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# Rebecca Horn, Postconquest Coyoacan: Nahuatl-Spanish Relations in Central Mexico, 1519-1650

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## Book Reviews

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*Postconquest Coyoacan: Nahua-Spanish Relations in Central Mexico, 1519-1650.* By Rebecca Horn. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. xiv + 356 pp. Illustrations, maps, chart, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 cloth.)

Now enveloped by Mexico City, Coyoacan at the time of the Spanish arrival was a lakeshore *altepetl*, or Nahua community, with its own ruling dynasty, subject to the Mexican lords of Tenochtitlan. Soon after Hernán Cortés' victory, Coyoacan became part of the *marquesado*, the large territory that Spain's Charles V granted to Cortés and his heirs. Close to Mexico City and possessing abundant farmland, forests, and water, Coyoacan supplied labor and raw materials to the capital while attracting Spanish agricultural and commercial development earlier than did other provincial centers.

Rebecca Horn's book traces the history of Coyoacan from the time of Cortés' arrival through 1650. Her principal argument is that postconquest Nahua society was shaped by contact with Spaniards in both institutional and informal contexts. This may seem a modest argument, but Horn is treading carefully between opposing views of the effects of colonialism on indigenous Mesoamerican society: the people of Coyoacan were not helpless victims of Spanish exploitation and enforced change, but neither did continuities in their political and economic institutions—the survival of the *altepetl* and communal landholding—insulate them from Spanish influence. Sidestepping larger issues of domination and resistance, Horn chooses instead to trace the everyday interactions that constituted inter-ethnic relations in Coyoacan. She makes extensive and meticulous use of Spanish and Nahuatl archival documentation: legal suits, municipal proceedings, wills, land sale records, baptismal records, and other sources. The result is a detailed, well-crafted study that brings to life a wide range of individual actors including mestizos, mulattoes, and African slaves as well as Nahuas and Spaniards of various social ranks.

The first part of the book focuses on formal, political, and economic relations: the *altepetl* and its ruling lineage, the local government, Spanish officials, and the tribute and labor systems that channeled Nahua production into Spanish hands. Two important and interrelated trends were the fragmentation of the larger Coyoacan *altepetl* as constituent settlements broke away to form independent jurisdictions, and the decreasing relevance of the

*altepetl*-based tribute payments and labor drafts to the Spanish-controlled economy as indigenous population declined and the commercial sector expanded.

The second part of the book examines the increasingly frequent Nahuatl-Spanish interactions in the informal contexts of landholding and the market economy. Given the importance of a land base to the survival of Mesoamerican communities through history, Horn's documentation of indigenous landholding patterns and the processes through which Spaniards acquired substantial properties in Coyoacan—principally through voluntary sales by individual Nahuas—is a valuable case study in the alienation of native land. Her analysis of Nahuatl-language bills of sale is particularly interesting, showing how Nahuas altered this Spanish documentary genre while at the same time its adoption facilitated transfer of land out of native hands. As the *altepetl* fragmented and Spanish estates expanded their influence, Nahuas were drawn increasingly into the market economy, selling their labor to Spaniards first on a temporary but increasingly on a permanent basis and pursuing commercial activities as individuals. Early in the seventeenth century many were also becoming bilingual. As more Nahuas became economically independent of the *altepetl*, the corporate unit was weakened, but at the same time the market sector provided a livelihood for Nahuas in or near their communities of origin, allowing them to maintain their social ties.

The book's focus on political and economic matters leaves little space for consideration of other aspects of public life. Religion and religious confraternities, for example, are not discussed, and the local Dominicans appear mainly in the context of their dealings in land and labor. The range of documentary sources Horn brings together nevertheless supports a rich and nuanced depiction of a rapidly changing colonial community.

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