

that extends beyond the island-nations (although comparative material from the major island-nations of Jamaica, Barbados, or Trinidad is minimal). Bolland inevitably faced the challenge of many Caribbean scholars who must balance broad regional trends with in-depth analysis of specific nation-states. In light of this, it is remarkable that one author is able to provide so much depth and breadth to the subject. For the historian, many of the general essays may not be historically specific enough. Others will lament the lack of comparison with the Spanish, French, and Dutch Caribbean. Yet, these essays provide important themes and issues that will allow for cross-cultural comparison. This volume is well organized and conceptualized (although it does not include the index listed in the table of contents) and will be an important reference for years to come.

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## Background

*The Códice de Santa María Asunción: Facsimile and Commentary. Households and Lands in Sixteenth-Century Tepetlaoztoc.* By BARBARA J. WILLIAMS and H. R. HARVEY. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997. Plates. Illustrations. Maps. Tables. Figures. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. xii, 410 pp. Cloth, \$275.00.

Increasingly, pictorial documents in the Aztec native tradition are available in excellent facsimile editions, and the *Códice de Santa María Asunción* is a recent addition to this library of primary sources. The *Asunción* document is a rural census and a record of land ownership and use from Tepetlaoztoc, a local capital near Texcoco in the eastern Basin of Mexico. Unlike the more familiar historical and religious codices, the *Asunción* document offers a rare look at the actual sixteenth-century Mexican families whose lives underwrote the more general accounts told, for example, by the *Codex Mendoza's* tribute record and "daily life" sections. Dozens of families are named, drawn, and diagrammed, and their farm holdings are measured and assessed. Because the *Asunción* provides this unprecedented level of historical intimacy, it contributes generously to what we know about how the Aztecs saw themselves.

The *Asunción* document dates from about 1544. It was drawn in native style on European paper, and annotated in Nahuatl and Spanish to serve as legal evidence when local farmers accused their colonial *encomendero* overlord of abusing his privileges. The original manuscript consisted of perhaps 125 folios, of which 80 remain. These 160 pages are the census and cadastral records for a dozen villages. Descriptions by Cortés, Zorita, Bernal Díaz, and others of native civil records such as maps and deeds are amply exemplified by the *Asunción*. In prehispanic times, the village headman kept such records, noting births and deaths and overseeing the transfer of plots of unused land and the inheritance of family holdings. Few such documents survived the colonial period, and the *Asunción* facsimile illustrates the formal characteristics of these records,

the information the headman used to make decisions about land redistributions and household assessments. Thus it demonstrates not only a kind of record keeping but also a highly practical way of thinking about the value of land and labor. The document also shows us that the Nahuas recorded families by name, house type, and standardized portraits, and recorded land by perimeter and surface area. They used precise mathematical calculations to derive areal measures, and employed color codes to convey information about issues such as category of land ownership and whether censused individuals were living or dead.

A typical census page profiled five households, each with a horizontal line of information. Each line begins at the left side of the page with the family name in glyph, then shows a house glyph facing right, in either Nahuatl or Otomí (and perhaps even Huastec) style. Next to the door, the household head's stylized portrait faces right, toward his (and occasionally, her) family, all named in a Spanish gloss above their representations. The stylized images show the elderly with wrinkled skin, babies in cradles, married couples facing each other, widowed people with tears on their cheeks, all linked by blood-red lines running beneath the set of portraits. Most poignant for this epidemic-wracked population, the blackened heads of the recently deceased graphically verify in human terms the chilling demographic reality of a loss of 80 percent of the basin's population within a century of European contact.

The illustrations vividly convey Aztec (and Spanish) traditions of bureaucratic bookkeeping, and, like many bureaucratic documents, this one has a certain visual monotony. It is surprisingly monochromatic in comparison with native pictorials on historical and religious topics. Page after page of family glyphs and land plots present a certain stylistic minimalism in contrast to the *Mendoza's* catalog of imperial riches. The *Asunción's* compelling qualities derive from its singularity as a rich source of sixteenth-century household and agrarian survey data. This volume will be an exciting research and teaching tool for many scholars of Aztec and colonial life, a primary source that documents the lives of a local sample of the great mass of Aztec farmer-artisan families. Furthermore, this edition's solid scholarly analysis and treatment of subjects such as family structure; land-holding patterns; soil quality and field size; and native conventions of measurement, enumeration, and calculation lend it further value. Williams and Harvey are to be commended for the organization and annotation of this handsome and useful book, which should be considered essential for any college collection of Mesoamerican primary sources in facsimile. The volume's substantial price reflects the considerable cost of unsubsidized high quality publishing, and makes book buyers everywhere appreciate the value of subvention donations, when they can be obtained. Yet the volume delivers fair value; scholars and especially libraries should not balk at acquiring it. From a purely practical perspective (and the Aztecs of the *Asunción* seem to have been eminently practical people) one could make a far worse investment than a facsimile edition, whose value, like that of the land itself, will only increase with time.

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