

Catherine R. DiCesare, *Sweeping the Way: Divine Transformation in the Aztec Festival of Ochpaniztli* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009), 248 pp., \$60 (cloth), \$45 (ebook).

One of the goals of contemporary researchers of the ancient world is to find new and exciting ways to interpret the past. This is exactly what Catherine DiCesare has done in *Sweeping the Way: Divine Transformation in the Aztec Festival of Ochpaniztli*. In this study, DiCesare analyzes the textual and pictorial depictions, the accoutrements, and the symbolism of one of the most controversial pre-Columbian ceremonies, the Festival of Ochpaniztli (a ceremony performed during the month identified as September, in honor of Toci, the earth and moon goddess). DiCesare challenges the traditional reliance on textual materials as the only source of knowledge of pre-Columbian ceremonies and tries to tell the story from another point of view, that of the aboriginals. She accomplishes this by turning her attention to the drawings of the *tlacuilos*, learned people who were trained from youth by the Aztecs in arts and history. One of her main sources was the Codex Borbonicus, which is a single 46.5-foot long sheet of amatl "paper." It is pictorial in nature with descriptions added in Spanish above them. Each page represents one of the twenty trecena (or thirteen-day periods) in the 260-day year. Most of the page is taken up with a painting of the ruling deity or deities. Scholars believed that the codex paintings were commissioned by Spanish friars and overseen by *tlacuilos* shortly after the Aztec Conquest. The friars interpreted the paintings according to their religious baggage. DiCesare's work offers an alternative to the "official history," the history put forward by the Spanish mendicant friars in charge of the catechization and acculturation of the aboriginal people during and after the conquest of Mesoamerica.

DiCesare divides her book into an introduction and five chapters. The Introduction offers a survey of the pictorial and textual sources available for analysis. Here, she explains that a few of the sources actually have pre-Columbian origins, but that most of the sources available today were either written post-colonially by the Spaniards themselves or were based on their own interpretations of paintings commissioned by the friars to the natives. The Ochpaniztli

ceremony, celebrating a deity frequently identified as Toci, Teteoinnan, and Tlazolteotl, was very troublesome for Spaniards because this deity was linked with human sexuality, midwifery, parturition, healing and cleansing rites, and because the ceremony involved human sacrifice.

The first two chapters go hand in hand. In chapter one, "Sources for Ochpaniztli: Negotiating Text and Image in Early Colonial Mexican Manuscripts," DiCesare points out that because of destruction of pre-Columbian sources, comparison with post-Columbian sources is almost impossible. She recognizes that pre-Columbian art was totally foreign to Westerners, in the sense that one painting was only one part of a whole series of actions. For example, the paintings served as visual cues that prompted a poet to recite an oral tradition or were the cue for an actor to perform; they were not intended to stand alone. She argues that when the Spaniards commissioned the paintings, the *tlacuilos* had to envision new ways of portraying festivals, traditions, customs, etc., accordingly. These paintings had to be analyzed from the standpoint that they were "new ways," and that they would reflect the origins and acculturation of their authors.

It is important to note that she agrees with other researchers who state that "the Borbonicus veintena [yearly ceremonies] chapter records a version of the eighteen feasts whose *overall* structure accords with the pan-Mesoamerican xihuitl cycle, the specific year that it records very likely reflects the events of one notable, and historically specific, period" (31, her emphasis). She explains that Mexicas performed yearly ceremonies that could vary from year to year or from period to period depending on the social and environmental circumstances. The Borbonicus veintena most likely represents the years Two Reed and One Rabbit (from the fifty-two year count). During those years, Two Reed/One Rabbit, an infestation of rats decimated the crops, leading to suffering and starvation. Thus, the performance of lavish ceremonies honoring the gods of maize, rain, and fertility is not surprising. In chapter 2, "Visualizing the Sacred in the Ochpaniztli Festival," DiCesare examines the available manuscripts and illustrations, and discusses the importance that the *tlacuilos* placed on the goddess's paraphernalia and accoutrements. The author discovers an interesting commonality of objects in the *tlacuilo* depictions of the Ochpaniztli feast and other post-Colonial illustrations. Examples are the broom in the hand of the goddess and her makeup.

Chapter 3, "Purification and Renewal during the Festival of Ochpaniztli," discusses the social, religious, and ceremonial significance of the goddess's paraphernalia and accoutrements. DiCesare explains that they were rarely mentioned in the textual records. A closer look, trying to take a Nahua point of view, shows that much can be learned from the goddess's paraphernalia and accoutrements. Textual sources may present her as a "Roman-style patroness of the Indians' 'idolatrous' and sanguinary practices" (100), while the tlacuilos' drawings represent Tlazolteotl as the model purifier. She embodied social and sexual issues, anxieties about corporeal behaviors, and represented women as agents of transformation in and out of the domestic sphere. In Mexica society women protected the earth and home as healers and midwives, and Tlazolteotl became the filth that they eradicated and took it outside the city outskirts where she remained as a guardian of the cleansed city.

In chapter four, "The Colonial Image of Tlazolteotl," DiCesare contrasts the tlacuilos' representations with the textual explanations of the Spaniard writers. She explains that the friars attached their humanistic baggage, fears, and beliefs to the ceremony. They thus reduced it from a polysemic ceremony to a dichotomy of good versus evil, as a symbol of benevolent motherhood, or as a symbol of sinful and depraved, libidinous behavior. She suggests that the reasons for attaching a negative meaning to the ceremony were due to their Christianizing agenda, and because they feared that the Pagan cult to the Nahua mother was being mixed up with the devotions to Christian mother figures. To avoid such confusion, they separated the image of the goddess into two: a benevolent grandmother Toci-Teteoinnan, reminiscent of the Virgin Mary, and the filthy Tlazolteotl to whom they assigned a negative context, associated with her role in Pagan ceremonies.

In chapter five, "Ochpaniztli in the Mexican Borbonicus," DiCesare turns her attention to the place where many scholars begin their investigations, to the *veintena* chapter of the *Codex Borbonicus*. DiCesare proposes that the ceremonies connected with Ochpaniztli were associated with the celebrations to Chicomecoalt and Tlaloc in response to apparent cyclical environmental conditions that devastated central Mexico. Even though important, Tlazolteotl was not the central figure in the ceremonies. Based on depictions of ceremonial events, accoutrements, and participants depicted in the *Codex Borbonicus* and elsewhere, DiCesare argues that the ceremony

of Ochpaniztli probably was performed in a variety of ways that reflected the historical moment.

DiCesare acknowledges the symbolic importance of color in the understanding of the illustrations, but unfortunately, the book only includes images in black and white. Also, it would have been advantageous to have a Spanish-speaking person review the spelling of Spanish words and names, especially in the bibliography where this reviewer found several errors.

This well-written and amply supported specialized book promises to interest archaeologists, art historians, ethnographers, and researchers of Mesoamerican culture in general. It offers a reasonable survey of bibliographic sources available in English, Spanish, and Nahuatl. Perhaps, even more importantly, it offers a creative new approach to the study of the Ochpaniztli ceremony and the Aztecs' imaginal world by contextualizing the sources and the creators with the pictorial representations in order to elucidate a more accurate interpretation of the ceremony as an alternative approach to the use of the textual narratives. This study is an excellent model for analysis of other ceremonial depictions, artifacts, and paintings.

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