6.4. New Fire and new codices

Previous considerations of the possible historical dating of the Codex Borgia undermine a basic assumption in Nowotny’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 calendars. 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 dependent 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, Citlactonal, Tlaltetecuin, and Xuchicahuaca. They created the tonalpohualli (the count or calendar of destiny), the xiuhmatl (the historical annals), 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 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 worshiped. 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 governorship.

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 pictorials 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,
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).

Figure 6.10. Ritual officiated by Mictlantecuhtli. Codex Laud, p. 25. Kingsborough 1831.
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...
Several descriptions of funerary rituals state otherwise, on a pyre, as the passage in Sahagún seems to suggest, Battcock suggested that these painted papers were burnt given to the dead as a guide to the underworld. Although would travel before reaching their final destination were

strips of paper that depicted the places where the dead

rebirth or survival) by fire or other means. What purpose

was creatively reconstructed from one or more damaged

originals but also that the reinvented contents were

incomplete calendrics of the Codex Laud, paired with its

unique iconography, suggests not only that the manuscript

were conceived to reflect or illustrate a distorted idea of

Indigenous religion and customs. Their images rarely show

the deep symbolism of the ancient books because they

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.

These are only a few reflections on the possible use of

religious pictographic manuscripts beyond the dichotomy

between history and divination. The three teoaomxtli

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.

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 dead 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,
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 forcible 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 Nahu (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 conception 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 Nahu religion and history, may have been drafted in the 1550s and 1560s (Quinones 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 (Quinones 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 Nahu culture. The manuscripts include sections on mythology, the calendar, divination, ceremonies, and history. With respect to general presentation and layout, Quinones 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 (Quinones Keber 1995, 242–243)