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Shaft Tombs and Figures in West Mexican Society: A Reassessment.

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beyond into a distinctive sound. Yucatecan trova, in other words, is the music of “cosmopolitan modernity” (Chapter Two) that had evolved through the “Mexicanization” of a regional cultural symbol of Yucatan (Chapter Three).

For a non-Latin-American scholar like me, Vargas-Cetina’s book provides an intelligent introduction to the regional history and political transformation, while also telling a unique story that links music, identities, and politics. The book presents a fluid understanding of a regional transformation by problematizing the relations between local cultural formations and shifting political forces. Furthermore, the key concept of “beautiful politics” presents a hopeful picture of a world where people struggle in gentle, non-aggressive ways to resist hegemonic powers. As a person who lives in one of the most violent regions of the world, I wish to be part of such a world, where social change is achieved through gentle, beautiful deliberation. After all, don’t we all wish to have a world with “less confrontational politics” and more “beauty, social harmony and cultural worth” (59)?

What I wanted to hear, and missed in Vargas-Cetina’s analysis, is a more specific discussion or a social analysis that might suggest when, and under what conditions, “beautiful politics” are possible. Are there circumstances that fail miserably in bringing about the desired change when one is armed only with “beauty, social harmony and cultural worth”? The author offers a beginning of the answer to these questions when she observes that “for the beautiful politics to emerge, the people involved need to have many resources: They need to have organizational infrastructure, they need to be literate and resourceful, and they need to have history

on their side” (59). The first three requirements suggest that “beautiful politics” is the privilege of a particular class—the educated, liberal middle class. In my experience, when such gentle, middle-class modes of politics have been used in the Middle-East via civil organizing like Peace Now, they have failed quite spectacularly. The answer might lie in the fourth condition listed by Vargas-Cetina in her outline of what makes “beautiful politics” work—one must have “history on your side” (59). Don’t we all wish that “history” in this very general, unspecific reference, could be “on our side.” However, Vargas-Cetina never makes clear what about Yucatan’s historical setting enabled the success of such gentle struggle or, in contrast, what necessitated a more violent means of social protest in Cancun, or for that matter in the Middle-East? Perhaps the likelihood of the struggle to succeed is affected by its objectives? And maybe middle-class struggles are limited to softer, less profound goals? To be able to “import” or make use of Vargas-Cetina’s concept of “beautiful politics” we need a more engaged political theory that might highlight the conditions under which gentle politics works.

Shaft Tombs and Figures in West Mexican Society: A Reassessment.

Beekman, Christopher S. and Robert B. Pickering, eds. Tulsa, OK. Gilcrease Museum, 2016. 232 pp.

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This volume consists of fourteen chapters about the shaft tombs of western Mexico (mostly 300 B.C. to A.D. 500) and

the range of objects associated with them, especially anthropomorphic and zoomorphic pottery figures. Several authors address two issues related to this particular corpus—the fact that so many objects are from looted contexts and that some very good fakes exist. Notable features of the book include the high-quality images and the thorough presentation of data in tabular form in some of the chapters. Most chapters take a contextual approach to the tombs and objects and several combine art-historical with materials science approaches (e.g., on authenticity).

The book's four sections are bracketed by an introduction and a summary. Pickering and Beekman's introduction provides background on the objects and tombs from Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit and parts of adjacent states. From this chapter on there is an emphasis on diversity and the authors emphasize that "there is no 'shaft tomb culture' that unifies West Mexico into a single cultural area" (11). Tomb morphology and contents vary and there are differences among regions. For example, social hierarchy appears to be important in central Jalisco, whereas gender is more strongly marked in burials in Colima and Zacatecas. Accordingly, Pickering and Beekman resist generalizations as they raise some of the questions that have been asked in the past. Are people in tombs related? Do ceramic figures in tombs represent gods, shamans, the deceased, or ancestors? Why are animals (especially dogs) so common in the graves?

After the introduction, three case studies look at the tombs from a contextual, bioarcheological perspective. Not many patterns are identified here, and there is great diversity in the tombs, human remains, and objects deposited in the tombs. In the first chapter, Rhodes and

Mountjoy see no clear patterns in the human remains and artifacts in tombs at the site of El Embocadero II, although they suggest that people buried in the cemetery acquired status throughout life rather than at birth. The third chapter in this section sees diversity in Chupicuaro funerary practices with more complex tombs representing higher status. They also discuss "killed" vessels and osteological evidence that some people habitually carried heavy objects or crouched (possibly while weaving and sewing).

The book's second section, "Broader perspectives" shows, among other things, that the pottery figures associated with shaft tombs are found in other ceremonial and even residential contexts. Almendros and Platas identify two different burial traditions in the Valley of Colima (Kelly's *Capacha* complex) but find no clear patterns in the mortuary offerings between them. In a chapter on central Jalisco, Beekman estimates the time it would take to construct shaft tombs. As always there is diversity, but "... the largest shaft tombs are consistently located beneath public architecture within ceremonial centers, and include more elaborate and diverse sets of offerings." (93). Beekman provides a detailed table of grave contexts and contents that could be useful to people examining shaft tombs elsewhere. In a strong chapter with more useful tables, Beekman then examines the figures and their contexts and attempts to address whether figures from rural and ceremonial centers represent gods, ancestors, or the people in the graves. He suggests a general correlation between more elaborate figures and more elaborate tombs suggesting that they both expressed the status of the deceased, although he does not argue that the figures are portraits of the deceased.

Three chapters then focus on natural science investigations of artifacts. Jorgensen and colleagues report on portable X-ray fluorescence (pXRF) analysis of ceramics from two sites. They see similar paste recipes between the sites but a change to burned shell tempering in the Postclassic period. Next, Pickering reports on the use of CT scans and medical endoscopy to determine the authenticity of figures, which are often faked. CT analysis revealed that a well-known masked dog figure is partially faked (the mask and surface treatment were added). Pickering also discusses the use of mineral stains, insect puparia, and usewear to identify authentic artifacts. The last chapter in this section is a statistically-oriented investigation of status and gender in Ixtlan del Rio style artifacts. Pirtle finds “that clothing, including headdresses, is associated with gender, while jewelry and body adornment are more likely an indication of social status or membership in a social group” (150).

I found the last section on visual culture-related analyses of the pottery figures to be the most compelling. Servain-Riviale discusses pathological skin conditions and intentional alterations (e.g., scarification) as indicators of identity. For example, specific motifs may express community affiliation, shoulder scarifications may express rank, and pelvis painting may indicate induction into womanhood or fertility. In the fascinating

chapter that follows, Stone looks at a corpus of paired male and female figures from southern Nayarit that appear to have been made by a single artist. Stone considers them guardian pairs, one function of which was “to prevent the souls from leaving the tomb space” (176) and employs the concept of instantiation to describe them as “material housings for the spiritual essences of important living roles” (176) in tombs. Stone discusses portraiture, as does the final chapter in this section. Norwood argues that Lagunillas Style E figurines from southern Nayarit are a form of portraiture that, while stylized, communicate the identities of ancestors.

In a short summary chapter, Beekman and Pickering discuss a range of issues relevant to the study of tombs and figures in West Mexico including terminology (they reiterate that there is no unified shaft tomb and figure culture in western Mexico), the need for research questions with broad significance, and more settlement survey/excavation. Despite problems with context, the editors argue that collections-based research has value, although researchers must pay close attention to the authentication of objects. Finally, investigators of west Mexican tombs and figures are urged to publish more thoroughly. This data-rich volume represents an important step in this direction, but the trade-off is that few general conclusions are drawn.