

**Barbara E. Mundy (2015) *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 246 pp., US\$75 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-292-76656-3**

We often view cities as barometers of civilization. While some societies preserve them as testaments to their resilience, others found them in demonstration of their ingenuity and virility. By the same token, a city's conquest and destruction can herald the death of the society upon which it was borne. As Barbara E. Mundy demonstrates in this work, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City*, the binary concept of urban development, which views the birth and destruction of cities in tact with the rise and fall of civilizations, was and remains elementary to the narrative of Spanish conquest in the New World. This was illustrated most spectacularly in 1521, when Hernando Cortés seized and, as the story goes, 'destroyed' the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, thus crippling the civic infrastructure of the Mexica realm and signaling the decline of the indigenous Nahuatl civilization. In its place, Cortés 'erected' a new center, Mexico City, which henceforth served as the capital of a fledgling European empire. Despite the remarkable durability of that narrative, Mundy's study reveals that conquistadores' efforts to stamp out Tenochtitlan's legacy were incomplete. Hidden amidst the normative portrayals of the colonial municipality in the wake of conquest are countless clues that reveal the perpetuation and adaption of indigenous technologies and ideals of urban life.

Mundy's challenge was to look beyond the impressions of the urban space relayed by 16th and 17th-Century colonial elites, whose monumental architecture, maps and illuminated manuscripts styled Mexico City as something familiar, something European. Appreciating that the Hispanic codices often communicated idealized representations, rather than organic realities, Mundy scrutinizes them for other clues as to how that space was 'lived' in accordance with environmental challenges and the changing socio-political landscape. In that vein, she sheds a light on previously underappreciated examples of indigenous agency in the early cultivation of Mexico City. Her methods are refreshingly graphic and accessible to the reader. A visual delight, this book's ample use of high-quality illustrations allows the audience to reference the same manuscripts and maps consulted for study, as well as the specific visual and textual clues upon which Mundy builds her arguments.

Beyond the work's optical allure, which this reader believes will itself draw wide audiences, its interdisciplinary approach will surely strengthen its appeal among a diverse readership. Infusing her expertise in cartography, art history and ethnography into the wider field of colonial history, Mundy fills gaps in surviving diplomatic material and creates a more holistic and multi-dimensional portrayal of public life in the city. The strength of this approach is witnessed, for example, in Chapters 5 and 6, which address efforts of Franciscans to recast the city space as Christian. While the conversion of indigenous populations is an appreciable feature of existing historiography in colonial Latin America, Mundy's analyses help readers better visualize the compass of the clergy's efforts to evangelize lived space and erase

recollections of idolatry. Scrutinizing city diagrams, she reveals that Hispanic city planners also relied on pre-existing axes within the urban space, as squares once used in reverence to indigenous deities were overlaid with Christian edifices and symbols, thus preserving the power of space while redirecting pagan memory.

Further praise goes to the book's coherent structure. While chapters are generally thematic, focusing on topics such as civic administration, religion and toponymy, they are also arranged in roughly chronological order, beginning with pre-conquest Tenochtitlan before moving on to its development as a colonial center in the mid- and late-16th Century. Organized in this manner, the book ushers readers through specific analyses while also relaying a generally linear survey of Mexico's pre-conquest and colonial history. Those with limited knowledge of the pre-Columbian era thus gain a better handle on important terms and concepts that reemerge throughout her analysis of the decades of Hispanic colonialism.

The most compelling points of Mundy's study are those which address the changing 'hydrographic profile' of the urban space. Building upon an islet adjacent to the western shores of Lake Texcoco, the indigenous Mexica waged a continuous war with water. As Mundy demonstrates in Chapter 2, their struggle can be traced in the achievements and failures of their water-management enterprises. Anchoring Tenochtitlan to the mainland, pre-Hispanic engineers built causeways that enabled rulers to access and impose their authority over dependent mainland territories throughout the Valley of Mexico. The compass of their lived space was also expanded through cultivation of new arable plots of land, while periodic flooding was controlled with levies and canals. Surrounded by brackish waters, inhabitants also tapped into fresh springs and attempted, although with variable success, to develop extensive aqueduct systems. In surveying these feats and failures, Mundy illustrates that hydrographic challenges not only spurred technical advancement, but also imbued in the local society a sense purpose and achievement that was manifest in the art, dress and performance of the urban space. By extension, she advances that these representations mirrored and sharpened the native Nahua vision of political community as a 'water hill' (*altepetl*).

Bridging pre-colonial and colonial experiences, Mundy addresses the issue once more in Chapter 9, demonstrating how the war with water raged on and even intensified in the wake of the Spanish conquest. Despite a reduced population, the 'new' city suffered under increased demands for fresh water to supply the leadership's agricultural and industrial projects. More unsettling was the city planners' disastrous management of brackish water: having breached or neglected pre-existing levees during their invasion, Spanish leaders ignored indigenous precedents for water management and thus failed to control the salinization of the city's water supply. Only after numerous failures and recurrent acute shortages did the Spanish ruling elite draw upon indigenous technological knowledge, recruiting Antonio de Valeriano and other Nahua elite to reinvigorate the *altepetl* through canals, aqueducts and fountains. Conceding authority in these matters was a move toward rapprochement with pre-Hispanic

strategies for urban island development and, by extension, facilitated the reintegration of Nahua leaders into the civic administration and historical narrative of Mexico City.

It is no coincidence that Mundy concludes her study by highlighting the marriage between indigenous technology and the emigrant Hispanic regime. While ostensibly emboldened by a narrative of conquest and innovation, viceroys could not, in reality, start from scratch. The success, indeed the very existence of Mexico City, supposedly a Spanish enterprise, must be attributed largely to its genealogy in Nahua civilization and Mexica ingenuity. The theory should resonate in the broader field of urban island history (and urban history in general), and encourage scholars to appreciate links between indigenous and emigrant civilizations. This reader, for instance, sees parallels between Mundy's study and his own case of early-modern Orkney, where Norse traditions of landholding, administration and law remained the bases for public life even after those isles were subsumed into the kingdom of Scotland. Despite these general parallels, the links between Tenochtitlan and Mexico City were somewhat exceptional, for, as Mundy illustrates, they flourished in inverse correlation to Spanish efforts to ignore or veil them. This work's greatest achievement is its ability to locate, rationalize and look beyond that paradox, exposing the lifeline between two cities and the intersections of two civilizations.

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