

Background

Aztec and Maya Myths. By KARL TAUBE. The *Legendary Past* series. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993. Photographs. Illustrations. Map. Index. 80 pp. Paper. \$9.95.

The *Legendary Past* is a series of short works devoted to the mythologies of ancient peoples. Volumes include the Greeks, the Romans, the Norse, the Celts, and, in this book representing the *New World*, the Aztecs and Maya of Middle America. The series is geared to a general audience, and it emphasizes the content of the myths rather than such issues as the nature of this verbal act, the cultural contexts of myth, or a particular theoretical or disciplinary approach to mythology. Karl Taube provides a brief synopsis of selected myths, with a few short quotations to indicate their literary characteristics. The many illustrations drawn from indigenous pictographic writing and artworks help the reader to visualize characters and episodes. In-text citations and bibliography are lacking, although a guide to further reading supplies both the documentary sources for the myths and some scholarly analyses of this material.

The book opens with a summary of basic information on the various Middle American cultures, followed by a discussion of the source materials for Aztec and Maya myths. These are primarily postconquest prose texts written by Spaniards or Hispanicized native peoples. The remainder of the book is equally divided between discussions of Aztec and Maya narratives. Each section begins with information on the gods, some of whom appear in the myths, but there is little other material on religion.

The author has selected only the creation myths of the two peoples, and these are organized by theme: the multiple episodes of the cosmogony followed by the origins of humans and of their sustenance, maize. He also discusses the state-creation myths of the Aztecs, but not the equivalent narratives for the Maya. For the latter group, Taube aspires to emphasize pre-Hispanic Maya mythology using the archaeological and hieroglyphic information now becoming available (p. 10). The Maya section, however, deals almost entirely with a single postconquest document, the *Popol Vuh* of the Guatemalan Quiche Maya, and then shows how episodes from this late narrative may have existed earlier, as illustrated on Maya vases and other artworks.

The writing is clear and necessarily parsimonious. The existence of variations in the myths is noted, but the author must choose among them in order to tell a consistent and unified story. This is not a forum for introducing new material or critical analyses. Nevertheless, Taube does draw out some of the themes and characteristics common to the mythology of both groups. He concludes with a brief comparison of Middle American myths to those of other civilizations, stressing how

little is known about this *New World* mythology but also noting that the mythic themes survive in tales still being told today in Mexico and Central America.

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Colonial Period

A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain. Revised edition. By PETER GERHARD. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Maps. Tables. Figures. Appendixes. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. xii, 484 pp. Cloth. \$39.95.

The North Frontier of New Spain. Revised edition. By PETER GERHARD. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Maps. Tables. Figures. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. xiv, 456 pp. Cloth. \$37.50.

The Southeast Frontier of New Spain. Revised edition. By PETER GERHARD. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Maps. Tables. Figures. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. xi, 219 pp. Cloth. \$28.50.

Los encomenderos de Quito, 1534-1660. By JAVIER ORTIZ DE LA TABLA DUCASSE. Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispánicos, 1993. Figures. Notes. Appendix. Bibliography. Indexes. xvi, 377 pp. Paper.

Encomienda y encomenderos en el Perú. By JOSÉ DE LA PUENTE BRUNKE. Seville: Diputación Provincial de Sevilla, 1992. Maps. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. v, 536 pp. Paper.

The five volumes under review collectively contribute to our understanding of the nature of Spanish administrative organization and control of native peoples at the core of high civilization zones in Andean and Mesoamerica. With Peter Gerhard we have a revised and corrected work that was increasingly difficult to locate with the passage of time. Here is a seasoned scholar who over the years has continued to keep his attention closely focused on the historical geography of Mexico. The volume on central New Spain was originally published by Cambridge University Press in 1972; the two volumes on the southeast and northern frontiers were published by Princeton University Press in 1979 and 1982, respectively. The discovery of some new, important source materials, as well as the findings of more recent researchers, also made a new edition of Gerhard's work desirable. Today the text is as valuable as it was originally—perhaps even more so.

Gerhard's organization and subjects are similar in each volume. He examines first the physical setting, then the nature of the conquest, the encomienda system, administrative history, ecclesiastical divisions; then population and settlements, followed by a place-by-place description. This is not a text to be read for the pleasure of a good narrative, competently written though it is. Instead, it is a re-