

REVIEWS

AZTECS

The Fifteenth Month: Aztec History in the Rituals of Panquetzaliztli. By John F Schwaller.
Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. Pp. 272. \$39.95, cloth.
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If we were to choose the pivotal moment in the ritual, social, and political life of the vibrant imperial city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, it would definitely be Panquetzaliztli, “The Raising of Banners.” This celebration has finally found its place in the area of critical studies of the Aztec past with John Frederick Schwaller’s book.

The author scrutinizes available sixteenth-century sources in Nahuatl and Spanish, tracing the presence and characteristics of Panquetzaliztli both outside and inside imperial Tenochtitlan. Carefully dealing with discrepancies in extant sources and with great attention to detail, Schwaller reconstructs the complex ritual trajectory leading to the culmination of the final day of Panquetzaliztli, enriching his analysis of textual accounts with pictorial sources. He convincingly shows that this extremely complex celebration depended on the choreography of thousands of social actors from the society’s different groups. They were engaged in a huge number of ritual preparations and acts leading, in an orderly and integrated manner, to the apogee of the ritual: the celebration of the Mexica patron deity Huitzilopochtli.

In previous studies, the image of Panquetzaliztli has been largely limited to the final celebration recreating the birth and the victory of Huitzilopochtli over his enemies, who faced inevitable death on the sacrificial stone; Schwaller, however, uncovers its complexity as reflected in “hundreds if not thousands of symbolic acts” that were not performed in a vacuum or in isolation from each other. One of the merits of his approach is the meticulous inclusion of numerous pieces of relevant information, endeavoring to explain the role of each component in the ritual celebration’s broader sequence, involving different social actors and distinct audiences. This careful analysis also makes it clear, as Schwaller himself states, that despite the variety of available sources, it is often impossible for modern scholars to understand all the nuances and symbolic messages that lie behind the plethora of ritual activities, gestures, attributes, and paraphernalia.

The unquestionable value of Schwaller's method, however, is in its application of what I would call 'thick description in ethnohistorical research.' In other words, the book evokes Geertz's influential proposal of "thick description" in anthropology (1973), building upon an analytical approach that begins by distinguishing all individuals and examples of shaped behavior manifest in the course of ritual actions, and culminates in "sorting out the structures of signification." Schwaller's thick description of the Panquetzaliztli month allows readers to witness a multilayered past reality, with its multiplicity of acts and conceptual structures, deeply interwoven with the social tissue of the heterogeneous Aztec society. In doing so, the study engages with an inquiry into 'a microhistory of a ritual.' It highlights not only the daily activities of collective groups, but also the individual actors and their actions on the ritual scene, situating their agency within ritual duties as well as the broader structures of social hierarchies.

I consider the book's thematic focus to be especially apt for uncovering and explaining the complex interplay of relationships and meanings in the indigenous world. Religious celebrations in contemporary Nahua culture, also falling on precise moments of the temporal cycle, with all of their prescribed and complete ritual sequences, constitute the pivot and points of convergence for culturally relevant behaviors and for maintaining human-divine relationships. It is in this context that not only individual and collective actions, but also sacred plants, objects, and the environment acquire their full meaning and become efficient in assuring the community's continuity and well-being (as shown in the work of Eduardo de la Cruz, *Cenyahitoc cintli tonacayo*, 2017).

Schwaller's approach does not focus solely on the religious foundation of Panquetzaliztli. It also determines the celebration's social and political ground and shows how memories and visions of the past formed part of the present. By examining the dynamics of historical processes, the book probes the development of this pivotal Aztec celebration and how it resonated with key moments of Mexica history. Schwaller argues, for example, that the "swiftness of Huitzilopochtli," a ritual run that proceeded counterclockwise from the main temple Huei Teocalli to the southwestern quarter of the Central Valley, recreated the Mexica migration story and culminated with the birth and victory of Huitzilopochtli over his enemies.

History, in fact, was present and recreated throughout the Aztec yearly cycle: for instance, the events of the month of Ochpaniztli perpetuated their establishment of the legitimate ruling dynasty of Tenochtitlan. One of the most puzzling elements of Panquetzaliztli—its alignment and conflation with the New Fire ceremony in 1507—reflects the dynamics of Tenochtitlan's state policies and especially the process of ascendance of Huitzilopochtli to the role of the dominant god at the expense of both Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. All of these threads come together in Schwaller's novel study of the Aztecs' fifteenth month. In addition to highlighting—through the temporal and spatial lens of Panquetzaliztli—the

deeper social, political, religious, ideological, and even economic processes that shaped the Aztec empire, he has indeed revealed the surprising degree to which “the rituals manifest the vestiges of bygone days” (196-97).

Center for Research and Practice in Cultural Continuity
University of Warsaw
Warsaw, Poland
jolko@al.um.edu.pl

JUSTYNA OLKO

CONQUEST OF MEXICO

Conquistadoren und Azteken: Cortés und die Eroberung Mexikos. By Stefan Rinke. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019. Pp. 399. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$31.75 cloth. doi:10.1017/tam.2020.74

The book market in German-speaking countries considers practical publishing introductions to South American topics, at least those aimed at a broader readership, only during commemorative years such as the fifth centenary of the discovery of America or the bicentenary of the independent republics. In 2019, the fifth centenary of the beginning of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire led to various publications tied to an ethnographic exhibition in the Lindenmuseum (Stuttgart) and a concise and more general introduction to the phenomenon of the Spanish conquest (Vitus Huber, *Die Konquistadoren. Cortés, Pizarro und die Eroberung Amerikas*; Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019). Rinke’s introduction is more detailed and narrative, focusing on the military conquest and cultural changes in Mesoamerica around 1520.

The book is highly recommended for two target audiences. Its 11 readily comprehensible chapters will be of considerable use to the general reader because they include the social basis and results of the conquest, both in Estremadura and Central America. Scholars and students seeking to acquire expertise in a new field will find an invaluable starting point in the precise endnotes and the excellent remarks on research traditions and the different types of sources (17-30), with a slight underrepresentation of French research into the subject.

The central part of the book (57-294) weaves together different narrative threads. The main thread is the biography of Hernán Cortés and the immediate historical context, starting with the expeditions of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba and Juan de Grijalva in 1517-18. Using one of the methodological innovations of the biographical turn, Rinke avoids the “coherent feel” (16) that the (auto)biographical writings of the early modern era may provoke. He summarizes the key results of historiographical and ethnographical research concerning Mesoamerica by stating that the indigenous world was not homogeneous at all (161), and that the conquest was a “complex process of pacts and deals” (21) between conquerors and indigenous allies and enemies. The same goes for Spaniards themselves, whose activities were anything but unitary, either in the