

“Indian Wonders:” The Landscapes of Early Colonial Mexico

Mountainous, untamed spaces had a variety of significations for the Spanish in early colonial Mexico. Religiously they were places that were resistant to evangelization due to both topography and the presence of shapeshifting demons who opposed this process from caves and sacred mountains. Politically they were impediments to colonization, populated by Chichimec warriors who resisted Spanish control of rich silver-bearing areas. Conceptually they were understood as sites of wonder containing oddities from the New World and mythical creatures from the Old. Finally, for the Augustinians who undertook the evangelization of some of these areas, these spaces were reminiscent of the Thebaid, the Egyptian home of the desert fathers who played a key role in the mythology of the order.

This paper will examine the diverse colonial understandings of these rugged spaces as found in the texts and the monastic wall paintings of the period. In some of the murals, as in Actopan and Zacualpan, these spaces were largely accommodated to the pre-existing Thebaid tradition, but in others the ambiguous nature of these lands is more fully present. This paper will address the Thebaid images, but will particularly focus on those cases—Culhuacán, Malinalco, and Ixmiquilpan—where the dangers, wonders, and demonic nature of the borderlands are strongly evoked. My analysis of these images will provide insight into Spanish understandings of the marvellous, dangerous, and protean qualities of the Mexican landscape and will examine the problematic relationship of this landscape to the projects of exploration, colonization, and evangelization.

Dr. Barnaby Nygren, Loyola University Maryland