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Michael E. Smith. *Aztec City-State Capitals.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. xv + 255 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8130-3245-0.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Graham (University College London)

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How to Tell a City

Michael E. Smith's volume brings together information on Aztec cities from the best known–Tenochtitlan–to those known only to specialists, a range made possible because he integrates disparate documentary and archaeological sources, and also incorporates archaeological data from unpublished excavation reports. Smith is well known as one of a group of scholars who have addressed the imbalance between ethno-history and archaeology in Aztec studies by directing excavations at central Mexican sites, and thus he is well positioned to enhance knowledge of Aztec urban form and function by augmenting the documentary information. The bulk of our information on pre-Aztec Mesoamerican societies comes from archaeology. In contrast, most of our information on the Aztecs comes from indigenous almanacs, histories, and tribute records; Spanish conquerors' reports; accounts of the Mendicant friars and their first generation of converts; and colonial administrative documents in both Nahuatl and Spanish. The record seems rich, but it is dominated by a colonial perspective and colored by colonial aims. The Aztec elites involved had been schooled by friars or had reached adulthood after the conquest, and had not experienced the construction and use of buildings in cities. Archaeology brings to light information that is either absent from documentary sources or reflects Aztec propaganda. The cities that are Smith's focus are what we would call the "capitals" of Aztec city-states, or *altepetl* in Nahuatl. Although Aztec cities had economic and religious significance, Smith interprets the evidence as supporting the idea that their political role was the dominant one.

In the first of eight chapters, Smith sets out his definitions of a "city "and "urbanism." He also discusses his theoretical approach and the nature of his sources. Although Tenochtitlan's population density satisfies most definitions of an urban center, archaeology shows that most Aztec capitals were not so densely populated. Residential zones, where they have been excavated, contain remnants of houses that Smith describes as dispersed over intensively cultivated land. Partly for this reason, he rejects the demographic definition of cities and instead emphasizes the roles of cities in an urban context. He devotes attention not only to city centers but also to smaller centers and other residential areas, and to what might be called the "hinterland," and in this way he gives urban relationships their due.

Chapter 2 describes the city-state capitals for which archaeological evidence permits comment on a range of architecture and urban features. Smith emphasizes that there were several hundred such capitals in central Mexico at the conquest, but we have useful information for only twenty-one capital cities and three towns, as well as four mountaintop shrines. The chapter helps to give the cities identities that are often lost in broad discussions of the Aztec empire and, with chapter 4 on public architecture and townscapes, it conveys important information on the building types and architectural styles common among Aztec cities. Delivered in this way, the chapters serve to crystallize information on the Aztec contribution to urban form.

Chapter 3 grapples with the difficult topic of the founding of cities and dynasties. Archaeology and our knowledge of urbanism in classic-period central Mexico (ca. 250-700 CE) and elsewhere in Mesoamerica tell us that the roots of urbanism lie deep in Mesoamerican his-

tory. What the Aztecs brought to this tradition is not always easy to identify; Smith turns to the documentary sources, where kings discussed founding an *altepetl* by building a palace, and notes that one Nahuatl term for city, *totecuacan*, means "place of our lords," which supports the idea that kings and nobles were critical to the city concept. He considers documentary descriptions of foundation rituals that tell us about the sanctioning of rulership and kings' views of themselves as having the rights to rulership, but these do not reveal the mechanics of power that enabled such individuals to become first among equals. Lines cannot be drawn around *altepetls* to delineate "territory" that an *altepetl* ruler controlled; according to Smith, "this perspective, in which polities are defined not by territory and boundaries but by relations of personal subjugation or allegiance, may have been widespread in ancient Mesoamerica" (p. 91). I have described Maya political and economic interaction in this way, as have Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube in their analysis of Maya polities.[1]

Chapter 5 focuses on models of urban design and city planning. Little can be said about why Aztec cities were located where they were; what can be said is that they evolved as the *altepetl* evolved. Smith discusses the importance of the plaza as an activity locus in Aztec cities, and argues that there was a high degree of coordination among buildings in city centers but not in residential zones. The importance of shrines is of interest because they may have had significance for the populace rather than the elites, but Smith's playing down of the role of religion in city planning goes against much of what is written about Mesoamerican cities.

Chapter 6 describes Aztec social classes, residential zones, and access and visibility in the city center. The impression is that most city centers–except perhaps for parts of Tenochtitlan–were accessible to city residents. Archaeological evidence shows, counterintuitively, that the lives of rural and urban people were not very different in regard to material culture, with most enjoying access to a wide range of goods. Smith asserts that working collectively on civic projects was important in city-dwellers' public life and therefore "an important part of political legitimation, ideology, and power for the *tlatoani*" (city-state ruler) (p. 163). This may have been true, but I suggest that, as in European cathedrals, people considered the projects as much theirs as the ruler's.

Chapter 7 discusses craft production, food supply, markets, education, and other activities known to have been carried out in Aztec cities. Information from both documents and archaeology is unfortunately limited in terms of how these activities might have distinguished the city from other forms of settlement.

In the last chapter, Smith makes a major contribution to our understanding of Aztec empire dynamics. He examines in detail how rulers and nobles managed to "control" commoner subjects, and suggests that the rise (or expansion?) of controlled labor may hold the key, because people owed goods and services to the ruler and were not tied directly to land. Movement seems not to have been hindered in the early Aztec period when, as a consequence of earlier events, land was available. Smith suggests that such a situation would have worked to the disadvantage of rulers intent on controlling more land and labor, and that the elites therefore created and enforced new rules concerning labor and property relations. He holds that "it is very likely that the various forms of commoner subjugation to nobles documented from the time of the Spanish conquest had their origins in the Early Aztec period" (p. 193). Because the topic is outside the book's purview, Smith does not discuss how such subjugation was effected, but I suspect that the nature of Aztec warfare may have created conditions not previously present in Mesoamerica.

My criticisms are minor. If Aztec platforms that supported buildings were constructed as described in chapter 4, they would be unique in Mesoamerica. In the Maya area, and in the core of the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan, terraced platforms ("pyramids") were engineered so that the core of the platform could stand alone. Square or rectangular cell-like features of unmortared rough stone, notable for their stability, retained other stones, and sometimes trash. The cells formed the platform core, which was faced first with uncut stone and then with cut stone. No "walls," which have two exposed faces, were used. If the Aztecs employed different methods, this would constitute a major break from Mesoamerican traditions.

Smith also notes that residential areas were unplanned, but could green space have been subject to planning as was building space and as the *chinampas* (raised field beds) in and near Tenochtitlan certainly were? At this stage we lack data to support the claim, but it may be worth considering that what appears to be unplanned when we focus on buildings might make more sense if we knew how green spaces were managed. In addition, Smith downplays the role of cosmology and religion in urban form, which is fitting if we accept a restricted definition of "religion," but one could say that modern cities

reflect our cosmology by favoring glass-dominated structures that afford a "view." Such features seem "secular," but have a cosmological dimension because they form part of how we think a city should look. I suggest that Aztec cities likewise contained reflections of such cosmology.

Smith's volume provides a wealth of information on Aztec cities not heretofore available, in a form that enables us to envision both the city centers and the role of the city in Aztec life. Furthermore, his analyses help to make sense of urbanization processes that were previously blurred and indistinct. Much work remains to be done, owing largely to the nature of the data available, but the volume is a major step in integrating the forms and functions of Aztec cities with literature on cities and urbanism.

Note

[1]. Elizabeth Graham, *Maya Christians and Their Churches in Sixteenth-Century Belize* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2011), 29-58; and Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008).

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