

a town of national or even regional significance: it was always a 'county of small towns'.

**C.C. Thornton**

Institute of Historical Research

**Michael E. Smith**, *Aztec City-State Capitals*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. xv + 256pp. 57 figures. 10 tables. Bibliography. £25.50 pbk.  
doi:10.1017/S0963926810000179

In this excellent book Michael Smith adds significantly to our knowledge regarding Aztec cities, as well as engaging with wider debates about the nature of urban settlement. There were several hundred Aztec city-state capitals in central Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest, and one of Smith's most important contributions is to make widely available in English archaeological data about cities beyond the famous capital of Tenochtitlan. Much of this information was previously unpublished, or available only in technical reports, and Smith collates the material into an extremely useful catalogue. Focusing on major capitals and those with the most archaeological remains, he also includes some more unusual sites, providing an excellent range of material with which to contextualize his analysis. In simply bringing these lesser-known cities to light, Smith makes an important contribution to history and understanding, but this book also seeks to understand the dynamics of Aztec urbanism and to place them in the wider context of processes of urbanization.

Aztec cities challenge demographic definitions of urbanism, because (with the exception of Tenochtitlan) they had relatively low population densities, and so Smith advocates a functional approach. Measured by their administrative, economic and religious influence over their hinterlands, Smith argues, Aztec capitals were 'fully urban settlements', which should be described using the term 'city' (p. 2). Although explicitly avoiding high-level social theory, Smith engages throughout with urban theory, making 'use of several lower-level theoretical concepts interpreted within a political economy framework' (p. 11). Using Amos Rapoport's scheme of high-, middle- and low-level meaning to analyse Aztec townscapes, Smith's discussion is organized around four key dimensions of urbanism: form, life, function and meaning. Taking a functional and materialist approach, underpinned by a strong base of empirical evidence from archaeological and historical data, Smith identifies three types of Aztec urban settlements: the imperial capital of Tenochtitlan, regional capitals and small towns.

Studies of Aztec urbanism have previously focused heavily on the great metropolis of Tenochtitlan, and Smith seeks to redress the balance by focusing attention on alternative centres and pointing out the extent to which Tenochtitlan differed from most Aztec cities. At times, a less specialist reader might have found just a little more detail on Tenochtitlan helpful in understanding the uniqueness of this city, but Smith rightly seeks to redress an overemphasis on the imperial capital as a model, which has led to misinterpretations of other Mexican settlements. Smith particularly challenges 'cosmovision scholars' who have attempted to extend the high-level religious meanings of Tenochtitlan's Great Temple to the entire city and beyond. Whilst not denying the significance of religion in shaping Aztec capitals,

Smith makes a strong case for rejecting speculative overarching cosmological interpretations, instead positing a model in which the design, construction and use of cities were parts of 'a process of exchange or negotiation among kings, commoners and nobles' (p. 193), which should be understood only in their regional social context. As a practical archaeologist of long experience, Smith is acutely aware of the difficulties of his evidence, and is careful not to overstate his 'admittedly speculative' hypothesis (p. 190) but he makes a convincing case for understanding these settlements as local capitals with significant urban functions.

*Aztec City-State Capitals* is a fascinating and accessible work which deserves to be widely read amongst both Mesoamerican specialists and readers with more general interests in urban history. This reviewer felt a slight hesitation at the use of terms such as 'king' to describe indigenous offices, where more explanation of Nahuatl terminology might have been desirable, but this is a perennial problem in writing for a general audience and is the smallest of quibbles with this excellent and original book.

**Caroline Dodds Pennock**

University of Leicester

**Lisanne Gibson and John Pendlebury (eds.),** *Valuing Historic Environments*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. vii + 220pp. Illustrations. Bibliographies. £55.00.  
doi:10.1017/S0963926810000180

Ideas on what constitutes the historic environment move with the times under pressure from our political masters, academic advances and grass-roots opinion. The means to present and manage this slippery resource evolve in response, usually with a time lag between public appreciation and effective stewardship. We are in such a hiatus at present as old values and systems are challenged and new approaches are in development. Ten essays by some of the leading 'heritage academics' (and a couple of practitioners) provide a forensic examination of attitudes to the historic environment and heritage and pose fundamental questions about the philosophy of protection and presentation. The context for the debate is provided by the democratization of heritage. The process is by no means complete, but it is both encouraged by government and, apparently, unstoppable. The genie was released from the bottle by *Power of Place*, a survey of public attitudes to the historic environment. This told us that the overwhelming majority of people value the historic environment highly, but it emerges that their historic environment is not restricted to sites and landscapes identified by experts as of special interest: it is recognized that we live in it and move around it in our everyday lives.

Most of the essays in this volume have something to say about the definition of 'heritage'. For Laurajane Smith, this is a process by which values are transmitted rather than buildings or landscapes. Peter Borsay provides a fascinating history of changing attitudes to the Georgian house, surprisingly to modern eyes recognized as heritage only very recently after a century and more of vilification and disregard. The use of heritage for political ends is studied through David Lowenthal's examination of how museum collections have been presented, and Lisanne Gibson