

[Burdette on Schwaller, 'The Stations of the Cross in Colonial Mexico: The Via crucis en mexicano by Fray Agustin de Vetancurt and the Spread of a Devotion'](#)

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John Frederick Schwaller. *The Stations of the Cross in Colonial Mexico: The Via crucis en mexicano by Fray Agustin de Vetancurt and the Spread of a Devotion.* Norman: University of

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Although devotion to Christ was central to the faith of all who lived in the Spanish Viceroyalties, comparatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the ways that said devotion took shape. John F. Schwaller's *The Stations of the Cross in Colonial Mexico: The Via crucis en mexicano by Fray Agustín de Vetancurt and the Spread of a Devotion* is a welcome contribution to that cause. As the title suggests, the book unpacks the meaning of a text authored in Nahuatl by Fray Agustín de Vetancurt that guided readers through a ritualized commemoration of Christ's passion known as the *via crucis*, or stations of the cross. Schwaller writes that "the Stations of the Cross as a devotion came to exist in three separate modalities: words, images and performative aspects" (p. 15). His analysis of Vetancurt's text considers its relationship to all three of these "modalities," and in so doing renders visible the big impact that the small book might have had in various arenas of public and private life.

Interestingly, Schwaller's access to Vetancurt's text is mediated by a manuscript copy completed in 1738 by a Native *escribano* (scribe) named Matheo de San Juan Chichahuatla, who Schwaller suggests must have been from the "village of San Juan Chichahuatla located in the Huauchinango region of what was Tlaxcala, now the state of Puebla" (p. 196). That manuscript, which is now owned by the Academy of American Franciscan History, is the only extant trace of Vetancurt's printed book, which has been lost to time. Schwaller makes the most of his chance to engage with the singular manuscript and produces a book that works on two levels. At its core, the book offers a close reading and analysis of a single devotional manual handwritten in Nahuatl. But the book does more than that. It also provides a sweeping account of how that small text fit within the larger landscape of baroque and Catholic Reformation culture in New Spain, the ritual repertoire of Nahuas and Creole communities in colonial Mexico, and Nahua intellectual and scribal culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The first chapter, "Introduction," ensures that readers are familiar with the narrative of Christ's passion, which is vital to understand the *via crucis* ritual. Here we see for the first time Schwaller's ability to distill and summarize lots of information and to provide the reader with the context necessary to engage with the topic at hand. This type of background-first approach makes the book

particularly well suited to readers who might not already be well versed in the topic (which I imagine, will be many since the book sits at the intersection of a few, related fields and thus will expose experts familiar with one area to unknown material from another).

The second chapter, “The European Origins of the Stations of the Cross,” builds upon the introduction by historicizing the stations of the cross ritual. The chapter does, as the title suggests, retrace the origins of the devotion to Europe and the popular fascination with the Holy Land and emergence of *Devotio Moderna* and embodied prayer. But the chapter also does much more. It surveys the role that similar processional rituals played in Nahua society prior to the conquest and addresses the significance that such rituals might have held for Indigenous peoples. It also considers the role played by the missionaries, and, in particular, the Franciscans, in promoting processional rituals (including the stations of the cross) as part of the evangelical process.

The third chapter, “Religious and Literary Culture in Mexico in the Middle Colonial Period,” situates Vetancurt’s text (and its manuscript copy) within the broader panorama of literary culture in New Spain. Schwaller surveys a number of similar devotional manuals and in so doing shows that Vetancurt’s *Via crucis* belonged to a broader genre of baroque devotional texts that are too often overlooked. What is more, Schwaller shows that Vetancurt’s *Via crucis* was actually a translation into Nahuatl of a popular manuscript written by Antonio de Anunciación called *Luz para saber andar la Via sacra*. This finding, which was made possible by his research at the John Carter Brown Library, is vital to the success of the book because it allows him to carry out a comparative analysis of the Spanish and Nahuatl texts and thus glean information about what choices Vetancurt and his assistants made to reshape the ritual in accordance with a Nahua worldview and the Nahuatl language. The third chapter ends with a look at the literary landscape of late seventeenth-century New Spain to make clear how Vetancurt’s intellectual output fit alongside other prominent figures from the period, including Sor Juan Inés de Cruz and Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. Here, as in a few other places throughout the book, it seems to me that Schwaller walks the line between providing added context and taking readers on an unnecessary detour. Such an impression, which is obviously determined by a reader’s personal interests, might not be shared by all.

Chapter 4, “The Texts of the Station of the Cross,” is by far the most important within the book. It is here that Schwaller turns to analyzing the text itself. His method is straightforward. Beginning with preambles and then the first station, he proceeds to transcribe and analyze both Vetancurt’s *Via Crucis* and Anunciación’s *la Luz*, from which it was copied. (The initial stations also include a comparison with another, similar text by Fray Miguel Angel Candia). For more than sixty pages, Schwaller transcribes, translates, and compares these texts. The simplicity of this method belies the monumental amount of work that such a feat must have required. Because he has shown us the text side by side, we believe him when he concludes that “in translating and modifying the text, [Vetancurt] frequently changed the meaning” (p. 160). Those changes included omissions of certain points of emphasis in the Spanish text, provocative word choice in Nahuatl, and the creation of neologism required for the ritual. Through these adaptations Vetancurt effectively contributed to the Nahuatlization of Christianity. Being able to understand this process is a big deal, and Schwaller makes it easy.

The fifth chapter, “Illustrating the Stations of the Cross,” turns to the drawings found in the manuscript. Here Schwaller’s tendency to start with a broad foundational survey before focusing on

the case study falls short. The section dedicated to his own analysis of the illustrations found in the manuscript is buried behind a lengthy survey of loosely related artworks. This imbalance is captured by the fact that the first twenty pages of the thirty-page chapter survey related works, while the last ten describe and analyze the illustrations in the manuscript. Consequently, while Schwaller is able to argue, rather convincingly, that Matheo de San Juan Chichahuastla drew the images based upon sculptures he might have seen rather than earlier prints, he is not able to carry his analysis of the images further. As a reader (and art historian) I was eager to know, for example, how each image worked in relationship with the written passage that it illustrated and how/whether the drawings provided the scribe an opportunity to shift the meaning ascribed to the written words. Those lines of inquiry might be taken up further by others, who could certainly build upon the solid foundation Schwaller has laid for us.

Overall, the book is a wonderful contribution to a variety of intersecting fields. It is clearly organized and clearly written. Schwaller's contribution to the study of devotional literature in New Spain is to be commended. Although small devotional texts were bestsellers and critical to the formation of religious culture during the period, they rarely receive such attentive analysis. Schwaller closely scrutinizes not only Vetancurt's text but also those that preceded it. This type of scrutiny helps to bring texture and detail to our understanding of how people practiced their faith and how that practice shaped their lives. In particular, the book enriches our understanding of Christocentric devotion during the colonial period. Like Alena Robin's *Las capillas del Vía Crucis de la Ciudad de Mexico* (2014), which focused on the artistic rather than literary side of things, it helps us to see how residents of Mexico City practiced their faith and grew closer to Christ through ritual action.

Perhaps its most important contribution comes from its addition of Vetancurt's *Via crucis* to the corpus of Nahuatl texts that students and scholars can study and from which they can learn. Prior to this study, Vetancurt's book had been lost to the passage of time, as often happens with small, functional devotional texts. Schwaller has filled that bibliographic gap. The impact of such a feat is not to be overlooked. Vetancurt was, as Schwaller demonstrates in his book, one of the most influential intellectuals of the seventeenth century working in Nahuatl. Adding his devotional manuscript to the corpus of Nahuatl texts from the period will surely enrich our understanding of Nahua intellectual and religious history as well as the role that creole intellectuals and their assistants played in shaping the ultimate trajectory of the language. The appendices include both the Nahuatl and English transcription/translation and make it possible for others to build upon the study. (Note that Schwaller suggests that a Spanish translation will be available on the publisher's website [p. 12], but I was not able to locate it at the time of this review). It is through publications like this one that the study of Nahuatl and Nahua culture can be moved forward. In this way it is a generous work of scholarship that will be appreciated by many.

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