonial times, how the Indians were manipulated by the Spaniards, and the impact of Christianity on value and belief systems. Also presented is a summary of the Nahuas (Nahuatl speakers) of today. Horcasitas's intent is to contrast what we know about preconquest lifeways with those same elements of Nahua culture that still persist in rural Mexico.

Horcasitas's account of Aztec history and lifeways is concise and well written, and the book is well illustrated, with photographs from archival sources and line drawings (by Alberto Beltrán). This book should be read by all of the lay public

interested in Aztec culture. It should also be required reading for all Latin Americanists touring the Aztec world who are unfamiliar with the accomplishments of this most astonishing of pre-Columbian civilizations.

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BACKGROUND

Portuguese Bankers at the Court of Spain, 1626–1650. By JAMES C. BOYAJIAN. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983. Notes. Tables. Appendixes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xiv, 289. Cloth. \$35.00.

In this admirably conceived study, James Boyajian examines the activities of the great Portuguese financiers who advanced funds to the Spanish crown during the waning years of Habsburg hegemony in Europe. Between 1626 and 1650, eighteen family networks made available to the crown at least 65 million ducats by signing *asientos*, annual loan and foreign payment contracts. As the author makes clear, it was largely thanks to this infusion of capital that Spain was able to prolong its role as the central player on the European stage.

Though primarily a financial history, the study provides data on the *asiento* families, their sources of wealth, and their social aspirations. Most of the financiers discussed were New Christians. A sizable share of the author's research has been condensed into eighteen genealogical tables (pp. 183–204) that extend from the early sixteenth to the early eighteenth century. In these tables Boyajian notes the commercial centers in which family members were to be found. Through these tables and the text itself the reader gains a rare perspective on the worldwide commercial networks established by New Christian merchant families after 1580.

Much of the family wealth encumbered in crown contracts derived from private trade in the Far East, the Atlantic slave trade, and, especially, the sugar plantations of colonial Brazil. When the Dutch intruded on these commercial ventures, Portuguese merchants saw *asientos* as attractive investments. After the bankruptcy of 1627, Portuguese capital flowed into Spain, filling the void left by Genoese financiers. In exchange for extending their capital, the Portuguese obtained religious and commercial concessions. Wealth accumulated in the slave and sugar trades thus found its way onto the receptive ledgers of the Spanish Habsburgs. It might even be argued that well before João IV of Portugal described Brazil as his “milch-cow,” the colony, through the fortunes of Portuguese *asentistas*, served a similar function for the Spanish crown.

During their two decades as principal financiers for the Spanish crown, the Portuguese made a number of contributions to the development of the world