

## Book Review

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**Bueno, Christina. 2016. *The Pursuit of Ruins: Archaeology, History, and the Making of Modern Mexico*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.**

An examination of state formation, and its connections to identity and cultural production, can take many forms. Christina Bueno pulls back the “mask” of the state in her work on the creation and operations of the national institutions that managed Mexico’s pre-Columbian history. *The Pursuit of Ruins: Archaeology, History, and the Making of Modern Mexico* is an excellent addition to the historical literature, offering readers a cogent and deep understanding of how the Mexican government, beginning largely during the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911, also known as the Porfiriato) carried out concerted efforts to utilize the country’s great indigenous ruins to produce an image of Mexico as a modern nation. The goal was to ensure Mexico took its place alongside other great and emerging national powers in the late nineteenth century, pushing back against the notion that the country was scientifically “backwards” and ignorant of its past.

Bueno divides the book into three thematic parts. In the first, she broadly examines the cultural significance of the pre-Columbian ruins in Mexico from the perspective of everyday citizens and tourists, as well as state officials. In chapters one and two, her attention is on the people who have lived around the ruins for generations and the markets that sprung up to sell artifacts to interested outsiders. She describes the problem of access, where foreign adventurers and archeologists successfully removed artifacts from local sites without approval or supervision from the government. This issue, however, highlighted the tension between local and national leaders. It was not uncommon for the people who lived around the ruins to traffic in the sale of authentic or forged items as a source of income. National elites, who wanted to use the pre-Columbian ruins for their modernizing ambitions sought to restrict local access to these places and dispossess these communities of local control over the land.

In the second part of *Pursuit of Ruins*, Bueno turns her attention to the men who worked inside the institutions that laid official claim to famous sites like Teotihuacán and the objects discovered within and around these places. Chapter three outlines the structure of the national museum and its staff who

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studied and categorized artifacts for display. One important point Bueno highlights is the distinction between museum researchers and field specialists; at that time, in the late nineteenth century, it was very common for antiquities scholars to spend most of their careers studying these works in books from the comfort of their museum offices. Less prestige was given to the people who actually went out into the field to study and categorize sites. This distinction would change, but remained a point of contention. In chapter four, Bueno introduces readers to one of the most compelling and controversial figures in her book, the Inspector Leopoldo Batres. She likens him to be a kind of “dictator” in the Mexican archaeological field, who used his close ties to Díaz in order to carry out heavy-handed programs of site reconstruction. On the way, he clashed mightily with his enemies inside the museum, as well as foreign specialists visiting Mexico. Ultimately, he had enormous influence over excavation and reconstruction duties, and occupied his post in the government for twenty-five years.

The final part of Bueno’s work, “Making Patrimony,” is focused on the practical and political aspects of the archaeological bureaucracy in Mexico. It is composed of four chapters organized thematically around the activities of the cultural institutions that presided over pre-Columbian ruins during the Porfiriato. Throughout this section, readers find Inspector Batres hard at work as he exerts his control over archaeological sites across Mexico and as he plans to carry out controversial work to reconstruct historical places, particularly Teotihuacán, in time for the nation’s centennial celebrations in 1910. In the process of analyzing this history, *Pursuit of Ruins* shows how national identity was constructed as a part of the government’s positivistic efforts to portray Mexico as a “civilized” nation with a grandiose past. Batres and others engaged in work that formally allowed some characteristics of this history to become part of society’s “national” patrimony, while excluding others and limiting who could access these sites and lay claim to their legacies.

The book ends with Batres’s enemies, including Alfredo Chavero and Manuel Gamio, ascendant. With Díaz’s fall from power and exile, along with new popular demands unleashed by the revolution, Batres was associated with the old political guard. The “archaeological dictatorship” he had presided over came under heavy criticism by a new generation of specialists who lambasted its emphasis on reconstruction over preservation of ancient sites, seeing that emphasis as destructive and deeply misguided. The new institutions that followed, including the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, took Mexican archaeology in a different direction. Many of Batres’s rivals were happy to see much of his legacy removed following renovations of museum spaces. Nevertheless, Bueno notes that later studies of Batres have been less critical of the man’s legacy, highlighting that although his technique could be heavy handed, his contributions in identifying and categorizing ruins remained essential to the history of Mexican archaeology. *The Pursuit of Ruins* can be read alongside Rick A. López’s *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans and the State after the Revolution*, in order to appreciate the full breadth of archaeological policy and institutional history underway in Mexico in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century. Overall, Bueno has accomplished an excellent study of the history of excavation and reconstruction linked to Mexico’s pre-Columbian past.

Bess – *Pursuit of Ruins* Book Review

It is a highly readable work, anchored by intriguing profiles of complex historical figures, and carefully researched.