

## Book Reviews

### General and Sources

*The Tira de Tepechpan: Negotiating Place under Aztec and Spanish Rule.*

By LORI BOORNAZIAN DIEL. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008. Illustrations. Map. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. viii, 160 pp. Hardcover, \$65.00.

The *tira* was a pictographic book painted on a strip of bark paper and used in late pre-Hispanic Mexico especially to record dynastic information for important cities. Tepechpan, however, was a minor settlement in the Aztec realm, under the hegemony of a major capital, Tetzcoco. How and why Tepechpan elites used the *tira* format to assert their claims to political legitimacy in reference to both pre-Hispanic Aztec and colonial Spanish domains is the subject of Lori Boornazian Diel's analysis. She demonstrates why interpretations of this document, which has more usually been studied for the pre-conquest history it records, must consider the colonial setting of its production, the changing agenda of its multiple authors during shifting political regimes, and their manipulation of visual patterns and metaphors.

The typical *tira* takes the annals format, in which the continuous span of time, rendered in the pre-Hispanic system of year symbols, runs across the length of paper, and any important historical events are depicted near or tied to the pertinent year. Begun in the latter half of the sixteenth century, the *Tira de Tepechpan* begins its historical account in 1298 and ends in 1596, although it continued to be annotated alphabetically for well over a century. Housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the document was analyzed in detail by Xavier Noguez (*Tira de Tepechpan: Códice colonial procedente del valle de México*, 1978), and Diel generally relies on Noguez's readings of individual symbols. Although this newer edition also includes a full-color photographic reproduction of the *tira*, readers wanting to visually follow the readings of the pictographs would do better to use Noguez's publication, which has larger illustrations accompanied by line drawings. Those untutored in the pre-Hispanic writing system will also have difficulty understanding the pictographs. However, reading the signs is not the goal of this book, whose value for even nonspecialist historians is the demonstration of how local-level experiences were represented in the early colonial period.

Based on her examination of the original *tira* and later copies, Diel structures her analysis in terms of the different contributors to its production, identifying four painter-scribes and five annotators who provided glosses beginning in 1590, after the pictographic portion was completed, and likely continuing into the eighteenth century.

(The annotations are provided in the appendix.) The work of each painter is presented in the temporal order of his contributions, including overpainting of earlier pictographs, followed by a briefer discussion of the Nahuatl texts added by each annotator. This order of presentation and the separation of the alphabetic from the visual information may disgruntle readers who prefer a simple sequential reading, but it makes better sense considering Diel's objective of demonstrating how the document was produced over time and the changing political motivations for inscribing its content.

Drawing loosely on poststructuralist theory, Diel treats the *tira* as an example of colonial discourse in mostly visual form, a strategic representation of history by minor elites to align themselves with the major players of their world, the Aztecs and the Spaniards, well after the conquest. Importantly, the pre-Hispanic section of the *tira* displays the parallel histories of Tepechpan and Tenochtitlan, with accessions and deaths of Tepechpan kings positioned above the horizontal line of year symbols, while matching events for Tenochtitlan are below. This means that the sixteenth-century Tepechpan painter-scribe "A" leapfrogged over Tetzcoco, the immediate overlord, to liken Tepechpan's history directly to that of the preeminent Aztec capital, even claiming that Tepechpan's foundation and kingship preceded those of Tenochtitlan. With the coming of the Spaniards and Christianity in 1519, the same historical trope was adopted in visual symbols: immediate alliance by Tepechpanecs with the victors. Mexica-Aztec symbols of rulership used in the earlier portion were replaced by Spanish signs of political and religious authority, as viceroys and bishops take the place of Tenochca kings.

However, the later painter-scribes neglected the careful patterning of history before and after the conquest, and they painted or repainted events prior to 1519. Diel links this loss of visual organizational structure to breakdowns in political order due to the toll of epidemic disease on tribute collections and land disputes with neighboring communities. Assertions of prestige by association with the highest levels of political hierarchy were replaced by local concerns, indicating a change in the *tira*'s function or purpose.

In sum, Diel's analysis reveals the *Tira de Tepechpan* as a dynamic, flexible document, a proof of legitimacy as derived from the past even as it was amended to respond to concerns in the present. Diel demonstrates how imperial history was a "strategy for survival" of low-level elites, providing a "bottom-up" view of the unsettled colonial era (p. 125). A similar analysis is needed for contemporary central Mexican pictographic documents.

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