Prophecy, Patronage, and Purpose in the Ancient Religious Manuscripts

The Codex Borbonicus was used as a reference in the preceding chapters to understand divinatory practices, ceremonies, and calendrics in the ancient manuscripts. The importance of the document lies in the historical information that it provides on the xiuhmolpilli celebrations in the year 2 Reed in Tenochtitlan. Although it is likely that the manuscript was created to commemorate such an occasion, the Codex Borbonicus dates to the colonial period. Therefore, it is either an early post-conquest copy of a now-lost sixteenth-century pre-colonial manuscript or an original colonial document that was intended to commemorate an important event that had taken place before the conquest (Nowotny 1974, 11).

Robertson (1959, 89–90) first noted that the red outline of the cells in the tonalamatl section on pages 3–20 of the manuscript left room for explanatory glosses to be placed next to the days and corresponding deity representations. This is a clear indication not only that the Codex Borbonicus was drafted after the conquest but also that a Spanish audience that required specific explanations was intended and expected. Later, colonial religious manuscripts such as the Codices Telleriano-Remensis and Tudela were created to illustrate Indigenous religion to a faraway European audience who would never travel and know the New World firsthand, and contained lengthy written explanations. Pre-Hispanic manuscripts, such as the religious Codices Borgia, Vaticanus B, Cospi, and Laud, were also taken to Europe soon after the conquest as gifts to popes and other dignitaries throughout the continent (Domenici 2017).

The Codex Borbonicus may also have been created to bridge the geographical and cultural distance between the two sides of the Atlantic. However, it is unique and distinct, as it is neither an object intended for a cabinet of curiosities, like the pre-Hispanic codices, nor a document that claims to illustrate a vanquished and vanished Nahua religion, like colonial religious manuscripts produced under missionary guidance. The Codex Borbonicus was produced after the fall of Tenochtitlan (1521) but before the establishment of the Colegio de la Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco and other conventual schools that would become the intellectual sites of manuscript production in New Spain by the mid-1530s (Robertson 1959), a topic that is thoroughly discussed in the following chapters.

Unlike all colonial religious manuscripts, the Codex Borbonicus maintains the physical features of a teomamoxtli (an ancient sacred book), such as the amate paper support and the accordion folding of its pages. However, in contrast to them and the pre-Hispanic codices of the Borgia Group, human sacrifice and other rituals that involve bloodletting are conspicuously absent, which likely indicates that traits of Indigenous religion that were more easily misunderstood and condemnable by a non-Indigenous audience were purposefully obliterated. In other words, the Codex Borbonicus betrays a post-conquest production and a Spanish-intended audience, but it was conceived within an Indigenous intellectual circle that was not condemnation but instead had a profound understanding of Mesoamerican religion.

6.1. The patronage of the Codex Borbonicus

Jansen (2002, 300) noted that the Codex Borbonicus was inventoried among the books in the possession of King Philip II of Spain at El Escorial in 1600. It was described as a “book in large folio format of the caciques of Mexico and the days that they sacrificed in the week, handmade and painted with retouched figures; cardboard binding covered with red velvet and colored banners” (libro en folio mayor, de los caciques de México y de los días que sacrificaban en la semana, de mano, pintado en colores con figuras retocadas; encuadernado en papelón cubierto de Terciopelo carmesí con cintas coloradas; Zarco Cuevas 1924–1929, vol. 3, 553). The “caciques of Mexico” were likely the patrons of the Codex Borbonicus, which may have been commissioned as a gift to the King of Spain (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 398). I suggest that the document itself contains several clues about its patrons’ identity.

As extensively remarked in the scholarship (Couch 1985, ch. 2, Nicholson 1988, Anders et al. 1991, 51–58), the Codex Borbonicus likely hails from the southern shores of Lake Texcoco and the towns of Iztapalapa, Colhuacan, or Xochimilco (Map 2). Glosses throughout the veintena section repeatedly mention the chinampas, raised fields on the fertile fresh waters of the southern lake. The goddess Cihuaocoatl, who plays a leading role in the yearly ceremonies in the second part of the manuscript, was worshiped as a town patron in Colhuacan and Xochimilco. The New Fire ceremony during Panquetzaliztli is said to have taken place in the Cerro de la Estrella near Iztapalapa.

The priest impersonator of Cihuaocoatl appears on pages 23 and 37, along with another priest dedicated to Xiuhcoatl and identified by a gloss as the tlatoani Motecuhzoma II. This strongly suggests that the Cihuaocoatl priest was the historical cihuaocoatl, the main priest and chief administrator of the Mexica state. According to Chimalpahin (Schroeder 2016, 131–132) the office of cihuaocoatl at the time of...
Frassani, Alessia. Mesoamerican Codices: Calendrical Knowledge and Ceremonial Practice In Indigenous Religion and History.

Map 2. Tenochtitlan and the basin of Mexico. Abbott 1899.

Motecuhzoma II was held by Tlacaelel II, grandson of the first Tlacaelel and nephew of the cihuacoatl that immediately preceded him, Tililpotonqui. Therefore, Motecuhzoma II and Tlacaelel II may have been the patrons of the original manuscript related to the last New Fire ceremony held in pre-conquest times, from which the Codex Borbonicus was painted (Jansen 2002, 301–302). The patrons of the colonial manuscript should be sought instead among the Indigenous inheritors and successors of the tlatoani and cihuacoatl in the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in the early years after the conquest.

In the chaotic years immediately after the war, siege, and fall of Tenochtitlan, the Mexica royal family (i.e., Motecuhzoma and his oldest direct male descendants) nearly all died as a result of battle, disease, or executions that were meant to behead the lineage that ruled over the Triple Alliance. Cortés explained in his fourth letter to the king that he decided to appoint a cihuacoatl from the high ranks of the Mexica Empire as governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan after the assassination of Cuauhtemoc:

> I charged a captain general whom I had known in the time of Mutezuma with the task of repopulating [the city]. And so that he should have more authority I gave back to him the title he held when his lord was in power, which was that of Ciguacoatl, which means lieutenant of the king. I likewise appointed chieftains whom I had known previously to the offices in the government of this city which they had once held. And to this Ciguacoatl and the others I gave such lands and people as were necessary for their sustenance, although not as much as they had owned before, nor enough to make them dangerous at any time. (Cortés 1986, 321)

While Cortés’ decision may be seen as a strategy to keep any putative ruling noble from seizing power, it also reflects the importance of the office of the cihuacoatl in the traditional structure and hierarchy of the Mexica Empire before the conquest. The cihuacoatl that Cortés appointed in 1524 was Tlacotzin, who died shortly thereafter. He was replaced by Motelchihuitzin, baptized as Andrés de Tapia, who ruled between 1525 and 1530. In 1532, Pablo Xochiquentzin assumed the role before Diego de Alvarado Huamitzin, the grandson of the tlatoani Axayacatl and nephew of Motecuhzoma II, restored the traditional line of descent in 1539.

In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, leading Indigenous historians such as Chimalpahin and Tezozomoc, who were both nobles of Mexico descent, disparaged what they considered to be the interim rule of the cihuacoatl (also referred to as cuauhtlatoani), as it deviated from their lineage (Castañeja de la Paz 2011). This institutionalized version of Indigenous colonial history has been challenged by scholars who delved into the complexity of Indigenous–Spanish interactions in the nascent colony (Kellogg 2005, Ruiz Medrano 2006). Elsewhere, I argued that two types of religious and political authority coexisted in the early post-conquest period in the Mixtec town of Santo Domingo Yanhuitlan (Frassani 2017, 80–94, Frassani and Snijders 2020, 85–92). As evinced from the transcripts of an Inquisition trial dated to the 1540s, the local ruling noble was Domingo de Guzmán, who is referred to as “cacique” in the documents. However, an equally important figure was Francisco de las Casas, who is consistently identified in the same source as gobernador and seemingly did not have any family relationship with the cacique’s lineage. While both of these figures (and a third figure known only as Juan) were persecuted for following the religion of their ancestors, Francisco de las Casas stands out due to his position as a religious leader. After his death, the Guzmán ruling lineage unilaterally imposed their authority on the town despite opposition from the former governor’s heirs, who sued the caciques in court but without success. However, based on a pre-Hispanic custom, it seems that, like the Mexica, hereditary rulers in Yanhuitlan and the Mixteca shared their duties and responsibilities with a larger group of councilors (Pohl 1994, 19–57).

Recently, Rovira Morgado (2013) reevaluated the figure of the second Indigenous governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan after the conquest: Motelchihuitzin, also known as Andrés de Tapia. A man of humble Tlatelolca origins, he rose through the ranks of the Mexica state and administrative apparatus thanks to his demonstrated abilities. His career began under the reign of Motecuhzoma II or even his predecessor, Ahuizotl, when he had distinguished himself as a brave and successful warrior. Bernal Díaz del Castillo said the following about him:

> I remember that at that time [Motecuhzoma’s] steward was a great cacique to whom we gave the name of Tapia, and he kept the account of all the revenue that was brought to Montezuma, in his books which were made of paper which they call amal, and he had a great house full of these books. (Díaz del Castillo 2010, ch. 91, 64)
Motelchiuhtzin was part of a council that included only a handful of people whom the tlatoani entrusted with tribute collection and record keeping, among other duties. The official titles of these royal administrators are variously mentioned in the sources as tlacochcalcatl, tlacatecatl, cioacoatl, and tlillancalqui, as seen in the Codex Mendoza (ff. 65r, 67r) and the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 8, ch. 14). Motelchiuhtzin also held the title of huitznahuatl (Fig. 6.1), the head of Huitznahuac, which was the southeastern quadrant of Mexico-Tenochtitlan and one of the four “great houses” or calpulli in the city (Rovira Morgado 2013, 176–180). Huitznahuac was connected through a causeway (modern-day Calzada Iztapalapa) to the southern shores of Lake Texcoco, the likely site of production of the Codex Borbonicus, as previously mentioned. More specifically, the Tlillan temple on page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus was probably located near Huixachtecatl, Cerro de la Estrella in Iztapalapa, where sources attest that the New Fire ceremony was conducted.

The coat of arms granted to the Tapia family, the descendants of Motelchiuhtzin, by Charles V in 1535 clearly symbolized both the titles and possessions of the lineage founder (Fig. 6.2). On it, an eagle-jaguar hybrid sports a few colorful feathers and sits on top of water. The animal is a reference to the Mexica warrior caste (known as eagle-jaguar), whose elaborate costumes included feathers, as seen among the huitznahuatl and others in the Codex Mendoza (f. 67r). The water may be a reference to the precious resource of Lake Texcoco. The coat of arms was granted to the family thanks to the efforts of Motelchiuhtzin’s son, Hernando de Tapia, who traveled twice to Spain. The first trip was between 1528 and 1529, when his father was governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and the second was in 1532 after his father’s death, after which he resided in Spain for five years (Martínez Garnica 2009, 96–102, Rovira Morgado 2019, 20–25).

The Codex Mexicanus, a manuscript compiled between 1570 and 1590, possibly depicts the two pivotal events of Motelchiuhtzin’s investiture as governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan and Hernando de Tapia’s travel to Spain. On page 78 (Fig. 6.3), a strip of turquoise squares identifies consecutive years in the Nahua calendar, which are also glossed with the corresponding Christian date. On top of the cartouche for the year 8 Rabbit (1529) are two mummy bundles, which are identifiable by their glyphic names as the tlatoani Cuauhtemoc and the first chihuacoatl Tlacotzin, both of whom died within a short period of time from each other. The last Mexica emperor was executed by Cortés, while Tlacotzin died on his way back to Mexico-Tenochtitlan from Honduras, where he had been taken captive with Cuauhtemoc and other members of the Mexica army, including Motelchiuhtzin. A third person depicted below the two mummies was made ruler in Cuauhtemoc and Tlacotzin’s place, as indicated by his royal headdress. He can be identified as Motelchiuhtzin by his name glyph, a stone, which also appears to be associated with him in the Codex Aubin (f. 45v), the Humboldt Fragment II, and Primeros Memoriales (f. 51v). The following year, 9 Reed (1530), four male figures are associated with footprints leading to a semicircular black spot. As argued by Diel Booamzian (2018, 143), this is probably the journey of a group of people, including Cortés and Indigenous dignitaries, to Spain. However, archival sources state that the conquistador left for Spain twice (first in 1528 and again in 1532), not only once in 1530, as indicated in the manuscript. The two people on the left can clearly be identified as Indigenous, given their haircuts and lack of a beard. An owl is attached to the figure at the top to indicate Nezahualtecolotzin (Venerable Fasting Owl), a son of Motecuhzoma, while the figure below is possibly Matlacotzin, who was also in the Mexica entourage. The person leading the retinue in the top right corner is Cortés himself, while the male
head below sports a Spanish hat but no beard. The character’s name glyph, a stone with water drops, should probably be read as Tapia (Diel Boornazian 2018, 143). This identifies the figure as Hernando de Tapia, son of Motelchiuhztin. Thanks to his dual Spanish and Nahua upbringing, Hernando de Tapia became a nahuatlato, an official Nahuatl interpreter for the Crown, after his return to New Spain (Rovira Morgado 2019). The Hispanicized headdress and speech volute attached to Tapia in the manuscript indicate the cultural and linguistic intermediary role that he successfully played until his death circa 1555 (Codex Mexicanus, p. 83).
In 1532, during his stay in Spain, Hernando de Tapia cosigned a petition to Charles V with other Indigenous nobles to restore the patrimonial rights of their families. In the letter, he declared himself to be the son of Andrés de Tapia, “old tecuhtli, governor of Mexico” (antiguo tucotecle, gobernador de México) under Cortés (Archivo General de Indias, México, 95, exp. 24, ff. 209r–210r, López de Meneses 1960, 193, Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 97–98). Hernando de Tapia referred to his father’s title and position using both Mexica and Spanish terminology. The governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan at the time, Pablo Xochiquentzin, was also among the signatories and identified himself as tucultecle y gobernador de México. The first signatory was Martín Nezahualtecolotzin, son of the tlatoani Motecuhzoma.

When Hernando de Tapia finally succeeded in obtaining the coat of arms for his family in 1535, the king wrote,

> our [sic] captains and governors that they had come to conquer it in our name and in doing all that he could as a loyal vassal, you asked that given these services rendered and in order of those not to be forgotten, we would grant you a coat of arms … (Por cuanto vos Fernando de Tapia, natural de la Nueva España, hijo de Andrés de Tapia, nos habéis hecho relación que el dicho vuestro padre nos sirvió en la toma de la dicha Nueva España en dar aviso a nuestros [sic] capitanes e Gobernadores que en nuestro nombra la fueron a conquistar e en todo lo demás que él pudo, como bueno e fiel servidor nuestro nos suplicaste e pediste por merced que acatando los dichos servicios, e porque de ellos quedase memoria, vos mandásemos dar por armas un escudo hecho de dos partes, en esta manera …; Archivo de la Fundación Casa de Alba, carpeta 238, legajo 2, documento 73, f. 1r, Paz y Meliá 1892, 250, translation by author)

The paleography of the document is exceedingly difficult, but it is illogical that Andrés de Tapia Motelchiuhtzin would warn or announce (dar aviso) to the Spaniards that the

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Spaniards had come to conquer New Spain. Moreover, the text refers to those who were told the news of the conquest as capitanes e gobernadores. The Spaniards usually reserved the latter term for Indigenous rulers and officials, not Spanish soldiers. It is more likely that vuestros (our) should have read vuestros (your), which would mean that Andrés de Tapia warned his own captains and governors that the Spaniards were coming to conquer them. Thus, according to the passage, Motelchiuhtzin’s contribution to the Crown was that he warned the Mexica that the Spaniards would conquer their land in the name of the Spanish king. However, what does this announcement refer to?

It is possible that Motelchiuhtzin had a premonition (tetzahuitl in Nahuatl), which sources concurred played a major role in the events leading up to the Spanish conquest (e.g., Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 12, ch. 1, Tezozomoc 1997, ch. 104–111). In the Cantares mexicanos, a collection of Nahua poems from the mid-1500s, Motelchiuhtzin is mentioned a few times as one of the heroes of the last battle in the siege of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, which took place in his native Tlatelolco in 1521. One of the songs is given as follows:

In this picture place of yours,  
Amid your paintings  
The Only Spirit has caused you to see things  
Oh Tapia, oh Motelchihuih  
And he causes weeping, he causes sadness here.  
The Mexican nation is passing away.

The song was written as a Renaissance stanza but based on a traditional Indigenous cuicatl. It states that God showed to Motelchiuhtzin through the painted books that the ancient Mexica culture and customs were coming to an end. This is very similar to what is stated on page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus during Izcalli at the very end of the veintena cycle, when the Cihuacoatl priest and Motecuhzoma close the ceremonies for the year 2 Reed. In a gloss, Cihuacoatl is described as “god of the omens who told them that the Spaniards would come and conquer them” (dios de los agieryos que les dijo como habian de venir los espanoles a ellos, y los habian de sujetar). Motecuhzoma could only confirm this dire prediction. The gloss next to him reads, “god of corn kernels (used for divination) and magicians who confirmed to them what he said: that they would soon come and conquer them” (dios de los maizes o hechiceros, que les confirmo lo que este dijo: que venian ya a los conquistar).

It is plausible that Motelchiuhtzin’s son, Hernando de Tapia, brought a manuscript commissioned by his father during one of his trips to Spain, either in 1528, while Motelchiuhtzin was still the tecuhli-gobernador of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, or in 1532, after his father’s death, to prove the family’s ancestry and obtain a noble title from the Crown. The Codex Borbonicus may have been used as the painting that proved the veracity of Motelchiuhtzin’s vision and prophetic pronouncement, as stated in the official document transcribed above. One of the Codex Borbonicus’ most striking characteristics is its style and execution. It is a seemingly perfect copy of a pre-conquest pictographic manuscript, as if to demonstrate visually that the fate of the Mexica had already been revealed before Cortés’ arrival.

Motelchiuhtzin’s fateful premonition is consistent with the powers of a priest and, more generally, the office of a person who was not of noble descent and had to prove his own abilities—military, administrative, or otherwise. As seen in Chapter 1 of this book, Indigenous healers or curanderos are granted their powers regardless of status. They are chosen; they do not choose. However, the social obligation associated with their calling is binding. Motelchiuhtzin proved his value among the Mexica and the Spaniards alike and was able to serve both overlords in the tumultuous years of the invasion and conquest. It seems that Motecuhzoma and, eventually, Cortés and Charles V recognized Motelchiuhtzin’s visionary ability and the way that he used it to serve them.

6.2. The prophetic value of pictography

The identification of Motelchiuhtzin as the patron of the Codex Borbonicus rests on a few specific historical data points, namely his role and status in pre-conquest Mexico-Tenochtitlan during the enterprise of conquest and later in the city reconstruction that transformed the great Mexica metropolis into the capital of New Spain.

Motelchiuhtzin’s various titles (e.g., cuauhpilli, huitznahuatl, cuauhtlatoani, and others) are not always easy to define in the sources. The council of trusted officials appointed by the tlatoani performed both administrative and religious duties, which involved responsibilities as well as privileges, especially in the form of tribute (Acosta Saignes 1946, Dehouve 2013). The somewhat nebulous information regarding these offices is also reflected in the reconstruction of the historical figure of the cihuacoatl Tlacaecel, as noted in the literature (Colston 1974, Peperstraete 2008). While Durán, Tezozomoc, and others who possibly relied on the same lost source, the so-called Crónica X, paint a larger-than-life picture of a man who was said to have lived over a hundred years, others, including Sahagún, do not even mention him. In the Codex Borbonicus, the Cihuacoatl priest on pages 23 and 37 is unidentified, unlike the accompanying Xiuhcoatl priest, who is said to be the tlatoani Motecuhzoma. The charged ritual and religious role played by the cihuacoatl may have deeply affected the way that he was portrayed in historical sources. In the Florentine Codex, for example, the cihuacoatl is often mentioned but never unequivocally
identified. In the chapter devoted to the kings, it is said that, during the reign of Motecuhzoma II, the cihuacoatl “went about weeping, at night. Everyone heard it wailing and saying: ‘My beloved sons, now I am about to leave you’” (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 8, ch. 1, 3). The corresponding illustration (Fig. 6.4) depicts a serpent with the head of a woman (which reflects the literal meaning of cihuacoatl, woman-serpent) speaking to a group of people weeping, perhaps as a response to her oracular predictions; in the background, a house is on fire. The omen of the cihuacoatl is the same one given by the Cihuacoatl priest in the Codex Borbonicus, by Motelchiuhtzin in the family title’s concession, and in the song of the Cantares mexicanos.

Two related accounts of the premonitions of conquest demonstrate the intertwined importance of vision and pictography in Mesoamerica. Durán (1964, ch. 70) and Tezozomoc (1997, ch. 110–111) related the first sighting of the Spaniards by Mexico envoyns on the Gulf coast and what they relayed to Motecuhzoma in Tenochtitlan. According to both sources, Motecuhzoma sent a tilillancalqui, a member of the emperor’s inner circle, to the coast to watch the boats and men approaching. The tilillancalqui interacted with Cortés and his interpreter, doña Marina, and then returned to Tenochtitlan. Once back in the city, he recounted everything that he saw to Motecuhzoma, who became gravely concerned. The tlatoani then ordered an old tlacuilo named Tocual in Tezozomoc’s account (1997, ch. 110, 457) to paint what the tilillancalqui had observed. The ships of the Spaniards were like floating mountains, and their weapons produced a terrifying smoke. As no one had seen these things before, Motecuhzoma asked the tilillancalqui to seek old and knowledgeable people in the towns and villages surrounding Tenochtitlan who could interpret the painting. After several failed attempts, the tilillancalqui suggested asking an esteemed man from Xochimilco known as Quilaztli. This man may have been none other than the Cihuacoatl priest from Xochimilco, as Quilaztli is indeed another name for Cihuacoatl. Quilaztli told the tlatoani that the arrival of the Spaniards was painted in an old amoxtli (book) that had been left behind by the teomamaque (the god bearers), the leaders of the Nahua-Mexica migration into central Mexico (Durán 1964, ch. LXX, Tezozomoc 1997, ch. 111, 459). This account corroborates what was expressed in the Codex Borbonicus. It was a Cihuacoatl priest from a southern town in the basin who prophesized the arrival of the Spaniards and the demise of the Mexica. Could this be another clue that the Codex Borbonicus, a fine and unique example of Mexica pictography, was produced by the cihuacoatl’s descendants? It does not seem coincidental that pictography and its use by Mexica high officials in the fateful events of the encounter are discussed in two strictly related sources that uniquely describe the cihuacoatl Tlacaeltl and his successors in great detail (see Peperstraete 2007).

Rovira Morgado (2013, 176–177) argued that Motelchiuhtzin himself was the tilillancalqui who first witnessed the arrival of the Spaniards and on whose account the first image of the foreigners reached Motecuhzoma’s eyes. While Durán and Tezozomoc’s accounts are very similar, the Nahua historian (Tezozomoc 1997, ch. 110, 457) inserted a brief passage in the narrative on the tilillancalqui’s travel to the coast that is not found in Durán’s. Both versions state that Motecuhzoma granted the tilillancalqui tribute privileges and possessions as a reward for his service and bravery, but only Tezozomoc identified the land and towns, some of which were also mentioned in early colonial archival sources as being disputed by Motelchiuhtzin/Andés de Tapia’s heirs. Rovira Morgado believes that Tezozomoc was aware of the Tapia family’s ongoing suit and took the opportunity to share his opinion on the matter when writing his chronicle. It should be added that, in this scenario, it was Motelchiuhtzin’s early expedition to the coast that granted him the title of huitznahuatl, the priest-officer in charge of the southeastern ward of Tenochtitlan. It was perhaps in this capacity that Motelchiuhtzin was able to call on the Cihuacoatl priest Quilaztli from Xochimilco to consult on the painting.

The Codex Borbonicus seems to reflect the complex religious and historical dynamic at play on the eve of the conquest in interesting ways. The glosses in the veintena section corroborate the idea that the New Fire ceremony took place in the same southeastern part of Tenochtitlan and towns on Lake Texcoco where Cihuacoatl was especially revered and Motelchiuhtzin oversaw the cult and tribute administration. However, the Codex Borbonicus does not depict Spanish ships and firearms. The manuscript is not the painting made...
after Motelchiuhtzin’s eyewitness account, which was eventually corroborated by an older painted manuscript in the possession of Quilaztli in Xochimilco. Yet, the Codex Borbonicus is, or at least purports to be, an early colonial copy of a lost pre-Hispanic original, thus mimicking the same exegetical dynamic narrated in Tezozomoc and Durán’s accounts in its production. The raison d’être of pictography lies in its future currency and is always contingent on interpretation. Quilaztli’s corroboration of Motelchiuhtzin’s account based on ancient texts, in turn, imbues the event of the encounter with a deeper historical dimension and significance.

The Codex Borbonicus is not concerned with historical events but rather their religious underpinnings and ritual processes. As argued in the preceding chapter, the tonalamatl section of the manuscript includes clues that tie the trecenas of the tonalpohualli to the specific historical period presented in the second part of the manuscript, the New Fire ceremony in the year 2 Reed under Motecuhzoma II. Nowotny (1974, 11) also noted traces of feathers in the tonalamatl of the Codex Borbonicus, which may indicate that the manuscript was used at some point. On the one hand, Codex Borbonicus is tied to a specific moment as a testament to a ceremonial occasion that legitimized a prophecy; on the other hand, divination and ritual use were still essential components of the manuscript’s life. In other words, we tend to think of written or painted documents as immutable and durable receptacles of information for future memory and generations, while Mesoamerican pictographic manuscripts self-consciously present partial information that must be constantly and retroactively reinterpreted and adjusted.

If my hypothesis that Codex Borbonicus was commissioned by Motelchiuhtzin and his son Hernando de Tapia to aid their petition for the family’s patrimonial and legal rights is correct, then the unadulterated pre-Hispanic style employed by the tlacuilo was meant to reinscribe the Spanish conquest into an imaginable Mexico future unborn by the defeat and humiliation of colonization. In the Codex Borbonicus, the cihuacoatl’s prophecy is given at the end of the veintena cycle during the xiuhmolpilli of the year 2 Reed (1507). The prophecy of conquest, while in itself frequently found in colonial alphabetical sources, is never cast within such a clear Mesoamerican religious and eschatological framework.

6.3. Provenience and dating of the Codex Borgia

The pivotal roles, both historical and religious, played by the Cihuacoatl priest and the New Fire ceremony in the commission, production, and final form of the Codex Borbonicus suggest that patronage and provenience can also be reconstructed for the Codex Borgia. This manuscript shares an emphasis on the yearly ceremonies and its protagonists with the Mexica counterpart, as detailed in Chapter 4. What prompted the Codex Borgia’s creation? What specific occasions determined its iconography and outlook? What internal clues may be found within the manuscript that implicitly indicate a certain locale, historical period, or ritual event?

Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 438–442) articulated a specific argument for the identification of two paired temples that appear in the Codex Borgia’s central pages (pp. 29–46) alongside the main religious structures of the sacred precinct of Cholula. Based on information provided by the Relación geográfica de Cholula (Acuña 1985, Relación de Cholula, § 14), two main priests ruled over the town: the Aquiach (Ruler of Above), who was associated with the sky and whose nahual was an eagle, and the Tlalquiah (Ruler of Below), who was associated with the earthly realm and whose animal companion was a jaguar. On the Codex Borgia’s central pages, two temples with complementary earth and sky imagery are frequently juxtaposed. It should be noted that, according to the Relación, the two priests resided in the same temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, while the Codex Borgia clearly represents two separate structures. In the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (f. 26v–27r), the main precinct of Cholula had one main temple that featured two separate conical roofs. It is possible that the Quetzalcoatl temple in Cholula was similar to the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan: a single structure topped with two separate temples dedicated to two different gods.

Finally, according to the same source (Acuña 1985, Relación de Cholula, § 14), Cholula was where rulers throughout the region would receive the investiture of their royal titles, specifically through the nose-piercing ceremony, as seen on the previously discussed page 44 of the Codex Borgia and the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (f. 21r). Archaeological data show a remarkable stylistic unity between the Codex Borgia’s pictorials and polychrome ceramics in Cholula (Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994). Both historical and archaeological data, therefore, seem to indicate that this important Nahua city was the place of origin of the Codex Borgia. In turn, the murals in Tizatlán and Ocotelulco, Tlaxcala, may be “inspired” by pictorials such as the Codex Borgia (Peperstraete 2006).

A key element for establishing chronology in the Codex Borbonicus was the identification of specific features in the tonalamatl section of the manuscript, which relates to events in the solar year. In the Codex Borgia, the twenty trecenas found on pages 61–70 are arranged in rows (see Fig. 6.12). The section is followed on page 71 (Fig. 6.5) by a separate plate that depicts the thirteen birds of the trecenas, which are repeated on each trecena panel in the Codex Borbonicus. On page 71 of the Codex Borgia, the central image is dominated by a solar god seated on a throne and receiving the blood of a decapitated quail. The sacrifice is performed at night, as indicated by the dark sky and moon (a rabbit in a crescent) above. Right next to the night sky, there is a Mixtec year sign associated with the date 1 Reed. The year sign, which can be identified as an interlaced A-O symbol, has the sign Reed inserted into it. As suggested by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 437), the leaves in the year sign are a linguistic pun, as the words for...
“leaf” and “year” are homophonous in Nahuatl. Therefore, the symbol combines Mixtec calendrical conventions with Nahuatl terminology—another indication that the Codex Borgia hails from the southern Puebla region, where the two ethnic and linguistic groups closely interacted.

The animal performing the sacrifice of the quail is difficult to identify. Anders et al. (1993, 347) tentatively considered it a skunk. Previously, Seler (1904, vol. 2, 290) noted that the animal’s muzzle is skeletonized: the lower jaw is fleshless, and the nose is replaced by a sacrificial knife. The German scholar also noted that the animal was green (now faded into light brown), which led him to interpret the spikes on its body as leaves of grass (or perhaps another plant). The animal could be a coyote, which is associated with Tezcatlipoca along with other feline or canine wild animals (Anders et al. 1993, 347, Olivier 2003, 32–33). As in the glyph for Coyoacan, the coyote has circles (coyoctic) on its body, where they may function as a phonetic complement for coy-o-.

The red deity on the left has clear solar associations. He is seated on a throne or altar and inside a rayed disk that represents the sun. The 4 Movement day sign at the base of the throne or altar indicates the fifth and present era at the time for the Nahuas and Mexica of central Mexico. Two colored streams fall from the sides of the sun, forming the known couplet attlachinolli (water-conflagration), a
metaphor for war and conflict that aligns with the sun god’s weapons and attack position. Warfare, solar imagery, and epochal dates are characteristic elements of another well-known throne or altar, the Teocalli of the Sacred Warfare (Fig. 6.6), a Mexica monument that was commissioned by Motecuhzoma II around the celebration of the xiuhmolpilli for the year 2 Reed. This date is carved in the front along with the date of the previous year of 1 Rabbit. Thus, the year sign 1 Reed that appears on page 71 of the Codex Borgia could also indicate the completion of a fifty-two-year cycle. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mixtecs and Nahuas counted years in a slightly different manner (Jiménez Moreno and Mateos Higuera 1940, 69–76). While the two systems shared yearbearers, their numerals are one unit off from each other. Year 1 Reed in the Mixtec calendar corresponds to year 2 Reed in the Nahua-Mexica calendar. It is also well known that 1 Reed was a year of cyclical completion among the Mixtecs (Furst 1978b, Anders et al. 1993, 347n1).

Finally, another important feature in the sun god altar on page 71 of the Codex Borgia indicates not only the completion of a calendar cycle but also a more specific ceremonial event. I believe that the colorful banners raised behind the god should be taken as a reference to Panquetzaliztli, a ceremony dedicated to the sun. As discussed at length in the preceding chapters, Panquetzaliztli was the most appropriate time to perform the ritual of the New Fire, as it fell between the time of the sun’s nadir and winter solstice.

Figure 6.6. Teocalli of the Sacred Warfare. Spinden 1928.
Nowotny (1960, § 7a) suggested that page 71 refers not only to the preceding tonalamatl section, given the depiction of the thirteen birds, but also, more specifically, to the sixth trecena, 1 Death, whose regent is the sun god. On page 66 of the Codex Borgia, Tonatiuh (the sun god) is on the right. He kneels in a dynamic posture towards an enthroned elderly man holding a carved staff (Fig. 6.7). In the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 13v and 19r; Fig. 6.8), the trecena 1 Death depicts the sun god, who is identified in the gloss by his calendrical name, Nahui Ollin.
(4 Movement), opposite Meztlí, the moon god. The sun god holds a bird in one hand, along with a white banner that signifies sacrifice. In the Codex Borbónico, a quail is sacrificed to the sun god by the coyote-like animal in front of him. In the Mexica teocalli (Fig. 6.6), the sacrifice to the sun god is performed by Motezuhoma II and a god with the attributes of Tezcatlipoca and Huiztilopochtli. Finally, in the Codex Borbónico (p. 6), the trecena 1 Death depicts the sun god opposite a god-priest of Tezcatlipoca, who embodies darkness and night. The conflation and exchange of iconographic elements and ritual behavior between the sun god and his counterpart, the moon god/Tezcatlipoca/elderly character, bespeaks their symbiotic relationship. This interpretation was seemingly also expressed by an annotator of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 19r), who stated, “And thus they put [Tecciztecatl, the Moon god] opposite of the sun because it is always countering the sun, which they say causes the generation of men” (Quiñones Keber 1995, 261). The victory of the sun over darkness, albeit temporary and cyclical, is a major theme in the Panquetzaliztli ceremony in general and its representation in the Codex Borbónico.

If Nowotny’s suggestion is correct and the scene on page 71 of the Codex Borbónico, which depicts a sacrifice to the sun god during Panquetzaliztli to celebrate the completion of a calendrical cycle on the year 1 Reed, is directly related to the trecena 1 Death, this would also indicate that a specific solar and historical year is highlighted in the tonalamatl of the Codex Borbónico, in a manner akin to that of the Codex Borbónico discussed in the preceding chapter (Ochpaniztli was highlighted during the days 7 Serpent and 2 Reed, beginning in the trecena 1 Rain). According to Caso’s chronology, day 1 Death fell on November 6 in 1505, close to the nadir of the sun, and December 26 in 1507, close to the winter solstice. The latter was year 1 Reed for the Mixtecs, a date highlighted on page 71. Could the Codex Borbónico have been produced to commemorate the New Fire celebrated in Cholula for the binding of the fifty-two years during 1 Reed (1507) in the Mixtec calendar?

One last detail in the Codex Borgia’s trecena 1 Death is worth mentioning: a rabbit is enclosed in a square surrounded by twelve dots. Anders et al. (1993, 330) interpreted the sign as 12 Rabbit. However, the square around the animal could also indicate that Rabbit should be understood as a separate day—that is, day sign Rabbit plus twelve more days. In other words, the date could be read as trecena 1 Rabbit. This trecena falls eighty days before 1 Death and recurs 180 days after it.

According to Motolinía (1971, ch. 11), the priests of Cholula, whom he called tlamacazque, began a gruesome fast eighty days before the main celebration in their town, which was held every four years. The feast honored the god Camaxtli, who can be seen in the Codex Borbónico (p. 45; Fig. 4.15), standing on an altar during a celebration tentatively identified as Panquetzaliztli. The tlamacazque’s ritual quest began with a four-day fast, during which they only ate a small tortilla and drank a little bit of water. Then, they spent sixty days inside the temple enclosures, constantly tending to the altars and sleeping only a few hours every night. Although they bathed every night, they covered their bodies with black charcoal paint. After sixty days of “insufferable hardship,” they were allowed to sleep and rest a little more for the remaining twenty days before the feast day. Finally, on the day of the celebration, the priests could return to their homes, where they were given colorful cloaks to parade in the temple. In Section 4.3.1 the quest of the priests during the days preceding Panquetzaliztli was similarly related to the hunt god Camaxtli-Mixcoatl and the tlatoques dedicated to his cult in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (ff. 20r, 21r) and the Codex Borgia (p. 44).

The quest began on page 42 with the sacrifice of Itzlacoliuhqui (Fig. 4.14). At the top of the page Itzlacoliuhqui is seen stretched out on an altar, an occasion marked by a day Rabbit encircled by a yellow ring. This day follows from the previous section, where the thirteen preceding days of the trecena 1 Eagle are depicted in full; this indicates that Rabbit does not stand for the day alone on this page but the entire trecena beginning on 1 Rabbit (Boone 2007, 200, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 506). This detail seems to corroborate the interpretation that the veintena sequence represented in the Codex Borgia (pp. 29–46) coincides with the year 1 Reed in the Mixtec calendar, when the Panquetzaliztli ceremony was held during 1 Death and Ochpaniztli occurred eighty days prior during 1 Rabbit.

Given the 260-day periodicity of the tonalpohualli, day 1 Rabbit recurs 180 days (roughly six months) after 1 Death. Paul van den Akker suggested to me in a personal communication (2021) that, if 1 Death coincides with the winter solstice, six months later 1 Rabbit would coincide with the summer solstice in the third week of June. Alternatively, if 1 Death corresponded to the nadir of the sun, it would correspond six months later to the first zenith passage of the sun at the beginning of May. In this respect, it is quite intriguing that the deities’ iconography of the trecena 1 Death and its reprise on page 71 in the Codex Borgia suggest the contrast between the opposing forces of darkness and light, the sun and the moon, and their perpetual struggle, which leads them to shift positions at established intervals.

It may be recalled from the previous chapter that both 1 Death and 1 Reed are carved on Mexico xiuhtolpilli sculptures and framed by square cartouches (Fig. 5.5 and 5.6). The fact that celebrations of the ending of a cycle were held in both years 1 and 2 Reed (according to the Mixtec and Mexica calendars) indicates not only that there were different time-keeping traditions in Mesoamerica but also that they were not viewed as mutually exclusive. There was no impulse or interest in imposing a single homologous time; instead, different “calendrical schools” coexisted, and their relative merits, meaning, and uses were perhaps even discussed and compared among calendar specialists.
6.4. New Fire and new codices

Previous considerations of the possible historical dating of the Codex Borgia undermine a basic assumption in Novotny’s divinatory paradigm (i.e., the perpetual use of the tonalpohualli and its calendrical tables). According to this view, the ancient books of wisdom were manuals that could be used over and over again regardless of the year.

By contrast, the approach that I propose stresses that the specific geographical and historical circumstances of production are not mere accidents to be placed within a larger a priori cosmological scenario but rather constitutive elements of the way that religious knowledge was conceived and constructed. I posit that the specific reasons for and circumstances of a manuscript’s commission largely dictated the final outlook of its pictorials, iconography, and calendrics. Therefore, images and the calendar did not conform to an immutable logic of divination but instead underpinned a dynamic reinvention of tradition, a constant reckoning with the inexorable passing of time, the accidents of history, and human actions.

Mexican scholar Ana Díaz Álvarez (2016, 2019) also espoused this view and suggested examining the codices not as books or inactive repositories of abstract knowledge but as objects to be manipulated. My suggestions follow up on those of Díaz by seeking clues about the localities, time, and circumstances of production. With regard to pre-Hispanic manuscripts that were salvaged from an unknown location at an undetermined time, establishing their patronage, provenience, and exact dating is bound to remain a somewhat speculative endeavor. Nonetheless, I believe that it is necessary to change our perspective and question our conceptions of history, fate, and religion. Even if divinatory books such as the Codices Borgia and Borbonicus were painted to bear traces of the specific historical and geographical circumstances of their production, this did not necessarily preclude future use. However, it meant that any subsequent divinatory reading would need to consider clues derived from the moment and place of creation and incorporate them into the understanding of and guidance on future actions and outcomes.

A passage from the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 10, ch. 29) offers glimpses of how cosmology, religion, history, and the ancient books were part of a relational web and mutually depended on one another. According to the origin story of the Mexica, the books of knowledge were destroyed twice. First, the wandering Mexitin (as the Mexica were once called) arrived in Tamoanchan; they were led by wise people called amoxoaque, which means “those who have the books.” However, the amoxoaque soon abandoned their people, heading east and taking the books and all knowledge contained therein on calendrics and crafts, among other things, with them. Only four old wise people remained, who had to invent knowledge anew: Oxomoco, Cipactonal, Tlaltetecuin, and Xuchicahuaca. They created the tonalpohualli (the count or calendar of destiny), the xiuhpohualli (the count or calendar of the years), and the temicamatl (the book of dreams). These books were preserved until the time of the Mexica tlatoani Itzcoatl (1427–1440), when a group of rulers convened and decided to burn them all.

Itzcoatl’s book burning has traditionally been interpreted as a strategic move that was intended to erase dissenting historical accounts during the crucial period of the Mexica’s hegemonic rise in the basin of Mexico (Battcock 2012, 97–105). However, as Battcock (2012, 105) indicated, it is also noteworthy that the episode is only mentioned in the Sahaguntine passage and not in any other source. Therefore, Itzcoatl’s book burning is part of a mythological account rather than a historical one, which suggests that the tlatoani’s decision had religious and ceremonial underpinnings that extended beyond shrewd political calculations. In particular, Battcock suggested that destruction by fire was a highly charged ritual of renewal and rebirth, a rite of passage by which the present realm was transcended to move towards a new era. Navarrete (1998) had previously interpreted the act of replacing old books and rewriting history, a process that implies destruction, as integral to knowledge production among Mesoamerican peoples. In the abovementioned passage by Sahagún, the disappearance of the old books enabled the creation of new books and new knowledge.

In the case of Itzcoatl, it is tempting to imagine that the first cihuacoatl, Tlacaelel, was among the tlatoques who decided to undertake the radical destruction and reconstruction of religious and historical knowledge in the early fourteenth century (León Portilla 1956, 244–245, Battcock 2012, 97–98). It was during the reigns of Itzcoatl and Motecuhzoma I, and the tenure of Tlacaelel I as cihuacoatl, that the Mexica expanded into the southern fresh waters of Lake Texcoco. As argued by Klein (1988), the incorporation of the cult of Cihuacoatl into the Mexica pantheon was the result of this war of conquest in a region where, as we have seen, the goddess was worshipped. The Mexica appropriated local land and resources by symbolically co-opting the local patron Cihuacoatl, turning this powerful but defeated goddess into one of the most important offices in the land. When the Codex Borbonicus was painted in the early post-conquest period, Motelchiuhtzin invoked the power of both the goddess Cihuacoatl and his cihuacoatl predecessors to rewrite and re-envision history once again, this time casting the Mexica defeat at the hands of the Spaniards as a meaningful new beginning for colonial Indigenous governance.

The Codex Borgia shows clear traces of having survived a fire that burnt the first two pages (pp. 1–2, 74–76), albeit only partially. Although it is not possible to firmly establish when the manuscript was damaged, the earliest information provided by the Jesuit José Lino Fábrega in the eighteenth century alludes to the fact that the fire damage had occurred long before the manuscript arrived in Italy. According to others, including the Baron von Humboldt, the fire occurred later, when the manuscript was already in the possession of Italian collectors. Anders et al. (1993, 36–37) suggested that the Codex Borgia may have survived
one of the many bonfires ordered by the mendicant friars after the conquest; it can also be hypothesized that the manuscript had been partially burnt and destroyed as part of a ritual that took place in ancient times.

Following others (Anders and Jansen 1994, 18–20, Boone 2006), I have argued elsewhere (Frassani 2021) that the Codex Laud, a fine example from the Borgia Group, is a full and complete manuscript that was creatively painted and reinvented based on a faulty and damaged original. The Codex Laud is an iconographic outlier within the corpus of religious pictographic manuscripts because only a small proportion of its piktories are cognate with others in the Borgia Group. The calendrics of the manuscript is also particularly problematic, with incomplete or faulty calendar counts appearing especially at the ends, where folded manuscripts are more easily damaged. While the manuscript is not itself a fragment, the calendrical count suggests that traces of damage and loss were preserved when an incomplete original was copied.

On page 24, a sun disk is encircled in blood while its tutelary solar deity presides over its interior (Fig. 6.9). On one side, an eagle feeds on the blood from the sun; on the other side, Mictlantecuhtli performs human sacrifice while partially covering the sun and touching the god inside the disk with a dark fog that emanates from his mouth. This scene represents a solar eclipse and the seemingly opposite forces that characterize this celestial phenomenon (an eagle from the sky and death from the underworld). The page is framed on two opposite sides by an earth band in which the eyes and teeth of a crocodilian creature are visible throughout. Four gods (eight in total) are arranged along these two sides and face one another in pairs. Nowotny (1961, § 21a,...

Figure 6.9. Solar eclipse and ritual performed by Mictlantecuhtli. Codex Laud, p. 24. Kingsborough 1831.
first noted that, calendrically, this is an instance of an incomplete $65 \times 4$ partition of the tonalpohualli. The day signs Crocodile, Death, Monkey, and Vulture are each followed by twenty-five dots, thus signaling four periods of twenty-six days each, for a total of 104 days. As Burland (1966, 22–27) noted, it would appear that this is a fragment of a sequence that should have included four more scenes on four different pages, for a total of two rounds of 260 days.

The initial section on the other side of the manuscript (pp. 25–32; Fig. 6.10) also represents an incomplete cycle. The count begins at the bottom right of page 25 with the day Crocodile, followed by Death, Monkey, Vulture, and Crocodile again, a count that repeats the calendrical partition from the last section on the other side of the manuscript. Overall, the count reaches a total of 180 days rather than 260. If, as Burland (1947) proposed, the last repeated day (such as Crocodile on the first page) indicates that the entire cycle must be repeated, this would add up to 360 days (i.e., one cycle of eighteen veintenas). Burland noted that this is the only depiction of the vague solar year in pre-Hispanic religious manuscripts. It seems that the painter of the Codex Laud copied a faulty original that was missing several pages, plausibly creating a link with the previous section on the other side of the manuscript; however, the count is only hinted at and never actually completed (Burland 1966, Anders and Jansen 1994, 155–159). Iconographically, the section is dominated by the cult of Mictlantecuhtli and related activities.

The other end of the manuscript on pages 45 and 46 (Fig. 6.11) depicts rituals performed by two women—one young and one elderly. The elderly woman’s blood offering is channeled into the round, open jaws of a reptilian creature, which represents the earth; a coyote or dog and a turkey are shown alongside it. The two animals may be understood as either nahuales presiding over the ceremony or offerings. In the following scene, a young female officiant may be identified by the day name 1 Water (the dot is beside her, while the sign for water is in the water stream that she pours onto the burning offering) and the water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue (Boone 2007, 167).
The water offering dissolves into the sky as vapor in an upward motion, which contrasts with the blood offering being swallowed by the earth in the preceding ritual. Several unclear days are signaled on the two pages that indicate periods of twenty and eighty days. The day 1 Water can be found in the lower register of page 45, while day 8 Deer is connected to a path of footprints to the earth monster in the register above. Day 1 Flower may also be depicted next to the turkey; above it, a circle is placed near what seems to be a feather. On the next page, day 8 Water is signaled above, while day 1 Water reappears as the sign within the stream of water and the single dot next to the young woman pouring the liquid. The continuous red line that divides both pages horizontally makes it difficult to understand whether they should be read as a whole (Boone 2007, 167) or, as Nowotny (1961, § 22) and Anders and Jansen (1994, 215–216) suggested, beginning at the bottom of page 45 and proceeding right to left, then left to right in the top register, where the two ritual scenes take place.

I propose that these two pages of the Codex Laud were copied and reinvented from a damaged part of a tonalamatl similar to that on pages 63–64 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 6.12). Two consecutive trecenas, 1 Deer and 1 Flower

Figure 6.11. Two ritual offerings. Codex Laud, pp. 45–46. Kingsborough 1831.

Figure 6.12. The trecenas 1 Deer and 1 Flower (bottom); 1 Wind and 1 Water (top). Codex Borgia, pp. 63–64. Kingsborough 1831.
in the bottom register (read from right to left) are paired with consecutive trecenas 1 Wind and 1 Water in the top register, which must be read from left to right. The four trecenas are part of a tonalamatl arranged into two rows of ten trecenas that proceed in opposite directions in the two registers. These four trecenas contain, among others, days 1 Flower, 8 Deer, 1 Water, and 8 Water, which are found in the pages of the Codex Laud. Iconographically, the turkey and the coyote on page 45 of the Codex Laud are also found on page 63 of the Codex Borgia. Chantico, patron of the trecena 1 Wind, is seated in the upper right corner of the Codex Borgia; underneath her seat, there is an upturned jar. The pouring of water on a fire results in smoke and “conflagration” (atlachinolli in Nahuatl), which is an attribute of Chantico; it can be seen in her trecena as the smoke that emerges from the offering and temple in front of her. Indeed, the female officiant on page 46 of the Codex Laud performs the same ritual activity of pouring water to extinguish a fire. Finally, several small elements drawn in a white outline and the red serpentine shape near the numeral bars in the pages of the Codex Laud recall the shell trumpet in the trecena 1 Wind of the Codex Borgia.

This comparison of two pages from a tonalamatl and two ritual scenes from the Codex Laud reinforces the idea that the latter was copied from a faulty original, whose reinvention resulted in new and perhaps even unprecedented images. It is therefore unsurprising that the Codex Laud’s original pictorials often accompanied faulty and inconclusive calendrics. The complex but incomplete calendrics of the Codex Laud, paired with its unique iconography, suggests not only that the manuscript was creatively reconstructed from one or more damaged originals but also that the reinvented contents were explicitly and purposefully kept fragmented when painted anew, perhaps to indicate a previous destruction (and rebirth or survival) by fire or other means. What purpose did the manuscript serve? Battcock (2012, 108–109) noted an interesting detail in the description of funerary rituals in the Florentine Codex. After the dead were tightly wrapped in their bundles, paper vestments were placed in front of them:

And here is wherewith thou wilt pass where mountains come together; and here is wherewith thou wilt pass by the road which the serpent watcheth; and here is wherewith thou wilt pass by the blue lizard, the xochitonal; and here is wherewith thou wilt travel the eight deserts; and here is wherewith thou wilt cross the eight hills; here is wherewith thou wilt pass the place of the obsidian-bladed winds. (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 3, appendix, ch. 1, 43)

Strips of paper that depicted the places where the dead would travel before reaching their final destination were given to the deceased as a guide to the underworld. Although Battcock suggested that these painted papers were burnt on a pyre, as the passage in Sahagún seems to suggest, several descriptions of funerary rituals state otherwise, including those in the Codices Tudela (ff. 57–60) and Magliabechiano (ff. 65–69). Papers were given to the deceased, along with food and offerings that the dead would eventually give to Mictlantecuhtli at the entrance of the underworld. Following this evidence, it could be hypothesized that the Codex Laud may have been prepared as a guide for a deceased person on their path to the land of the dead. Mictlantecuhtli plays a predominant role on pages 25–31 of the manuscript, in a section where the calendrics follows a solar year pattern. In the same passage on the painted papers given to the deceased, Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 3, appendix, ch. 1) stated that funerary rituals were celebrated eighty days (four veintenas) after a person’s death and again at the end of each year until the fourth year, after which it was understood that the deceased had reached their destination.

These are only a few reflections on the possible use of religious pictographic manuscripts beyond the dichotomy between history and divination. The three teoamoxtli analyzed here—the Codices Borbonicus, Borgia, and Laud—are hardly representative of a corpus whose characteristics will always remain unknown because too many of them have not survived. The analysis took Mazatec ceremonies as an emic point of departure to go beyond our current understanding of pictographic images as a text whose meaning will finally become clear once its grammar and syntax have been understood. The approach that I advocate considers that astronomical and historical time, as well as other unpredictable contingencies, have shaped the patronage, purpose, design, and afterlife of pictographic manuscripts.

The remaining chapters are dedicated to the analysis of manuscripts produced in the colonial period to document Indigenous religion and customs. Their images rarely show the deep symbolism of the ancient books because they were conceived to reflect or illustrate a distorted idea of Mesoamerican religion that was alien and refractory to the complexity of the pictorial language. Still, ritual practice and history are invariably intertwined with divination as a testament to the impact of the invasion and conquest on Mesoamerican peoples and their books.
The Evolution of Early Colonial Pictography

This and the following concluding chapter analyze religious manuscripts produced after the conquest under the sponsorship and guidance of Spanish friars. The Codices Telleriano-Remensis, Tudela, and Magliabechiano and the Florentine Codex have been cited numerous times throughout this book in the interpretation of images and calendrics pertaining to the ancient religious manuscripts. In this chapter, the focus is on their creation in the mid- and late sixteenth century. Although the socio-cultural context of their production can be at least partially reconstructed, unlike the Codices Laud, Borgia, and even Borbonicus, the analysis of the manuscripts’ contents, organization, and specific iconography offers the most important clues and insights into the motivations and concerns of the artists and patrons involved.

A comparative analysis of selected post-conquest sources reveals the ways in which Spaniards (primarily friars) and Nahuas participated and interacted in the representation of Mesoamerican religion after the establishment of the colonial order in New Spain. As discussed in the preceding chapters, the Codex Borbonicus is also a post-conquest document, but it was produced before the forceful Christianization of the Indigenous population. Once manuscript painting was co-opted and confined to the conventos and their schools, the documents began to serve a different purpose: illustrating Indigenous religion to a foreign and mostly hostile audience. In this respect, the most striking feature of the manuscripts discussed in this chapter is perhaps the novel juxtaposition and relationship between the alphabetic text and pictorial representations—the two poles of European and Mesoamerican understanding of local religion, respectively. I do not mean to argue that alphabetic and pictographic texts were separately produced or that they constitute parallel narratives, a view that has been expressed by authors such as Batalla Rosado (2002) and Magaloni Kerpel (2003a, 2003b) with respect to the Codex Tudela and the Florentine Codex, respectively. However, I attempt to highlight how the inherently different semiosis engendered by Mesoamerican pictography and European alphabetic writing—a topic discussed in the introduction of this book—came to interact and mutually influence each other once they were made to coexist within the same intellectual project. I have already remarked on a peculiar quality of the glosses in, for example, the Codex Borbonicus: they often provide information that is not given or apparent in the images but nonetheless corroborated by other colonial sources.

Two pairs of manuscripts are discussed in this chapter: the Codices Telleriano-Remensis and Vaticanus A, and the Codices Tudela and Magliabechiano. The dating of these documents is not precisely known, but they were all compiled roughly between 1550 and 1580 and underwent different stages of production. All manuscripts primarily concern Nahua (Aztec) religion and comprise divinatory and ritual sections. The latter aspect is extensively represented by the veintena ceremonies. How did history—namely, the fateful events of the conquest and its aftermath—and a certain conceptions of history affect the way that both divination and ceremonies were represented during the colonial period? Post-conquest pictorial and alphabetic descriptions of Mesoamerican religion, such as those analyzed here, were produced under the supervision of the Spanish friars. Their agenda and purpose were wholly different from those of the creators of pre-Hispanic manuscripts. To understand how different ideas and conceptions operated within these texts, I compare the works as a whole and try to define the overall intellectual project before moving on to a comparison of specific details to account for their differences and possibly competing points of view.

7.1. The Codices Telleriano-Remensis and Vaticanus A

The Codex Telleriano-Remensis, a manuscript that details several aspects of Nahua religion and history, may have been drafted in the 1550s and 1560s (Quiñones Keber 1995, 129). The Codex Vaticanus A is largely a “clean” copy of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, whose sections were partially rearranged, and the glosses were translated into Italian (Quiñones Keber 1995, 130). Painted and written on European paper, both works are also bound like Western books. Although the Codex Vaticanus A’s pictorials are decidedly of inferior quality, the codex contains more sections. Its faithful reproduction of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis makes it particularly useful for reconstructing lost pages from the original. Jansen (1984) established that Dominican friar Pedro de los Ríos was responsible for the realization of both documents, which reflect a wide interest in Nahua culture. The manuscripts include sections on mythology, the calendar, divination, ceremonies, and history. With respect to general presentation and layout, Quiñones Keber (1995, 242–243) noted the tripartite arrangement of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis. The tonalamatl, which addresses the calendar and divination, can be found between the ceremonial cycle (the veintenas) and history (the annals). Thus, the gods are the focus of the first part of the manuscript, followed by human and individual destiny (the reading of the tonalamatl), and, lastly, the historical and transcendental projection of human and divine action through time. The same author (Quiñones Keber 1995, 242–243)