

Elizabeth P. Benson. *Birds and Beasts of Ancient Latin America*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997. xix + 162 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-1518-7.



Reviewed by Bryan Just

Published on H-LatAm (March, 1998)

Birds and Beasts of Ancient Latin America was published as an accompanying text to a traveling exhibition of the same name funded by the Florida Museum of Natural History, the Carnegie Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and the California Academy of Sciences. Although Elizabeth Benson's general survey of faunal imagery in ancient Latin America covers a myriad of traditions with a wide array of specific examples, the illustrations in the text come solely from the exhibition, comprised of selections from four institutions: the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, the Florida Museum of Natural History, the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. The book was not created, however, as an exhibition catalog, but as an expansion of the major themes of the exhibition, intended primarily for the general public as an introduction to the topic. Still, the author claims that the work will prove useful for scholars in many fields as well. While the text successfully places the exhibition objects in a broad symbolic tradition, the general and at times anecdotal use of temporally and

geographically diverse sources makes the work potentially confusing for the general reader while also inconvenient for the serious scholar. The greatest value of the book, in my opinion, is the publication of many heretofore unpublished objects, primarily ceramics and gold artifacts from coastal Peru, western Mexico, and the Intermediate Area. Even so, I see this book as neither particularly useful for scholars nor clearly informative for the general reader. It is important to note, however, that these inadequacies are most likely the result of inherent limitations posed by the exhibition, which seemed to stifle the careful, thorough and stimulating scholarship more typical of the author.

The body of the text includes a basic introductory chapter of the animals of Latin America and a general overview of how the inhabitants of ancient Latin America made use of them, with a focus on imagery and mythology. Benson stresses the pervasiveness throughout Latin America of faunal references in ancient mythology, ritual, and symbolism.

This chapter is followed by a series of six topicalized chapters, each discussing briefly a set of animals corresponding to the following groupings: domesticated animals, hunted mammals, anomalous animals, birds, amphibians and reptiles, and finally fish, crustaceans and mollusks. In each of these chapters, Benson systematically discusses the range of possible meanings particular animal imagery may have had throughout a myriad of ancient Latin American cultures. By grouping analyses by animal instead of culture, a sense of how each culture coordinated and assembled its faunal symbolism is lost in exchange for a very general range of meanings across varied temporal and geographic contexts. This form of organization, although it assumedly follows the organization of the exhibition, leads to confusion for both the interested general reader and the more knowledgeable student or scholar.

Also, the text only generally provides creatures' habitation zones and presents no photography of the less commonly known animals, such as peccaries or quetzals. Whereas such imagery would prove informative for the general reader, it would also facilitate a more critical and scholarly consideration of what Precolumbian peoples considered diagnostic of these creatures, shedding light on their most fundamental symbolic meanings.

Furthermore, many of the most powerful and compelling animal references known in Precolumbian art are mentioned without illustration. For example, there are no illustrations of the puma form of the Inca city of Cuzco, no images of the caiman on the Chavin Tello Obelisk, no Aztec serpent sculptures, and no Maya uinal toads. Although appropriate for placing the exhibition objects in a broad Precolumbian context, limiting the visual component of the text to these images provides a rather narrow view of the ancient Latin American corpus of animal imagery as a whole.

In my opinion, one of the most compelling issues raised by Precolumbian faunal symbolism is the frequent reference to animals not indigenous to the given culture area. Tropical fauna in particular appears in art from the highlands of Mexico and Guatemala as well as the Andes. As mentioned above, however, the organization by species and more general faunal categories cloud the geographic and temporal distinctions that are essential for such investigation.

Finally, a significant strength of the book for scholars and amateurs alike is Benson's bibliography, which provides a convenient assemblage of the best Latin American bestiaries as well as an array of articles related to faunal iconography throughout the region.

In sum, *Birds and Beasts of Ancient Latin America* provides a broad, general context for better understanding its corresponding exhibition, yet the book itself offers neither a clear introduction to the general reader nor a significant source for the scholar. Still, the newly-published imagery and thorough bibliography may be of use to both audiences. In any case, the limitations of the text are clearly imposed by its exhibition context and do not represent the quality of Benson's typically fine scholarship.

Copyright (c)1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permissions, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Bryan Just. Review of Benson, Elizabeth P. *Birds and Beasts of Ancient Latin America*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1817>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.