

*De l'eau vive à l'eau morte: enjeux techniques et culturels dans la vallée de Mexico (XVIe–XIXe siècles)*. By ALAIN MUSSET. Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1991. Photographs. Plates. Illustrations. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 414 pp. Paper.

The inhabitants of the basin of Mexico cannot really ignore the place water occupies in their existence. The questions and problems preoccupying today's Mexico City residents may have changed from those that worried the inhabitants of Tenochtitlán, but the constraints of geography and hydraulics are still vital to their everyday lives. Water, and particularly the lake that dominated the basin of Mexico when the Spanish conquerors arrived, gradually changed from ally to enemy over the course of the colonial period.

Alain Musset broaches this diachronic change while examining the problem of water in a very broad sense. He examines how the European conception of water paralleled or diverged from the indigenous notion, and he follows up this distinction to show how alternate ideas or philosophies of resource usage led to distinctive approaches to the lake environment. Musset looks at the basin of Mexico as a whole, and does not neglect the surrounding areas or the needs—agricultural and otherwise—that contrasted and competed with those of the metropolis.

While many scholars have concentrated on irrigation versus floods, the law versus folklore, or other specialized topics, Musset approaches the subject of water from multiple angles: cultural conceptions, products derived, canals and allocation, influence in urbanization, ecology, agriculture, religion, and finally drainage, in each category contrasting the practices of the indigenous peoples of the region (but mostly the Aztecs) to those of the Spanish. The book zigzags from the pre-Hispanic period to the colonial, the national, and back to the beginning through the various themes. Although for examining one topic this organization is ideal, as a whole it is rather unnerving. Musset's stated goal, to elucidate the transformation from a culture in equilibrium with the lake milieu to one that fought and destroyed this environment, gets lost in the course of the book, mainly because he does not follow any one line of investigation to its logical end. The many parenthetical asides are pleasant, but they detract from the work as a whole.

Musset's sources are diverse: codices, documents from Mexico and Spain, scientific tracts, travelers' accounts, and chronicles. Yet his use of documentary information is haphazard: he tends to cite one case or one reference to a problem and base his entire discussion on this scrap of evidence. He is on more solid ground when he examines published materials, but his bibliography leaves some glaring omissions (Meyer, Doolittle, Taylor, Murphy, to name a few). Musset's book remains a gracious introduction to the subject, but the specialist will find neither novelty nor a satisfying depth of analysis.

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