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Michoacán and Eden: Vasco de Quiroga and the Evangelization of Western Mexico, by Bernardino Verástique

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Michoacán and Eden: Vasco de Quiroga and the Evangelization of Western Mexico.
By Bernardino Verástique. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.

In this short volume, attractively illustrated with drawings adapted from the *Chronicles of Michoacán*, Bernardino Verástique proposes to cover a wide territory: to recount the conquest and evangelization of the indigenous people of Michoacán, particularly the Purhépechas; to evaluate the career of Don Vasco de Quiroga, first bishop of Michoacán, for the purpose of resolving the contradictions surrounding him; and to evaluate the lasting value of the missionary efforts of Quiroga and the Catholic religious orders in Michoacán.

The book begins with two chapters on the preconquest history of Michoacán and the religion of the Purhépecha, the dominant native people of the region.

These are followed by chapters on the religion and history of Spain, the conquest of Michoacán, and Quiroga's career as the province's first bishop. The book ends with a discussion of cultural synthesis or syncretism, which the author concludes is what Quiroga and the missionary orders got for their efforts among the natives.

Along the way, the author discusses Spanish institutions of conquest such as the encomienda system, the congregation of native people, and religious confraternities, Renaissance humanism and Franciscan millenarianism.

This is the first scholarly book on Quiroga in either Spanish or English in over two decades and Verástique does a fine job of recounting his activities in Spain, Mexico, and Africa. Quiroga was a career bureaucrat, not a priest, and was already in his fifties when he took holy orders in order to be appointed bishop of Michoacán. The province was in chaos after the death of the native ruler, the *cazonci* Tzintzicha Tangaxoan II, at the hands of Beltrán Núñez de Guzmán, who was soon after deposed as president of the first Mexican audiencia. The province lacked strong spiritual and temporal leadership and Quiroga was deemed the man to provide it. Despite his title of bishop, Quiroga was first of all an experienced bureaucrat and servant of the Crown, and proved himself equal to the challenge of establishing his (and by extension royal) authority over both the Spanish encomenderos and the religious orders who had preceded him there, as well as over its native peoples. Verástique concludes that while Quiroga's education and outlook were humanist, his authoritarian manner demonstrates that he was not

therefore necessarily a humanitarian.

One of the problems in reconstructing the life of Quiroga, which also presented obstacles to earlier writers on the bishop, is the lack of primary materials.

Although he became a prominent figure in the affairs of New Spain later in life, little remains in the historical record of his activities before coming to the New World. Quiroga also seems to have been a man of action rather than an intellectual and wrote very little. In one of the most interesting sections of this book, the author uses Quiroga's longest written piece, the *Información en derecho*, to good effect to show the humanist and utopian influences on Quiroga's thinking about the Spanish conquest of the Americas and his views of the natives.

While this book demonstrates the author's mastery of the secondary sources, in both Spanish and English, on the conquest and evangelization of sixteenth-century Michoacán, it is not particularly original its evaluation of these events or of Vasco de Quiroga. The book's strength is that for a general audience or for students of the period seeking an introduction to the early history of Michoacán, it presents in a highly readable and concise form the major events of the times and the current historical debates surrounding them.

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