Spaniards had come to conquer New Spain. Moreover, the text refers to those who were told the news of the conquest as capitaes e gobernadores. The Spaniards usually reserved the latter term for Indigenous rulers and officials, not Spanish soldiers. It is more likely that vuestras (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 Motelchiuh  
And he causes weeping, he causes sadness here.  
The Mexican nation is passing away.

Yn ye mamox ipan  
motlacuiloł ye ineantla  
mizomitlachialt Yceloteol  
yn Tapia ye Motelchiuh  
 techoci tetaacoctli  
y nica ye yahh yn mexicayotl  
(Bierhorst 1985, song 60, 281)

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 Icartli at the very end of the veintena cycle, when the Chihuaacoatl priest and Motecuhzoma close the ceremonies for the year 2 Reed. In a gloss, Chihuaacoatl is described as “god of the omens who told them that the Spaniards would come and conquer them” (dios de los agueros que les dijo cómo habían de venir los españoles a ellos, y los habían 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 confirmó lo que este dijo: que venían 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 tecuhtli-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 toloanni performed both administrative and religious duties, which involved responsibilities as well as privileges, especially in the form of tribute (AcoztÁn 1946, Dehouve 2013). The somewhat nebulous information regarding these offices is also reflected in the reconstruction of the historical figure of the chihuaacoatl Tlacaelel, 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 Chihuaacoatl priest on pages 23 and 37 is unidentified, unlike the accompanying Xiuhtocztli priest, who is said to be the toloani Motecuhzoma. The charged ritual and religious role played by the chihuaacoatl may have deeply affected the way that he was portrayed in historical sources. In the Florentine Codex, for example, the chihuaacoatl is often mentioned but never unequivocally
identified. In the chapter devoted to the kings, it is said that, during the reign of Motecuzoma 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 envoys on the Gulf coast and what they relayed to Motecuzoma in Tenochtitlan. According to both sources, Motecuzoma sent a tlillancalqui, a member of the emperor’s inner circle, to the coast to watch the boats and men approaching. The tlillancalqui 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 Motecuzoma, 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 tlillancalqui 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, Motecuzoma asked the tlillancalqui to seek old and knowledgeable people in the towns and villages surrounding Tenochtitlan who could interpret the painting. After several failed attempts, the tlillancalqui 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 Tlacaelol and his successors in great detail (see Peperstraete 2007).

Rovira Morgado (2013, 176–177) argued that Motelchiuhtzin himself was the tlillancalqui who first witnessed the arrival of the Spaniards and on whose account the first image of the foreigners reached Motecuzoma’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 tlillancalqui’s travel to the coast that is not found in Durán’s. Both versions state that Motecuzoma granted the tlillancalqui 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 Taipa’s heirs. Rovira Morgado believes that Tezozomoc was aware of the Taipa 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 Motelchihuitzín’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 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 Motelchihuitzín’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 Motelchihuitzín 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 reinsert the Spanish conquest into an imaginable Mexico future unbent 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 Tlalquiach (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 (ff. 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