

tion of travelers, acquired a Mixtec ritual-divinatory calendar, which he gave to Cospi, the marquis of Petrioli, who in turn gave it to the Bologna museum. By the late seventeenth century, Bologna boasted one of the greatest collections of Native American objects, including the Mixtec book, now called the *Codex Cospi*.¹²⁵

Mesoamerican indigenous books often changed hands in the culture of deference and courtly patronage that determined the fate of curiosities in early modern European collections. The history of the so-called *Codex Vindobonensis*, or *Vienna Codex* (Fig. 2.8), typifies the ways in which Mesoamerican books circulated. Upon his arrival on the coast of Veracruz in 1519, Cortés sent to Emperor Charles V (r. 1519–56) an indigenous book that recorded the dynastic genealogies of the Mixtec from the eighth through the mid-fourteenth centuries. The emperor, in turn, offered it as a present to his brother-in-law, Manuel I, then king of Portugal (r. 1495–1521). In 1521, Manuel gave the annals to Giulio de' Medici (1478–1534), the future Pope Clement VII, along with a Mexican blanket of parrot feathers and a set of indigenous bells. Upon the pope's death, Ippolito de' Medici (1509–1555) inherited his uncle's estate, including the Mesoamerican book. But Ippolito himself died a year later. In 1555, one of Ippolito's creditors, the German cardinal of Capua, Nicolaus Schomburg, asked to be paid in items from the deceased's estate and thus got the annals. Schomburg died soon afterward, and in 1557, his estate, along with the Mesoamerican annals, went to Germany, where the exact location of the Mixtec dynastic genealogy for the next hundred years remains a mystery. In 1650, however, it resurfaced in the cabinet of curiosities of Prince Wilhelm of Saxe-Weimar. By 1677, it was in the hands of Wilhelm's son, the duke of Saxe-Eisenach, who that year presented it to Emperor Leopold I. The latter deposited it in his library, the Imperial Library of Vienna, where it has been ever since.¹²⁶

Despite their status as curiosities, Mesoamerican books were considered reliable historical sources in both Europe and New Spain. In 1553, André Thevet (1502–1590), soon to be royal cosmographer to the king of France, obtained a set of documents that the viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza (r. 1535–49), had recently ordered painted, recording Aztec annals from 1325 C.E. to the Spanish Conquest in pictograms and *logograms*, including tributary lists from towns subordinated to the Aztecs and descriptions of assorted indigenous customs and laws. After falling prize to a French privateer en route to Spain, this so-called *Codex Mendoza* wound up in the hands of Thevet, who drew on it for his books on cosmography and biographies. In 1587, three years before his death, and with his scholarly reputation

in decline, Thevet sold the *Codex* to Richard Hakluyt, then chaplain to the English ambassador in Paris. A staunch supporter of a policy of Atlantic maritime expansion, at a time when England accepted Spanish hegemony in the New World, Hakluyt had set out to compile a collection of English travel accounts, and he acquired the *Codex Mendoza* in hope of finding in it strategic information about the Spanish empire in America. Samuel Purchas, an Anglican pastor, who inherited Hakluyt's papers, subsequently published the *Codex Mendoza* (Figs. 2.4 and 2.5a and Plate 12), for the first time, in 1625, as part of a multivolume universal history and compilation of travel accounts entitled *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes*.¹³⁰

Purchas thought that just as humans were superior to animals because they had understanding and speech, and thus the ability to dominate animals by use of communication and reason, some groups of humans “excelled” others, who were “British, Savage, [and] Barbarous,” solely because the former were able to communicate through writing. The want of letters animalized peoples like the Amerindians, who seemed “in comparison of [Europeans who had writing], as speaking Apes.”¹³¹ Implicit in Purchas's formula lay the assumption that literate Europeans had the right to dominate Amerindians in the same way that humans had the right to dominate animals. Nonetheless, Purchas thought that Inca “Quippos in stones or Threads” and Mexican “Pictures” were forms of writing.¹³² Consistent with his definition of Mexican pictograms as writing, Purchas printed the entire Mendoza collection, along with an English translation of the accompanying Spanish glosses. Purchas not only relied on Spanish interpretations of Mexican sources but used the *Codex Mendoza* as his documentary foundation for the sections on Mexico of his history of the world.¹³³

Purchas's exaggerated yet vacuous rhetoric about the value of alphabetical writing in essence resembles the attitude of sixteenth-century Spanish humanists to Mesoamerican scripts and annals. Like the Spaniards on whose scholarship he drew, Purchas also limited himself to translating Amerindian accounts of events.¹³⁴

Conjectural Histories of Writing

After conjectural histories maintaining that writing evolved gradually from primitive painting to alphabets began to appear in Europe in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Amerindian scripts ceased to be valued as repositories of reliable accounts.¹³⁵ Since the sixteenth century, Spanish scholars had characterized nonalphabetical scripts as merely the

early stages in the gradual ascent of reason toward the mastery of the visual representation of speech. However, the novelty of the new conjectural histories of writing lay rather in presenting nonalphabetical scripts as untrustworthy. More important, too, conjectural histories deployed systems of writing to demonstrate the evolution of the human mental faculties. Amerindian documents were used to demonstrate the progress of the human spirit through various mental stages rather than as reliable historical records.

The use of Amerindian scripts, and in particular Mesoamerican pictograms, to shed light on the Old World's history began as early as the sixteenth century. Perhaps the Italian scholar Monsignor Michele Mercati (1541–1593) offered the first full-fledged statement. In *De gli obelischi di Roma* (1589), Mercati set out to clarify the meanings of the hieroglyphs carved on ancient Egyptian obelisks recently unearthed from local ruins by Domenico Fontana, architect of Pope Sixtus V's ambitious renovation of Rome. As Gianfranco Cantelli has shown, Mercati drew on the scholarship of his colleague Paleotti, who in his *Discorso intorno alle imagine sacre et profane* had offered a conjectural history of writing that treated hieroglyphs as primitive, yet reliable forms of writing. Mercati, who thought that alphabetical writing was not a human but a divine invention, sought nevertheless to explain the origin of Egyptian hieroglyphs as a postlapsarian human creation that had begun as primitive picture-writing, not unlike that used by the Mexica and the Ethiopians. Egyptian hieroglyphs, however, had later evolved into forms of symbolic writing, a means devised by cunning priests to keep arcane and sophisticated knowledge away from the masses.¹³⁶

In 1626, the Italian antiquarian Lorenzo Pignoria (1571–1631) also turned to Mexican books to shed light on the history of Egypt, but he reached very different conclusions from those of Mercati. Well known among European antiquarians for his interpretation of the “Isiac table,” a stela with Egyptian hieroglyphs dating back to Ptolemaic times, Pignoria was a staunch follower of Annus de Viterbo, a late-fifteenth-century forger who had sought to persuade Europeans that they were the descendants of the Egyptian hero Osiris. Pignoria was determined to prove that Egyptians had done more than just colonize Europe, and that they had also created the Hindu, Chinese, Japanese, and Mesoamerican civilizations. In 1626, to prove that Asian and American deities derived from analogous Egyptian ones, Pignoria adduced statues and paintings in the cabinets of curiosities of friends and patrons. In the case of America, he also drew on a copy made in Italy in the 1560s by Pedro de los Ríos of a compilation of pictograms of Mexica gods, ritual calendars, and histories, the original of which has since been lost. Now known

as the Codex Ríos (or Vaticanus 3,758), this included Italian glosses, and Pignoria followed these and the images of the book to show that the Mexica were familiar with many ancient Egyptian scientific and religious concepts (see, e.g., Fig. 2.5), including the idea of a nine-sphere cosmos, the Chain of Being, the Trinity, the Flood, and the devil. To prove the Egyptian origins of the Mexica, Pignoria also compared their systems of writing, which he assumed were both hieroglyphical. Pignoria found confirmation of the symbolic nature of Mexican writing in the Codex Ríos. As with Egyptian writings, some symbols, according to the authors of the glosses to the Codex, held deeper symbolic significance: thus, a deer represented a thankless man, and a lizard copiousness of water; a stone next to wilted maize stood for sterility, whereas green corn stalks signified bountifulness.¹³⁷

If Pignoria's comparison of Mexica script to Egyptian hieroglyphs was unusual, his attempt to establish a conjectural history of Egyptian migrations was nothing new. In his *Oedipus aegyptiacus*, published between 1652 and 1654 in four stout folio volumes, Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) had sought to trace Egyptian migrations on the assumption that most pagan religions had originated in Egypt. Kircher thought that only two ancient peoples, the Hebrews and the Egyptians, had enjoyed a privileged insight into the structure of the cosmos, the former through God's own dispensation and the latter through their own independent and pious accumulation of knowledge. Just as God had encoded his work in symbols, writing the books of nature and revelation in sacred hieroglyphic characters, the pious Egyptians (and Hebrews) had understood that objects and writings always had deeper symbolic meanings. Kircher mustered geometry, mathematics, music, alchemy, medicine, astrology, and architecture to prove that Egyptian texts were polysemic, adumbrating the teachings of the Bible. Migrations and demonic manipulation, however, had made peoples forget the original Egyptian and Hebrew sacred knowledge. According to Kircher, scripts were proof that the descendants of the Egyptians had strayed from the truth. Unlike the Egyptians, who had stored profound theological and philosophical insights in their hieroglyphs, the Chinese, Hindu, Mexican, and other descendants of the Egyptians had, however, lost their capacity to write symbolically. In Kircher's account, Mexican scripts are interpreted as mere pictograms (see Fig. 2.4), if useful as historical evidence.¹³⁸

As part of their larger efforts to trace the history of writing or peoples, Mercati, Pignoria, and Kircher focused their attention on the similarities and differences between Mexican scripts and Egyptian hieroglyphs. They were not, however, interested in weighing the credibility of records written in

primitive scripts. Apportioning credit to documents written in nonalphabetical scripts was a preoccupation that came to dominate the late seventeenth century, a period that Paul Hazard has characterized as one of *crise de la conscience européenne*. This crisis of European consciousness originated in, among other sources, the multiple skeptical attempts of “free thinkers” to challenge the validity of the Bible as reliable universal history. Richard Simon’s higher criticism presenting the Pentateuch as the product of multiple ages and scribes went hand in hand with the efforts of Spinoza to cast the Bible as the mythic-historical records of just one provincial people, the Jews. There were other intellectual developments as well. New naturalistic accounts of the origins of civil society explained the emergence of human institutions without any recourse to providential metanarratives. Moreover, the discovery, study, and elucidation of ancient sources and chronologies of Egyptians, Chaldeans, Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans, combined with the arrival of new ones, particularly from China, cast doubt on the reliability of the entire biblical chronology. Even more seriously, the biblical Creation was itself called into question by the revival of ancient pagan doctrines positing the eternity of matter and the publication of Isaac La Peyrère’s *Præadamitæ* in Amsterdam in 1655, which insisted that humans had inhabited the earth before Adam.¹³⁹

Pious scholars reacted furiously to these attacks. A favorite strategy among scholars to bolster the authority of the Bible consisted in challenging all alternative chronologies, including those of the Egyptians and Chinese. In the process, nonalphabetical scripts were cast as primitive, unreliable record-keeping devices. The Anglican divine Edward Stillingfleet (1635–1699), was typical of this new breed of intellectuals bent on dismissing nonbiblical universal chronologies. In his *Origines sacrae* (1662), Stillingfleet sharply summarized the ideas of modern “atheists” as a tripartite challenge to the Bible, which included “the irreconcilability of the account of Times in Scripture with that of the learned and ancient Heathen Nations; the inconsistency of the belief of the Scriptures with the principles of reason; and the account which may be given of the Origin of things from the principles of Philosophy without the Scriptures.”¹⁴⁰ To be sure, Stillingfleet spent part of his voluminous treatise proving the consistency between “principles of reason” and “the belief of the Scripture” and the inconsistencies in the doctrine of the eternity of matter. More important for my purposes, Stillingfleet sought to address those critics who maintained “the irreconcilability of the account of Times in Scripture with that of the learned and ancient Heathen Nations.” His strategy was simple. On the one hand, he cast doubt on the credibility of all an-

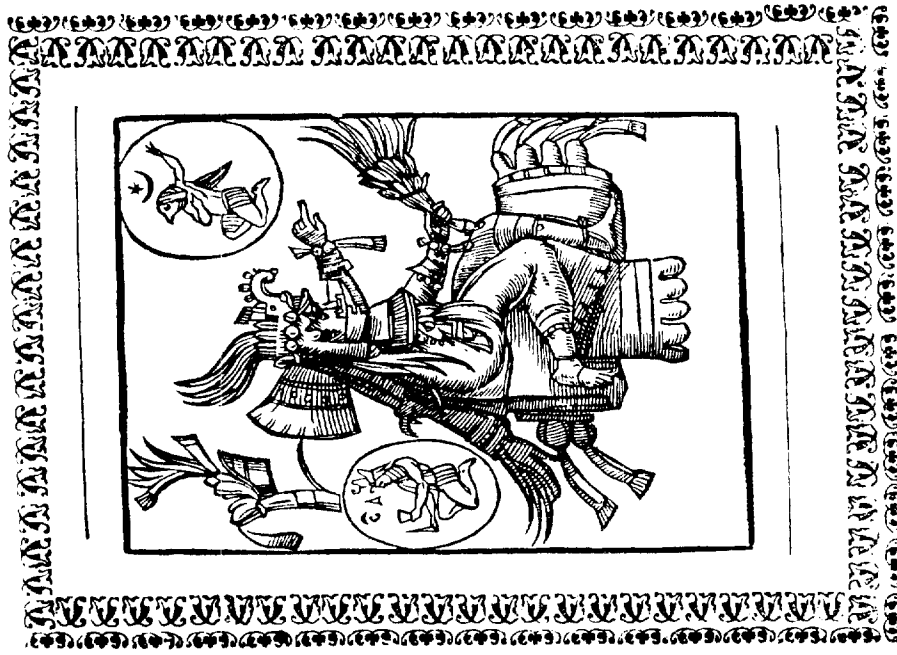


FIGURE 2-3. Similarities between the Mexica deity Homocoya (taken from the Codex Ríos) and Osiris. According to Lorenzo Pignoria, Homocoya was “the creator of everything,” First Cause, and the Trinity. Pignoria explained this resemblance to Christian ideas as the product of either a blurred reflection of natural reason or demonic deception. From Lorenzo Pignoria, “Seconda parte delle imagini de gli dei indiani,” in Vincenzo Cartari, *Imagini de gli dei antichi*, 2d ed. (Padua, 1626). Courtesy of the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid.

cient historical accounts that seemed to challenge the Bible. On the other hand, he emphasized the credibility of Moses, the alleged author of the Pentateuch, whose learning and wisdom vouched for his credibility.

Of all the available accounts of heathen nations, Stillingfleet concentrated his attention on those of the Greeks, Chaldeans, Phoenicians, and Egyptians. Throughout, he dismissed heathen alternative chronologies as either fakes or the products of unreliable or misunderstood calendrical systems; he also sought to undermine the character and credibility of heathen historians. Stillingfleet argued that heathen histories were false because internal analyses demonstrated “monstrous confusion [and] ambiguity” in them; contradictions surfaced as soon as the accounts were checked against one another; the chronologies were the product of nations bent on patriotic self-aggrandizement. More important, Stillingfleet dismissed them because of the “defect, weakness and insufficiency” of the recordkeeping devices with which they had been kept.¹¹

Stillingfleet set out to prove that only alphabetical writing was capable of keeping reliable historical records. After the Flood, most nations had lost their original, God-given ability to write, because, as in contemporary English colonies, the isolated tended to revert to barbarism. Stillingfleet therefore offered a conjectural history of writing in which Egyptian hieroglyphs appeared as a stage even more primitive than speech itself, a recordkeeping device “clogged with two inconveniences very unsuitable to the propagation of knowledge which were obscurity and ambiguity.” Only alphabetical writing was more “lasting than words, more firm than memory, more faithful than tradition.”¹² Moses was trustworthy because he alone had had access to reliable Jewish historical records. The Jews alone put a premium on the exact mechanism of transmission of traditions.¹³

In France, the question of the Bible’s credibility as a universal history was conveniently couched as a debate about the credibility of the sources upon which later Greek and Roman historians had chosen to reconstruct the history of early Rome. As already noted, during the Renaissance, it was conventionally argued that Greek and Roman historians had reconstructed Rome’s origins and the first five centuries of Roman history from nonliterary sources, including family memoirs and songs (*carmina*) and the lists of pontiffs and magistrates (the *fasti*), as well as other public documents. In the early eighteenth century, the reliability of these sources came under close scrutiny by the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres. The debate this time pitted pious scholars against skeptical “free thinkers.” The abbé Antoine Anselme (1652–1737) began the exchange with two memoirs defending the credibility

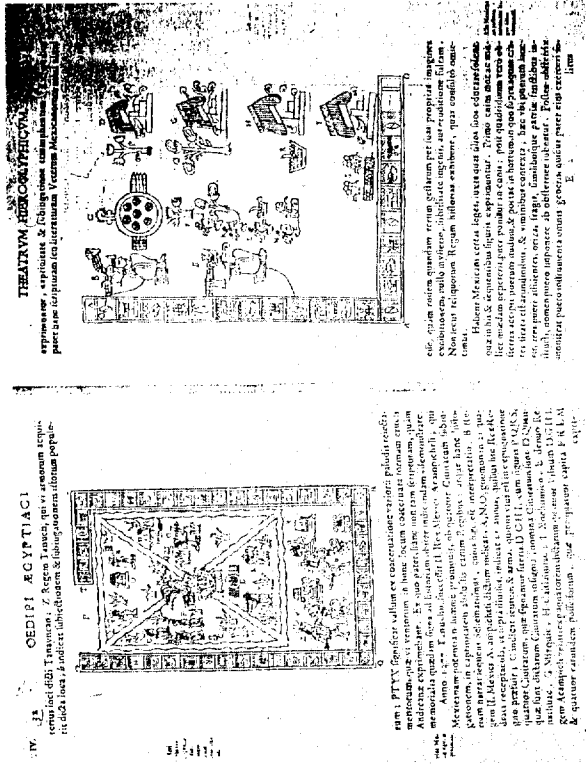


FIGURE 2-4. Athanasius Kircher’s copy of pages of the Mendoza collection edited by Purchas. The image on the left records events from years 2 House (1325, upper left) through 13 Cane (1349, upper center) that led to the foundation of the city of Tenochtitlan in a lake (see also Plate 12). The bottom of this image recounts the military campaigns that the first elected Mexica monarch, Tenoch (“Nopal Stone”) waged on the towns of Culhuacan (“Place of those with ancestors”) and Tenayuca (“Ramparts”). The image on the right describes twenty-one years of the reign of Tenoch’s alleged heir, Acamapichtli (“Handful of Reeds”), who appears here conquering the neighboring towns of Cuahnahuac (“Beside the Trees”), Mizquic (“On the Mesquite”), Cuauhauac (“On the Water-Excrement”), and Xuchimulco (“Flower Field”). Torquemada would have disagreed strongly with this sequence of events. Moreover, under Acamapichtli, the Mexica were still a subordinate ethnic group with no power to make war on their neighbors. Kircher concluded that Mexica script differed considerably from Egyptian hieroglyphs. These pages exemplify how ideograms and calendrical signs combined to create sophisticated historical narratives. From Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus aegyptiacus* (Rome, 1652–54).

of Moses and the Pentateuch, read to the members of the Académie in 1715 and in 1720. In the first memoir, Anselme maintained that the Jews had interrupted written accounts that went back to Creation, from which Moses had drawn. Even without access to such an uninterrupted written tradition, Moses could have drawn information from other equally reliable sources, including statues, inscriptions, temples, and the architecture of cities. Songs and myths also stored trustworthy historical information, although in a garbled fashion.¹⁴⁴

Freethinkers at the Académie, such as Louis-Jean Levesque de Pouilly (1691–1750), challenged Anselme's views. In 1722, Levesque de Pouilly delivered a memoir in which he called into question each and every one of the recordkeeping devices that Anselme had cited to defend the credibility of the Pentateuch. Querying the reliability of sources such as family memoirs, inscriptions, and mythology, he suggested that recordkeeping devices gained in credibility as they evolved. The annals of the magistrates and pontiffs and of the neighboring peoples of Rome, from which later historians had drawn their information to reconstruct the early history of Rome prior to the sack of the city by the Gauls, were primitive, untrustworthy records.¹⁴⁵ Such primitive recordkeeping devices and orally transmitted information led to distorted recollections: "The histories that are trusted to the memory of man are altered in the mouths of each of those who successively transmit them. The more these [types of oral] histories distance themselves from their origins, the more foreign accretions are added to them and the fewer things in them we can trust, until any trace of truth disappears from them entirely."¹⁴⁶ Only the written testimony of witnesses might be trustworthy, but even then, historians needed to be careful of their character and motivations.¹⁴⁷

The debate continued within the Académie and included members as prominent as Nicolas Fréret, who came to the support of the use of oral traditions, particularly mythology, as an important source for reconstructing obscure eras. According to Fréret, mythology garbled popular historical recollections of significant social and cultural events. The role of the historian, he argued, was to unveil the historical meaning of those recollections.¹⁴⁸ The last word in the debate, however, came from an outsider to the Académie, Louis de Beaufort (1703–1795), who agreed with Levesque de Pouilly that the credibility of all nonalphabetical scripts was suspect. So, too, was the credibility of Greek and Roman historians such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Quintus Fabius Pictor, who had allegedly reconstructed the history of Rome from nonliterary sources.¹⁴⁹

In Italy, much ink was also spent in discussion of the reliability of non-

alphabetical sources. Giambattista Vico produced various editions of his *Scienza nuova* from 1725 to 1744 to do battle with freethinkers bent on destroying the historical authority of the Bible. Vico was concerned that new modern historical narratives left no room for God in their accounts of the origins of human social institutions. By insisting that history revealed regular and lawful patterns, Vico sought to create a new science to demonstrate the workings of an indirect Providence operating through the law of unintended consequences. Like Stillingfleet, Vico solved the problem posed by alternative heathen chronologies by positing a radical distinction between the chronology and credibility of the Bible and the untrustworthiness of alternative heathen historical narratives. Again like the Anglican divine, Vico maintained that the Pentateuch was the result of an uninterrupted written historical tradition, and that nonbiblical chronologies were unreliable, because they were those of peoples who had lost the ability to write after the Flood. Moreover, like Stillingfleet, Vico maintained that the historiography of the heathen nations was the unreliable product of patriotic self-aggrandizement.¹⁵⁰

Like Stillingfleet, Vico was concerned with finding forms to create and validate historical knowledge, but he went about it differently. Vico did not attempt to demonstrate the credibility of Moses or prove the consistency of the account offered by the Pentateuch. For Vico, humans could never have access to the mind of the Creator, hence God was unintelligible and certainty about the laws of nature unreachable. Truth was to be found in disciplines such as geometry and history, created by human beings. Like geometry, human social institutions were built upon conventions created by human beings themselves and had a history. The history of such principles, Vico maintained, "ought to be found within the modifications of our very own human minds."¹⁵¹ However, two impediments had to be overcome to create the science of history, namely, *la borìa delle nazioni* and *la borìa de' dotti*: the conceit of nations and the conceit of the learned. Greeks, Chaldeans, Scythians, Egyptians, and Chinese boasted of "having been the first founders of the humanity of the ancient world."¹⁵² The conceit of scholars assumed that ancient peoples were as learned as the scholars themselves, and that ancient myths and hieroglyphs therefore stood for sophisticated knowledge stored allegorically both in speech and paintings.

Vico pierced through the self-aggrandizing narratives of ancient heathen nations and through layers of accumulated commentary on myths and hieroglyphs by academics to find that the minds of nations, like those of individuals, developed in stages. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs held no mystic meanings, and Greek myths were not sophisticated philosophical allegories.

Hieroglyphs and myths were the product of primitives who projected themselves and their fears onto the cosmos using figurative, not abstract, rational thought.

According to Vico, the history of the heathen (gentiles) could only be indirectly reconstructed through the study of myths, oral tradition, and linguistics. That of the Jews, however, was directly accessible in the Bible, because they had not degenerated into childlike poetic primitives after the Flood, and had therefore never lost track of their history.¹⁵³ Vico found in the very chronology of the Egyptians a clue to understanding the stages of the development of the mind of the heathen. The Egyptians had classified their own history into three ages: the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of man. Each age, Vico maintained, had witnessed the development of a corresponding system of writing: hieroglyphic, or sacred; symbolic, or figurative; and epistolary, or vulgar.¹⁵⁴ The human mind went through similar stages, as did writing, which evolved from primitive hieroglyphs to alphabets (the epistolary stage). In the age of gods, humans were so limited that they expressed themselves in monosyllables, and words consisted simply of endless lists of deities. Later, this age witnessed the development of songs recounting the myths of gods and goddesses. The names and songs of deities sought to signify particular events in the past of the primitives. In the age of heroes, the gentiles still spoke in songs and poetry, but now they kept their garbled historical recollections in myths of heroes and heraldic signs. The final age, that of men, at last witnessed the arrival of prose, of alphabetical writing, and of the ability to think abstractly without recourse to figures and tropes.

As he sought to undermine the credibility of the historiography of all ancient nations but the Jews, Vico paradoxically went about creating a new science to “recover the underlying truth” (*i motivi del vero*) in “vulgar traditions” and languages.¹⁵⁵ Not only did myths preserve clues about the events of the past, but the history of important social changes also lay hidden beneath words.¹⁵⁶ Vico’s *Scienza nuova* was a blueprint on how to interpret myths and words as reliable historical records. Like fossils and ruins, words and myths were material evidence upon which to reconstruct the past. So, too, were writing systems, which encapsulated the development of human mental faculties.

Vico demonstrated that conjectural histories of writing did not simply call into question the reliability of “primitive” scripts, but described the progress of the human mind. Conjectural histories of writing as histories of the mind, in fact, first appeared in Restoration England, a society traumatized by the English Civil War, for which “enthusiasts”—zealous religious reformers and

dabblers in Neoplatonism and the occult—were widely blamed. In an effort to discredit the Egyptian sources from which enthusiasts allegedly drew their inspiration, Egyptian and Mexican scripts were treated as manifestations of early stages of mental development. In 1668, the English scholar John Wilkins (1614–1672) unveiled his “real characters” and “philosophical language.” Wilkins sought to create a script that would allow individuals from different nations to communicate with one another without equivocation, a recorded language isomorphic with nature, resembling the structure of the world itself. There was nothing new about his quest. Beginning with the Renaissance, Neoplatonists had thought that Egyptian hieroglyphics were a philosophical language. A mechanical philosopher and a founding member of the Royal Society, Wilkins, however, had little sympathy for enthusiasts and Neoplatonism. Far from being a “philosophical language,” he argued, Egyptian hieroglyphs were useless. “But there is no reason to doubt whether there be any thing in these [Egyptian hieroglyphics] worth the inquiry,” Wilkins concluded, “the discoveries that have been hitherto made out of them being but very few and insignificant. They seem to be but slight, imperfect inventions, suitable to those first and ruder Ages; much of the same nature with that Mexican way of writing by Picture.” According to Wilkins, Egyptian hieroglyphs were identical to Mexican pictograms, the script of “first and ruder Ages.”¹⁵⁷

In France, conjectural histories of writing as histories of the mind appeared not to attack enthusiasts but to contradict the alleged exaggerations of the Jesuits regarding the accomplishments of China. In a memoir presented to the Académie des inscriptions in 1718, Nicolas Fréret sought to deflate European representations of Chinese erudition. Along with Montesquieu, Fréret had the opportunity to learn Chinese ideograms from Arcadio Huang, a Chinese scholar who arrived in Paris in 1711 to help catalogue the Chinese holdings of the Royal Library. After taking a course with Huang for no more than two years, Fréret found that the Jesuits had exaggerated the complexity of Chinese writing and civilization. French Jesuits in particular had contributed throughout the seventeenth century to the creation of an image of a millenarian Chinese civilization led by old sages. This image, among other things, challenged the authority of the Bible, for the Chinese boasted chronologies more ancient than any the Judeo-Christian sources could offer and appeared to live happily under a naturalistic moral system without any need of religious revelations. The prestige of China in Europe reached such heights that, by the second half of the seventeenth century, reputed scholars such as Leibniz thought that Chinese writing was the long-sought “philo-

sophical language," a script to record things according to natural taxonomies. In his memoir, however, Fréret located Chinese writing low on the evolutionary scale, reducing the some 70,000 ideograms to 214 "radicals" and proving that Chinese metaphysics had never been complex enough to devise a philosophical language. Fréret based his attempt to prick the bubble created by the Jesuits on the assumption that scripts proceeded through evolutionary stages. He thought that the mind evolved teleologically, gaining greater power of abstraction, from Mexican pictograms to Chinese characters to alphabetical writing.¹⁵⁸

The most significant conjectural history of writing as a philosophical history of the mind, however, was not Fréret's but that of William Warburton, Anglican bishop of Gloucester (1698–1779). Hidden in the pages of his elephanine *The Divine Legation of Moses*, Warburton presented the Europeans with one of the most influential eighteenth-century conjectural histories of writing. Like Wilkins, Vico, and Fréret, Warburton cast his history of writing as a study of the evolution of human mental faculties. But unlike his intellectual predecessors, Warburton wrote his history to bolster the authority of the ancient Egyptians. In his convoluted treatise, Warburton sought to defend the credibility of the Pentateuch based on internal evidence. According to Warburton, most contemporary defenses of the Pentateuch (e.g., Stillingfleet's) had focused on the character of Moses. An internal defense, however, might not only be more compelling but also put future debate to rest. If only it could be proven that the Pentateuch had been written under the auspices of Providence, without having to defend first the character, judgment, and learning of Moses, then the authority of the Bible would forever be saved.

Warburton sought to prove that unlike other great ancient legislators, Moses had given laws to the Jews that did not include the doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments. If this were indeed the case, Moses' dispensation ran counter to the accumulated political insights of pagan nations, including the Egyptians, from whom not only the Greeks but Moses himself had derived their learning. The wise had always known that laws did not suffice to create social contracts and civilized governments. Only religion, by controlling morality, could civilize societies. Understanding this, ancient legislators had invented religious dispensations that struck fear into people's hearts and offered them either punishment or rewards in the afterlife. Moses had not had recourse to these ancient forms of civic religion when he gave laws to the Jews, however, making his dispensation seem truly providential.¹⁵⁹

Albeit convoluted, the logic of Warburton's thesis built on the very argu-

ments that freethinkers had offered to erode the credibility of the Bible: the account by Hobbes of the transition from the state of nature to civil society; the claims of English deists such as John Toland (1670–1722) that all ancient peoples had drawn their laws and learning from the Egyptians; and Spinoza's insight that in the Pentateuch there were no references to the doctrine of future rewards. Paradoxically, Warburton found his most important opponents in the camp of his potential allies. Pious men such as Stillingfleet had done a splendid job of undermining the credibility of Egyptian historiography and paring down Egyptian chronologies to make them fit the biblical narrative. In 1728, in *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms*, Isaac Newton had used hair-splitting etymologies and astronomy to take 5000 years off the traditional record of Greek history in order to deny Egyptians their vaunted antiquity. Newton had also rejected the credibility of any historian before Herodotus. Ultimately, Newton's chronology, like Stillingfleet's theories, was designed to bolster the historical credibility of the Bible. Warburton took on Newton and all those who had sought to deny that Moses drew his learning from the Egyptians.¹⁶⁰

To restore Egypt's much-denied antiquity to it, Warburton paradoxically turned against the tradition, typified by Vico, that used conjectural histories of writing to undermine the value of Egyptian sources. The ancient Egyptians had necessarily been a people of fantastic antiquity, Warburton argued, because Egyptian hieroglyphs had a long and complicated history, and pictograms such as those found in Siberia and the New World were the earliest stage of writing (Fig. 2.5). When Moses lived among the Egyptians, they had already developed alphabets and secret symbols, and it took time for primitive pictographic hieroglyphs to have evolved into sophisticated alphabets and "tropological" secret symbols.

Classical tropes such as synecdoche, metonymy, and metaphor were the mechanisms that Warburton chose to explain the transformation of writing from its most primitive pictographic origins. Like the Mexica, Old World peoples had first been compelled to write in pictures. But as painted communication became time-consuming and burdensome, some nations began to use parts of pictures to represent events (e.g., two hands and a shield and a bow to signify a battle). The use of synecdoche gave way to metonyms, and parts of objects began to be used to represent the whole (e.g., an eye to signify God's omniscience). Later, metaphors allowed nations to draw analogies between seemingly unrelated objects (e.g., a serpent in a circle to represent the universe, because the serpent's spots signified the stars). The most primitive extant Egyptian hieroglyphs were both metonymical and metaphorical,

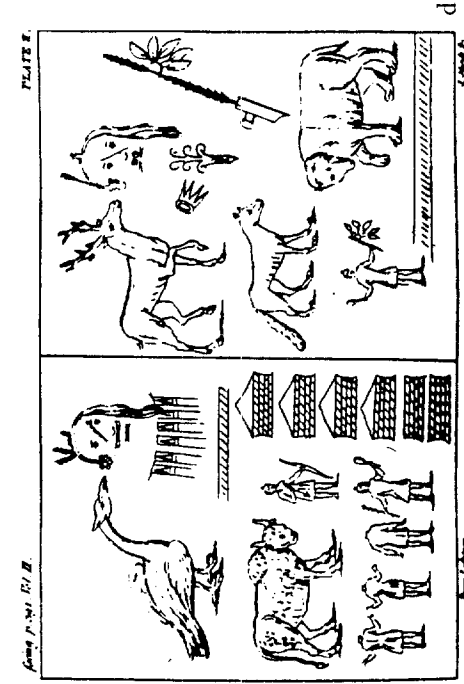
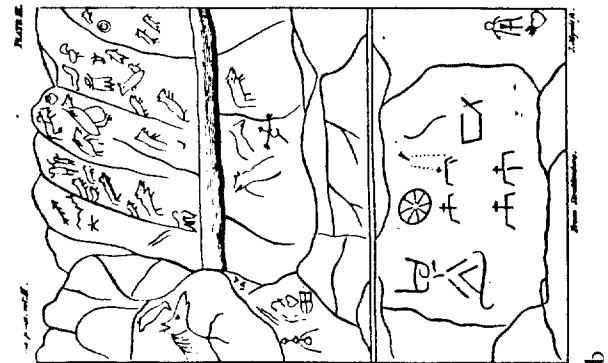
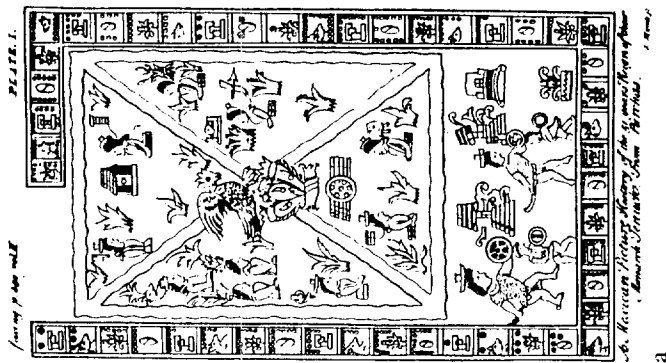
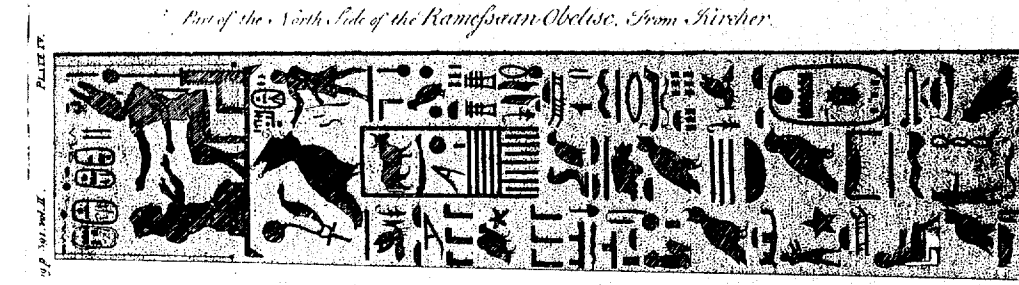


FIGURE 2.5. Scripts used by Bishop Warburton to illustrate the "tropological" development of writing and the mind: (a) Mexico annals describing events after the foundation of Tenochtitlan; (b) pictographic characters found in Siberia; (c) Egyptian hieroglyphs from an obelisk; (d) pictographic writing of the Huron and Iroquois. Unlike Samuel Purchas and Athanasius Kircher, Warburton made no attempt to read Aztec script, which he merely used to illustrate the development of the mental faculties. From William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*, 2d ed. (London, 1738-42).

which proved their great antiquity. The ancient Egyptians had let their imaginations run wild, however, and embodied their knowledge of nature in even more arcane metaphors, in the process creating sacerdotal symbols that kept the mysteries of their religion secret from the masses. Moreover, the Egyptians soon broke altogether with the hieroglyphic pattern that named things, not words and used conventional signs to represent words. Furthermore, Hermes, secretary to an Egyptian king, invented signs to represent sounds and to keep state affairs secret. According to Warburton, the Egyptians at the time of Moses had at their disposal a gamut of writing systems, ranging from hieroglyphic proper to sacerdotal-symbolic to epistollic and hierogrammatic (Fig. 2.6).¹⁶¹

The philosophes were indifferent to Warburton's original intent of defending the authority of the Bible; however, they did embrace his conjectural history of writing. Only section 4 of book 4 of Warburton's *Divine Legation* was translated into French in 1744.¹⁶² The French translation was soon recy-



led in Condillac's *Essai sur les origines des connoissances humaines* (1746) and by D. J. Jaucourt for the articles "Hiéroglyphic" and "Ecriture" in the *Encyclopédie* (1755). The attraction of Warburton's conjectural history of writing lay in his developmental history of the evolution of mental faculties. Warburton made the thrust of his argument explicit when he linked the history of writing to a conjectural history of language. Writing evolved from primitive pictograms to alphabets and secret tropological symbols to signify the piecemeal acquisition of mental faculties that permitted greater abstraction. According to Warburton, spoken languages also went through parallel developments corresponding to the tropological evolution of writing. People used first gestures and actions and later forms of speech, dominated successively by figures such as apologias, fables, similes, parables, riddles, pleonasm, and metaphors.¹⁶³

Natural Histories of the Mind

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, students of the mind transformed medieval faculty-psychology into a historical discipline.¹⁶⁴ Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) initiated a tradition that by the eighteenth century became canonical: upon birth, the mind was a blank slate, which slowly filled up with ideas gained through the senses and mental reflection. This tradition maintained that nations recapitulated the experience of individuals, who slowly acquired mental faculties as ideas were gradually accumulated and compared. Like children, "primitives" had blank slates for minds, to which new faculties were added piecemeal. The historicization of faculty-psychology was so popular among eighteenth-century savants and literati that even Rousseau, among the harshest critics of the ideology of progress, thought that his noble savages lacked imagination, estimative power, and memory. "In all nations, progress of the mind has been precisely proportioned to the needs that peoples had received from nature," he argued in his *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1755). Because he has no needs, the savage's imagination suggests "nothing to him . . . he is so far from the degree of knowledge, that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity . . . his projects, as limited as his views, barely extend to the end of the day. Such is even today the degree of foresight of the Carib: in the morning he sells his bed of cotton and in the evening he comes weeping to buy it back, for want of having foreseen that he would need it for the coming night."¹⁶⁵

For all his much-vaunted originality in capturing the dynamics of the

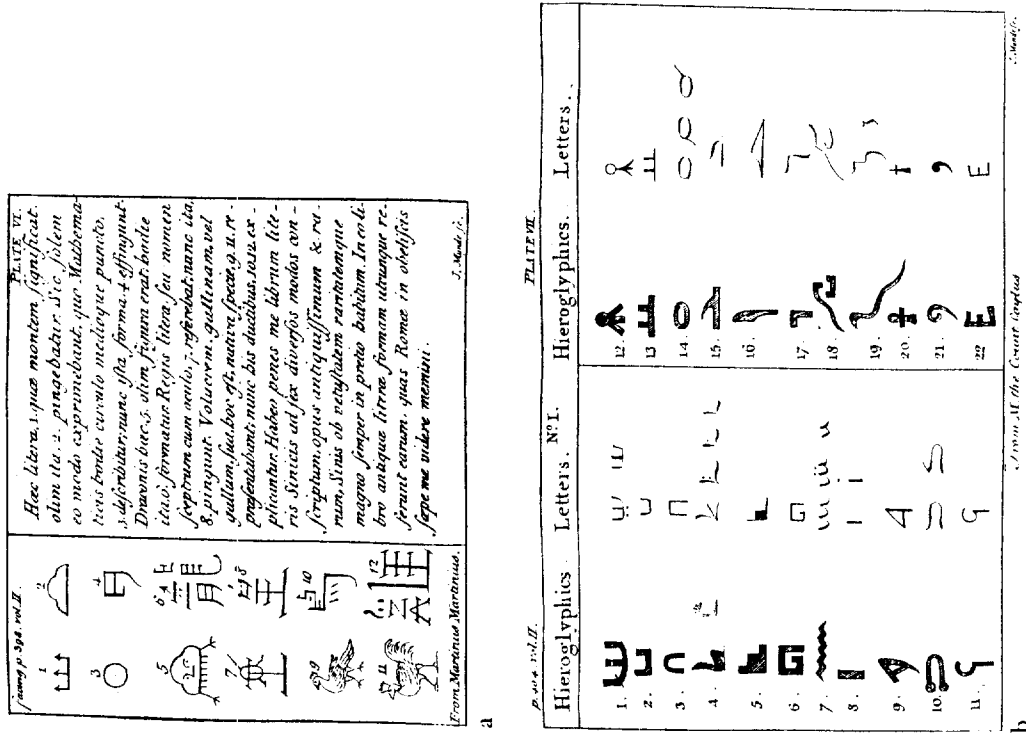


FIGURE 2.6. The development of conventional signs and alphabets according to Bishop Warburton: (a) the evolution of Chinese ideographs from pictograms to conventional signs; (b) the emergence of alphabetical script in Egypt from hieroglyphs. From William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*, 2d ed. (London, 1738-42).

matical structures reflected the development of peoples in the process of gaining analytical power over time. In these historical narratives, humans characteristically appeared as first communicating with one another through gestures, then through monosyllables, and finally through articulated speech. The separation of subject from predicates and the appearance of verbs, inflections, prepositions, and pronouns all spoke of the gradual development of the power of analysis of ideas and abstraction.¹⁶⁵

Grammars, vocabularies, and writing systems became alternative forms of evidence that replaced traditional literary sources (now perceived to be unreliable) to reconstruct the history of the gradual development of the mental faculties and, implicitly, that of Europe's obscure ages. In this context, Amerindian scripts became items of collection to shed light on the natural history of the mind. In the Renaissance, Amerindian documents in indigenous scripts were items of collection used to acquire reliable information about the histories of local peoples. In the eighteenth century, Amerindian documents were valued for their evidentiary power to reconstruct a philosophical history of the mind.

The views of the great French eighteenth-century classicist and orientalist Jean-Jacques Barthélemy (1716–1795) typify this transition. In the 1740s and 1750s, Barthélemy astounded European scholars by deciphering the value of Palmyrian and Phoenician letters through an evolutionary and comparative approach similar to that proposed by conjectural historians of writing. Barthélemy assumed, for example, that the Phoenician alphabet derived from Egyptian cursive writing, which in turn had derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the same evolutionary vein, Barthélemy thought that Mexican pictograms were primitive scripts that, had the Spanish Conquest not occurred, would have become either Egyptian hieroglyphs or Chinese ideograms. "It is clear," Barthélemy argued in a memoir addressed to the French minister Bertin around 1770, "that if the [Mexican] empire had subsisted for a few more centuries, their writing, through successive progress, would have become totally hieroglyphic, such as that of the Egyptians and Chinese."¹⁷⁰ Barthélemy urged the minister to sponsor the collection and publication of Amerindian documents on the grounds that "if one wants to be instructed in the progress of the human spirit among these Amerindians, one should collect all the manuscripts that escaped the barbarity of the first bishop of Mexico [who had burnt them]."¹⁷¹ Barthélemy's main interest in collecting Mexica documents became the study of the evolution of the faculties of the mind. Unlike sixteenth-century Spanish authors, he did not show much interest in using the sources to clarify details of the past of central Mexico.

primitive mentality. Vico's ideas were rather similar to Rousseau's. According to Vico, primitives were mute, speaking through gesture and drawings, overtaken by passions, and thus incapable of abstraction and so "buried in the body" (*seppellite ne' corpi*) that for them the cosmos became a mirror of themselves.¹⁶⁶ Warburton's primitives were like Rousseau's and Vico's, incapable of abstraction, first communicating themselves through the language of gestures and pictures and slowly later gaining articulate language and rational thought. Behind all these views lay the assumption that the mind of the primitive lacked most mental faculties, although to be fair to Vico, he thought that primitives had an excess of imagination. The idea that the minds of "primitives" were empty affected even figures on the fringes of the Enlightenment such as James Burnett, Lord Monboddo (1714–1799), one of the last defenders of the Ancients over the Moderns in the battle of the books.¹⁶⁷ In 1773, Monboddo thought that "man [is] formed, not however at once, but by degrees, and in succession: for he appears at first to be little more than a vegetable, hardly deserving of the name of a zoophyte; then gets sense, but sense only, so that he is yet little better than a muscle; then he becomes an animal of a more complete kind; then a rational creature, and finally a man of intellect and science, which is the summit and completion of our nature."¹⁶⁸

Along with histories of writing as conjectural histories of the mind, the eighteenth century also witnessed the explosion of philosophical histories of language. Vico and Warburton linked the history of writing and speech tightly, and so did Condillac. Most conjectural histories of language, however, focused exclusively on speech. The world offered a hierarchy of languages that ran the gamut from the primitive-concrete to the civilized-abstract. Eighteenth-century conjectural historians of language drew from two parallel yet slightly different traditions, one focused on grammars, and the other on vocabularies. The first tradition maintained that grammars reflected the structure of the world itself (patterns of causation, relations among objects, systems of classification). When a language deviated from this ideal grammatical structure (Latin in the Middle Ages, universal grammars in the seventeenth century), it demonstrated a failure on the part of its speakers to grasp the structure of the universe. The second tradition insisted that ideas matched an objective reality; the failure of languages to have signs to represent those ideas, therefore, reflected the quality of the minds of the speakers. Eighteenth-century historians of language added complexity to these two views by historicizing them. According to most eighteenth-century historians of language, languages were systems to analyze ideas, and gram-

Amerindian Sources in Eighteenth-Century European Historiography

In the course of the eighteenth century, European authors interested in the American past contributed to the development of conjectural histories of writing and the mind. In this section, I trace how these views converged to cast doubt on the credibility of Amerindian sources.

As early as 1688, European editors began to question the reliability of indigenous sources and testimonies. The English translator of Garcilaso's *Comentarios reales*, Sir Paul Rycaut (1628–1700), a Fellow of the Royal Society, argued that Garcilaso's history of the origins of the Incas under Manco Capac was in all probability a fable, "divers truths mixed with abundance of fictions and foolish inventions." Rycaut drew a clear connection between literacy and the trustworthiness of historical traditions. "How then can be expected that these illiterate creatures," he argued, "should be able to give an account of their extraction of matters which passed in those [obscure] ages of which the learned parts of the world acknowledge their ignorance and confess themselves to be in the dark [even though they had writing]?" Lack of writing had led Peruvians to be "so simple and credulous" that they actually believed they came from lakes, mountains, fowls, and even the sun, as their foundation myths maintained.¹⁷²

Writing and literacy became a central concern both for those who admired and for those who disliked Garcilaso's history. For Jean-Frédéric Bernard, the editor of the 1737 French translation of *Comentarios reales*, Garcilaso could have done an even more convincing job of presenting the Inca state as a great classical society if the Incas had developed writing. Quipus were not truly writing, in his opinion, so the history of the great capital of the Incas, Cuzco, had been lost forever. Unlike Rome, Cuzco had not kept records of its own greatness: "[With] methods so weak [as songs and quipus], it has only been possible to have but a superficial knowledge [*entendre fort loin*] of the history of its monarchy." "I dare say," Bernard concluded, "that [had the Incas had historical records] this New World could have challenged that of the ancients."¹⁷³ The 1744 French editor of Garcilaso did not, however, think so highly of the Incas, and he reorganized the entire structure of the *Comentarios reales* on the grounds that Garcilaso had completely lacked method and system. The chaotic confusion of the work lay in the nature of the recordkeeping devices used by Garcilaso. "Having been able to learn the history of his ancestors only by means of tradition, for [his ancestors] did not have writing, [Garcilaso] could not help but to write a most

confusing work, so garbled that it is hardly possible to follow the facts."¹⁷⁴ The editor also argued that quipus were the reason the Inca had limited knowledge of the abstract sciences, including geometry and astronomy, for science was based on the transmission of accumulated insights over time. The Incas, the editor argued, knew enough to keep track of solstices and important agricultural dates, but not enough to understand the cause of eclipses. Illiteracy itself was the reason why the Incas had failed to develop abstract knowledge.¹⁷⁵

Skepticism about Amerindian scripts as reliable means of storing information increased. Amerindians were incapable of keeping historical records, the abbé Raynal asserted. Quipus, he argued in 1770, were merely systems of numerical calculations. Uncertainty in the transmission of information was characteristic of Amerindian systems of writing, and in such uncertainty lay the nature of the Amerindian systems of government. "Among such [illiterate] peoples, the witness that accuses, the law that condemns, the judgment that decides are all as uncertain as the memory of men, as vague as their ideas, as arbitrary as their inclinations. Even the most prudent laws [when not written down] undergo insensible changes as they lack precision and stability."¹⁷⁶ Illiteracy and untrustworthiness, Raynal maintained, were at the root of the Amerindian penchant for political tyranny.

Jean-Benoît Schérer, the German diplomat who in 1777 furiously denounced de Pauw for calling into question the credibility of classical sources on Egypt and of Jesuit testimonies on China, was less adamant about defending the reliability of quipus. Schérer suggested that Garcilaso's history was unreliable because it was based on information drawn from oral traditions. "Quipus," Schérer argued, "[are not really writing systems], and they therefore can never transmit to posterity the history of a country. Garcilaso, who descended in direct line from the Incas, and who for the first time introduced us to the knots of different colors used [in Peru], did not record the history of his country but [only] the oral traditions of his ancestors."¹⁷⁷

It is curious that precisely when Amerindian scripts were losing credibility as systems capable of transmitting reliable information, the first and last representation of quipus as more than devices used to store and manipulate numerical data appeared in Europe. In 1750, Raimondo di Sangro (1710–1771), prince of Sansevero, published his *Lettera apologetica*, a book penned to defend the plausibility of Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747), a novel about the letters allegedly written in quipus by an Inca princess, Zilia. In the novel, Zilia, after having been taken prisoner by the Spaniards and later ransomed by the French, writes first in quipus and later

in alphabetical script to her beloved Aza, an Inca prince.¹⁷⁵ Sansevero's "defense" of Craffigny's novel consisted of a treatise about quipus that was much more than just an attempt to understand the ways quipus stored information. As a critic of Sansevero later suggested, the prince had written as a free-thinker seeking to undermine the authority of the Bible by toying with ideas such as the eternity of the world and by backing the credibility of alternative chronologies. Be that as it may, Sansevero was a committed Neoplatonist who read quipus as though they were Egyptian hieroglyphs, that is, as allegorical figures that stored deep symbolic meanings.

Drawing on a manuscript made available by a Jesuit who had recently arrived from Chile, Sansevero concluded that there were two kinds of quipus. One type, well known to Europeans, stored numbers by means of knots representing decimal positions (Fig. 2-7); the second type had been kept secret.¹⁷⁹ This second system was syllabic and based on the woven representation of forty master words (*parole maestre*). Sentences were written (woven in this case) by the permutations of the different syllables of forty master words (see Plates 1 and 2). Knots underneath a figure signified the position of the syllable in the master word (three knots = third syllable). The Neoplatonic aspect of the system that Sansevero obtained from the Jesuit lay in the choice of figures. The master word "Pachacamac" (Pa-cha-ca-mac), God, creator of the Universe, for example, was represented as a yellow circle, signifying the eternity and luminosity of the deity. The yellow circle, in turn, had an inner circle whose four colored quarters each represented one of the four elements: red (fire), blue (air), green (water), and black (earth).¹⁸⁰ The Neoplatonic reverberations of an image that identified God with the sun were obvious. The system also implied that the Incas had been privy, not only to monotheism, but also to a sophisticated view of the cosmos in which four elements were responsible for change, generation, and corruption in the sublunary sphere. The Neoplatonic content of the symbolic representations of the master words was even more obvious in the case of the figure used to signify the master word "Viracocha" (Vi-ra-co-cha), the human incarnation of Pachacamac. Viracocha was a pink knot followed by Pachacamac's circle. The pink knot stood for a human figure and the circle for Viracocha's divinity. The striking thing about this quipu is that it implied that the Inca had already prefigured Christ.¹⁸¹ The remaining thirty-eight master words and their corresponding quipus reinforced the sense that the Inca were, like Kircher's Egyptians, a very pious and advanced civilization, which had mastered the deepest religious mysteries.

Sansevero's system, which had originally been concocted in the Andes in

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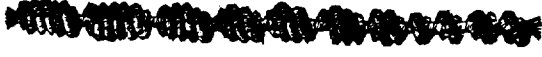


FIGURE 2-7. Representation of the number 21,314 in a quipu according to Raimondo di Sangro, prince of Sansevero. Each turn of a knot represents a decimal position; thus, five turns stand for the tens of thousands, four for the thousands, three for the hundreds, two for the tens, and one for single units. The quipu in the illustration contains two knots of five turns, one of four, three of three, one of two, and four of one: 21,314. The system allows for complex mathematical calculations; combined with colors, it is also useful for keeping elaborate records and classifications. From Sansevero, *Lettera apologetica* (Naples, 1750). Courtesy of the Edward Auer Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

the first half of the seventeenth century by Italian and mestizo Jesuit followers of Kircher, was greeted apparently with absolute silence. After all, Sansevero had gone against all the learned consensus of his age.¹⁸² He was denounced by inquisitors in Rome for seeking to undermine the authority of the Bible by bolstering the authority of nonalphabetical scripts.¹⁸³ His views of quipus as woven versions of Egyptian hieroglyphs codifying Neoplatonic verities undermined the views of philologists who insisted that both written and spoken languages developed through stages. For the leading conjectural

historians of the time, Inca quipus did not represent syllabic scripts, let alone religious mysteries, but primitive stages in the development of the mind.

The hostile reception of Sansevero's views speaks volumes about a dominant intellectual culture unwilling to reformulate teleological views of the history of writing and the mind. It could well have also been part of a growing scholarly discontent with Spanish glosses of indigenous sources. Sansevero insisted that he had obtained the manuscript from a Jesuit who had lived in Spanish America (Sansevero did not mention that the original manuscript was ciphered), and it is plausible that a scholarly community wary of the value of Spanish documents regarded these views as delusional ramblings.

There is evidence that by the 1760s, Spanish glosses to indigenous documents had become the prime target of skeptical scholars. Once the glosses became suspect, the document itself was declared useless, for scholars assumed that the original indigenous interpretations had forever been lost. Cornelius de Pauw typifies this trend. His *Recherches philologiques sur les Américains* (1768–69) was not a typical eighteenth-century history of Amerindians written to shed light on the obscure and fabulous ages of Europe. Instead, he set out to prove that peoples who lived under extreme climatic conditions were degenerate beings. De Pauw was convinced that Laplanders, African blacks, and Native Americans lived in regions of the world that had caused dramatic changes in their bodies and souls, making them unfit for civilization.¹⁸⁴

De Pauw's dislike for developmental views of history made him hesitant to adapt Warburton's dominant views of the history of writing. He called to task those "savants who have pretended" that scripts unfold from picture writing to alphabets. In the hypothetical case that the Incas and Mexicans had progressed in their development, however, their scripts would have taken different paths. Quipus, he argued, like any other primitive system made of conventional signs, would have become alphabets, whereas Mexican "paintings," mere pictorial representations of objects, would have turned into Egyptian-style hieroglyphs. Painting-writing and signs of convention, De Pauw concluded, evolved differently. To highlight his criticism of Warburton's theories, De Pauw insisted that ancient Egyptians had obtained their epistolary script (alphabet) from foreigners and not through the slow modification of hieroglyphs.¹⁸⁵

For all his disagreements with Warburton, however, de Pauw was quick to link the history of writing with statements about the development of mental faculties. For example, he firmly linked quipus with the "primitive" mental

stages of peoples who lacked memory. Convinced that the American climate had wiped out the will, foresight, and memory of the natives, de Pauw contended that quipus had been designed to help the natives "to remember in the afternoon what they did in the morning."¹⁸⁶ Quipus were thus mere mnemonic devices to assist peoples who had barely acquired memory. Mesoamerican systems of writing were also indicative of the poor mental faculties of Amerindians: "Mexicans had made almost no progress in the art by means of which the memory of things past and historical events are perpetuated."¹⁸⁷ Their manuscripts spoke of the poverty of their taste, of their inability to draw mimetically accurate representations of the world, and of their ignorance of perspective and chiaroscuro.

The fact that Inca quipus and Mesoamerican pictograms and logograms were representative of peoples with inferior mental qualities made them unreliable as recordkeeping devices. According to de Pauw, Garcilaso had built his entire history of the Incas on the oral testimony of his uncle, who had in turn read it from quipus. Building on such shaky ground, Garcilaso had traced the history of the twelve Inca rulers back to the year 1131 C.E. If the Romans, who knew how to read and write before Romulus and Numa, had left posterity a fabulous history of their first five centuries, how could one believe that the oral testimonies of Garcilaso's uncle were any more credible? Echoing the views of the 1744 editor of Garcilaso's work, de Pauw maintained that Garcilaso's history had turned out to be "a work undigested, pitiful, [and] fundamentally ill reasoned," largely because of the Incas' lack of writing.¹⁸⁸ From such speculations, it followed that the history of Peru before the arrival of the Europeans "does not contain any confirmed fact . . . nor does it have any incontestable truth."¹⁸⁹

The case of the history of Mexico before the European arrival was slightly more complicated. De Pauw blamed the alleged obscurity surrounding the history of Mesoamerica on the Spaniards. Their glosses of indigenous sources such as the Mendoza collection were pitiful: "I do not advise anybody to rely on those [interpretations]."¹⁹⁰ Spanish interpreters insisted that the historical part of the paintings represented the annals of nine Mexica monarchs. However, the paintings in isolation, de Pauw argued, could just as well represent the deeds of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin and his eight concubines. De Pauw found the same problem with the interpretation of dates in indigenous documents and highlighted the inconsistencies of the interpretations of calendars and dates of migrations offered by Spaniards. The interpretations were flawed because the Spaniards had failed to realize the internal consistency of the indigenous claims. How could they have accepted that the natives had

accurate calendars when the natives were ignorant of almost everything else.¹⁹¹

The history of European interpretation of the dynastic genealogies of the Mixtec in the Vienna Codex is another telling example of how the questioned authority of the Spanish glosses was partially responsible for the gradual loss of credibility of the Amerindian documents. In 1679, Peter Lambeck (1628–1680), curator of the library of Emperor Leopold I, published a catalogue of the holdings that included seven Persian manuscripts and *unius incomparabilis Mexicani, literis picti Hieroglyphicis coloratis*.¹⁹² Lambeck promised to study this “priceless, incomparable” rare codex in more detail after reading what authors such as Ole Worm (1588–1654) and Georg Horn (1620–1670) had written on the subject of Mexican scripts, and after reading and studying Purchas’s edition of the Codex Mendoza, with its accompanying Spanish glosses,¹⁹³ but he died before making good on this. In 1769, the new curator of the Imperial Library, Adam František Kollár (1718–1783) did read Purchas and discovered that the two codices were “leagues apart” (for one thing, they used two different iconographic conventions and very different sets of pictograms and logograms, one Mexica, the other Mixtec). Purchas’s edition of the Codex Mendoza was, moreover, at several removes from the indigenous original. In fact, it was an English translation of Spanish glosses, which, in turn, were allegedly a translation of a Nahuatl commentary. “This process of sequential translation was not only cumbersome but also unreliable. Kollár did not offer any interpretation of the Vienna Codex, which he refused to study, on the grounds that he, unlike Lambeck, was “not wise enough [to read it]” and that he had “not seen the Muses of Mexico even in a dream.”¹⁹⁴

Unlike Kollár, William Robertson was not shy about interpreting the Vienna Codex in his 1777 *History of America* (Fig. 2.8). After a brief iconographical analysis using Purchas’s edition of the Codex Mendoza and the recent edition in Mexico of a slightly different sixteenth-century set of Aztec tributary records, *Matrícula de tributos*, published in 1770 by the cardinal of New Spain, Francisco Antonio de Lorenzana, Robertson concluded that the Vienna Codex was also a tribute roll.¹⁹⁵ Robertson’s profound misunderstanding of Mixtec dynastic genealogy was not merely the result of a scholarship that had not yet developed the intellectual resources necessary to interpret indigenous documents. It originated rather in Robertson’s facile and superficial assumptions about the indigenous documents he encountered, stemming from his lack of interest in the information in the documents in the first place.

It would be difficult to claim that Robertson was uninterested in indige-

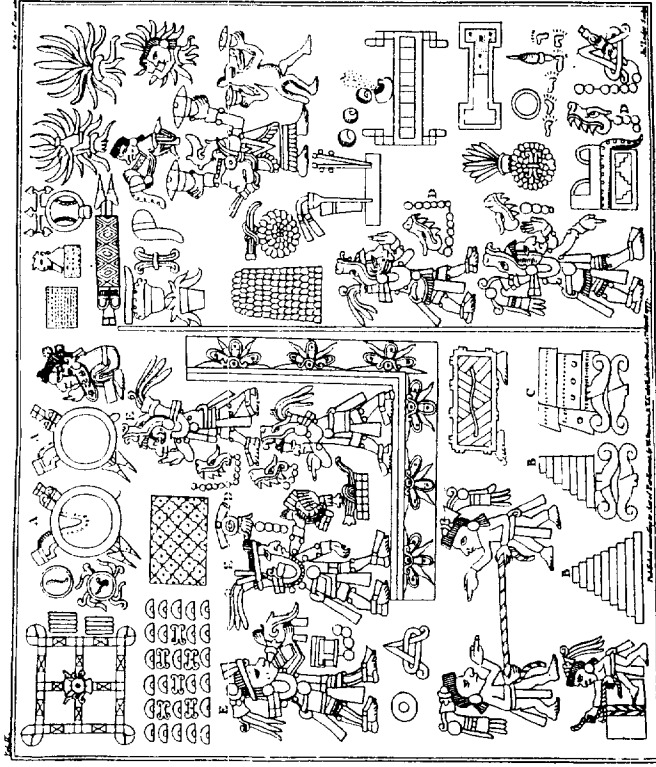


FIGURE 2.8. Illustrations that William Robertson took at random from the Vienna Codex. Robertson concluded that figures A and C were shields and bales of mantles similar to those represented in Francisco Antonio de Lorenzana’s edition of the *Matrícula de tributos* and in Samuel Purchas’s edition of the Codex Mendoza. Robertson read figure D as numerical signs representing quantities in the tribute roll. It is in fact a calendrical sign that in the original codex stands either as a date or as the name of a ruler. From William Robertson, *The History of America* (London, 1777).

nous sources. He made widely available both illustrations and information about the Vienna Codex that had been available only to circles of antiquarians acquainted with the publications by Lambeck and Kollár. Robertson also introduced the European public for the first time to the Codex Borbonicus, a ritual divinatory-calendar at that time in the library of the Escorial but removed to Paris in 1826.¹⁹⁶ For all his zeal at identifying new Amerindian sources, however, Robertson’s interest in Mesoamerican codices resembled Barthélemy’s rather than Torquemada’s. Robertson was interested in using the documents to write a philosophical history of the mind, not to inquire into the natives’ own version of their past.

The first three books of the *History of America* retrace the voyages of “dis-

covery,” to show the technical superiority of the Moderns over the simple navigational skills of the Ancients and to demonstrate the civilizing role of commerce, only possible among highly advanced sea-faring societies. Book 4 is entirely devoted to the “rude” natives of America. Robertson, who thought that the works of the Ancients were not good guides for interpreting Americans, proposed a new genre: a natural history of the human mind. “In order to complete the history of the human mind and attain a perfect knowledge of its nature and operations,” he argued, “we must contemplate man in all those various situations wherein he has been placed. We must follow him in his progress through the different stages of society . . . we must observe, at each period, how the faculties of his understanding unfold.”¹⁹⁷ In typical eighteenth-century fashion, his natural history of the mind assumed that the minds of “savages” were empty, without speculative reasoning, foresight, and will.¹⁹⁸ Like Rousseau, he offered the story about the forgetful Carib who sold his hammock in the morning only to realize at night that he needed it back to sleep.¹⁹⁹ Such minds were, of course, untrustworthy. Savages who claimed to be very old were not to be believed, since, “most of them are unacquainted with the art of numbering, and all of them are forgetful of what is past, as they are improvident of what is to come.”²⁰⁰

Robertson considered, however, that “man cannot continue long in this state of feeble and informed infancy . . . the powers of his nature, as well as the necessity of his condition, urge him to fulfill his destiny.”²⁰¹ Thus he went on to classify the savages in a hierarchy of moral and political progress. The peoples of the Isthmus, Brazil, and the Caribbean were placed at the bottom, whereas the more independent and courageous North Americans and Chileans, inhabitants of more temperate regions, were given a higher standing.²⁰² Mexicans and Peruvians were no “savages”; they belonged in a different category. Hence, Robertson used a separate book to study them: In book 7, Robertson set out to describe the “positive” and “negative” traits of Aztecs and Incas, as on a balance sheet. He was torn, so he said, between those things that made Incas and Aztecs comparable to “highly polished peoples” and the other practices that made them resemble savages. In a typical display of epistemological “moderation,” he argued that readers themselves should decide where to locate Peruvians and Mexicans on the scale of development.²⁰³ He, to be sure, had already reached conclusions of his own: “In their highest state of improvement [the] power [of Mexicans and Peruvians] was so limited, and their operations [of their minds] so feeble, that they can hardly be considered as having advanced beyond the infancy of civil life.”²⁰⁴

This conclusion helps us navigate through Robertson’s seemingly contra-

dictory usage of Mexico and Inca documents. In a superficial reading of the *History of America*, one might get the impression that Robertson thought that the codices might yield useful historical information. In a long digression on the possible Asiatic origin of the Americans via the Bering Strait, for example, he, like Torquemada, argued that annals of the Mexica indicated that they came from the north across a strait. “This account of the population [coming via the Bering Strait],” Robertson argued, “coincides with the traditions of the Mexicans concerning their own origin, which imperfect as they are, were preserved with more accuracy, and merit greater credit, than those of any people in the New World.”²⁰⁵ Moreover, he deplored the loss of almost all codices at the hands of superstitious Spaniards, forcing historians to rely on untrustworthy oral traditions.²⁰⁶ Conceding that Mexican “picture-writing” might have included some “signs of convention” to represent abstract ideas, Robertson thought that Aztec glyphs were on their way to becoming a true alphabet.²⁰⁷

But all these statements are deeply misleading, for Robertson thought little of the codices as historical documents. Besides using the Aztec annals to support the thesis of the Asiatic origins of the Americans, Robertson employed Mexica manuscripts only once throughout the four volumes of his history, and only to dismiss as “exaggerated” accounts of the great antiquity of the Nahuatl.²⁰⁸ He thought, in fact, that “the Mexican paintings, which are supposed to have served as annals of their empire, are few in number, and of ambiguous meaning.”²⁰⁹ Robertson systematically excluded the Amerindian version of the Conquest.²¹⁰ His description of the massacre of Panuco, for example, was entirely based on Cortés’s own letters, although he openly flaunted his knowledge of an alternative native account recorded by the Franciscan Torquemada.²¹¹ Robertson had only scorn for authors like Torquemada and Clavijero who had followed native sources to the letter. He found them to be “whimsical credulous” men with a “propensity for the marvelous” and their works “improbable narratives and fanciful conjectures.”²¹² Robertson was absolutely convinced that Mexica writing was after all “little more than a species of picture-writing, so far improved as to mark their superiority over the savage tribes of America; but still so defective, as to prove that they had not proceeded far beyond the first stage in that progress which must be completed before any people can be ranked among the polished nations.”²¹³ In less than two pages, he demonstrated that Inca quipus were wrong, for they had recorded absurd, garbled chronologies and “contributed little towards preserving the memory of ancient events and institutions.”²¹⁴

Again, the difficulties that Robertson had believing the Mexica and Incas

restoring the credibility of indigenous sources. Yet a closer reading of Humboldt's *Vues des cordillères* reveals that he was also a conjectural historian of the mind. Humboldt's views, therefore, are a good point at which to end this chapter, for they allow us to see two different views of the value of indigenous sources, coexisting in a single capacious mind.

Based on the research of antiquarians whom he had encountered on his trip to Mexico and the writings of exiled Jesuits in Italy, Humboldt rejected Robertson's conclusions about the history of Mexico. Robertson's *History of America*, Humboldt argued, was "admirable for the sagacity with which it has been compiled, but too much abridged in the part relating to the Toltec and Aztecs." To make up for Robertson's silence, Humboldt included dynastic genealogies from the Toltec to the Mexica.²¹⁷ Taking his cues from Torquemada, Humboldt concluded that the history of the Central Valley of Mexico could be documented all the way back to the seventh century C.E., although he also concluded that the annals of the Toltec were as "uncertain as those of the Pelagi and the Asonian."²¹⁸ Humboldt blamed the uncertainty, in part, on the fact that the Toltec sources were not original, but versions kept by later invaders who came to replace the Toltec as the dominant power of central Mexico.²¹⁹

Although he did not take its chronology seriously, Humboldt deduced from a plate in the *Codex Rios* depicting the ages of the world according to Aztec tradition (Fig. 2.9) that the first age, when the people were giants, had lasted 5,206 years and ended in famine; the second had lasted 4,804 years and ended in fire, with all humans being transformed into birds; the third had lasted 4,010 years and had ended in hurricanes, with humans becoming apes; and the fourth had lasted 4,008 years, terminating in floods, with all people becoming fishes. According to Humboldt this Aztec chronology derived from a Central Asian myth, from which the Hindus had also taken their history.²²⁰ As for the 18,028 years recorded in the Mexica document, Humboldt maintained, drawing on the writings of the seventeenth-century Texcocan noble Alva Ixtlixochitl, that they were not annual but monthly cycles, corresponding therefore to only a few hundreds of years. Humboldt cited the case of Hindu chronologies to justify his interpretation, for according to scholars, the alleged four million "years" of the Hindu represented only 12,000 real years.²²¹ For all his shortening of Nahua mythical chronologies to a mere fourteen hundred years, however, Humboldt did believe that the Mexica had kept complete and accurate records, "[with] the greatest order and [revealing] an astonishing minuteness in the recital of events," since at least 1091 C.E., the year they had left their northern home of Aztlan.²²²

stemmed from the ideas he had about the nature of their minds. He chose to follow Warburton's account of the evolution of writing, because the Anglican bishop, "with much erudition and greater ingenuity," had traced through scripts "the successive steps by which the human mind advanced." "He is the first," Robertson declared, "who formed a rational and consistent theory concerning the various modes of writing practices by nations, according to the various degrees of their improvements."²¹⁵ The historicization of faculty-psychology led him to believe that the Mexica had not acquired enough fore-sight. Accounts that claimed that Tenochtitlan had had some 200,000 inhabitants and that the Mexica had resisted the siege of the city for three months were clearly exaggerations. Robertson thought that the provisions required to feed all those people during the siege were so great that it would have demanded "much foresight and arrangement to collect" them. The accounts were clearly wrong, because the Mexica were "naturally so improvident, and so incapable of executing a complicated plan, as the most improved Americans [savages]."²¹⁶

The end result of these views is that Robertson set the clock of the historiography on Mesoamerica back to the period before Torquemada. Paying no attention whatsoever to the scholarship of the early-seventeenth-century Franciscan, who had lengthened the history of central Mexico to allow for numerous cycles of civilization, Robertson collapsed the history of the region and studied only the deeds of the Mexica (Aztecs). Moreover, Robertson's analysis was structural not diachronic; he described the institutions of the Mexica but had little to say about their migrations and dynastic genealogies. As shown in Chapter 1, Robertson included the Mexica not because he was interested in their history but because he needed them to shed light on Europe's own obscure ages.

Whereas de Pauw, Barthélemy, and Robertson came to value native records as evidence of the development of the human mind, rather than for the sake of the historical information they provided, Alexander von Humboldt can scarcely be said to have participated in this epistemological reorientation. Reviewers, particularly in England, denounced Humboldt for according too much authority to indigenous sources, for creditously believing Spanish glosses, and for drawing unwarranted conclusions from the glosses and sources. From the complaints of the reviewers, it would seem that Humboldt's approach barked back to Renaissance paradigms. This was in fact the case. Unlike previous eighteenth-century European historians of the New World, Humboldt was operating in the wake of a massive Spanish American historiographical reaction that was to some extent instrumental in

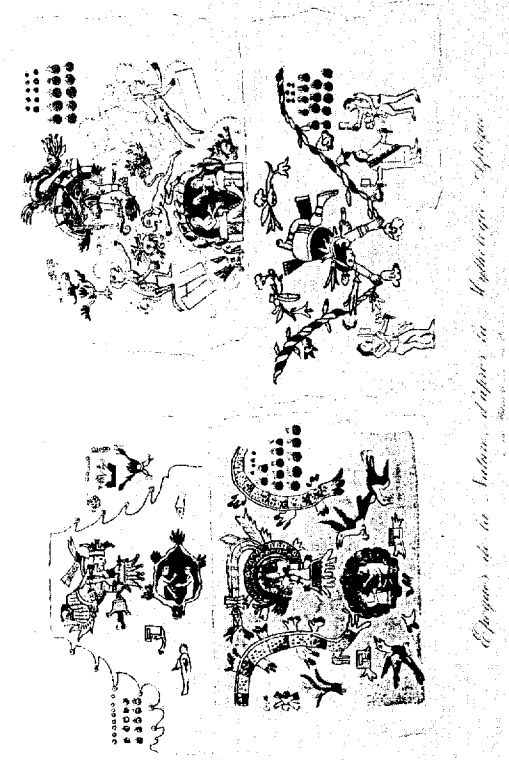


FIGURE 2.9. Cycles of history or “solar ages” according to Mexica chronology. The document, drawn under Spanish patronage, should be read from bottom up and from right to left. The right order and even the number of the ages (either four or five) created heated controversy among colonial scholars. From Alexander von Humboldt, *Vues des cordilleres* (Paris, 1810). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, R.I.

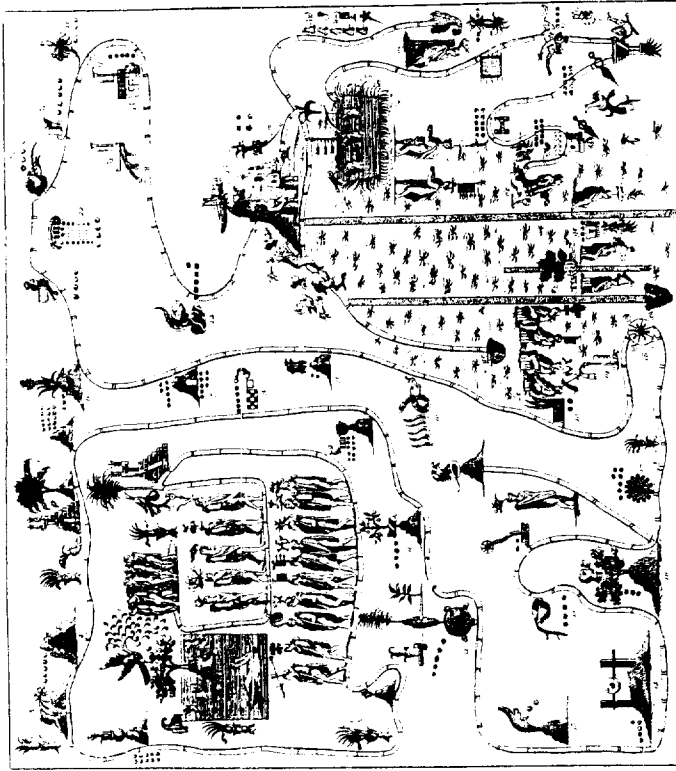
Humboldt also adduced in evidence a “hieroglyphical history of the Aztecs from the deluge to the foundation of the city of Mexico” published in 1699–1700 by Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri (1651–1725), an Italian world traveler, who had obtained it in Mexico from a local antiquarian, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. Robertson thought that Gemelli Careri’s “map” (Fig. 2.10) was a fake, fabricated by Spanish friars bent on proving the truth of the Bible by means of alternative non-European documentation. Humboldt dismissed this on the grounds that he had found many copies of the same map in Mexico, which, unlike Gemelli Careri’s, showed no evidence of European iconographic influences. Humboldt interpreted the map according to the glosses in Italian first offered by Gemelli Careri and concluded that it was a document that supported, not the historical narrative of the Bible, but the existence of a widespread common myth of origins. The map showed that, like the Hindus, Chinese, and Semites, the Mexica explained the existence of marine fossils on mountaintops through the fiction of a universal flood and saw their mythical ancestors as the survivors of this

flood (Coxco for the Mexica, Noah for the Semites).²²³ Although he took all these myths to be “childish fables,” Humboldt thought that the map accurately recorded the migrations of the Mexica since at least the year 1038 C.E. (a date he obtained from his careful reading of the late-eighteenth-century antiquarian Antonio de León y Gama [1735–1802]), contradicting his own earlier assertion that the Mexica had kept accurate records since the year 1091 C.E.²²⁴ Finally, Humboldt introduced his readers to an alternative version of the annals of the Mexican “empire” offered by the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (so called because it had once been in the possession of Archbishop Teller of Rheims), which he had found in the Royal Library in Paris.²²⁵

Humboldt had little to say on Inca history, largely because during his trip to the Andes, unlike in Mexico, he did not find local antiquarians from whose research to draw. The striking differences in the way Humboldt handled Peruvian and Mexican antiquities show the derivative nature of most of his work, a fact that has gone largely unnoticed. But be that as it may, the fact still remains that Humboldt’s *Vues* restored some of the depth of the Mexican past, which had recently been shortened and edited out of recognition.

Humboldt did not merely, however, make the research of Spanish American antiquarians in New Spain widely available to Europeans. In seeking to write a philosophical history of America, he used Amerindian sources to shed light on the natural history of the human mind through a conjectural history of writing not much different from those of Vico, Fréret, and Warburton. He found Mexica pictograms and logograms, “these hieroglyphical paintings which Robertson has so aptly denominated picture writing,” primitive, signifying the initial unfolding of the Amerindians’ mental faculties.²²⁶ Echoing Warburton, Humboldt argued that figurative writing like that of Mexico characterized all primitive peoples.²²⁷ All reports that suggested that Amerindians could have developed alphabets, he dismissed as unreliable.²²⁸

But the Mexica had not only used pictograms but logograms and phonograms as well. For Humboldt this was evidence that the peoples of central Mexico were advancing teleologically toward the discovery of the alphabet. Such developmental history, not surprisingly, allowed Humboldt to offer some speculations on social psychology. The peoples of central Mexico, he concluded, had not developed alphabets because they were changeless orientals, “[adhering] to their manners and customs with the same invincible obstinacy as the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Hinds.”²²⁹ Humboldt’s willingness to embrace romantic stereotypes of Asia and apply them to Mexico was contradictory, because he himself argued some hundred pages later that



Histoire hieroglyphique des Aztèques,
plans de l'origine jusqu'à la fondation de la ville de Mexico

FIGURE 2.10. Pictorial history of Mexica migrations from Aztlan to the founding of the city of Tenochtitlan, known as the Mapa Sigüenza, first made public in Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri's *Giro del Mondo* (1699-1700). The dots along the route represent 52-year cycles. According to the glosses, the Mexica descended from Coxcox, a survivor of a flood. Coxcox's fifteen mille descendants regain speech from a dove as they set out on their wanderings. This document exemplifies how Amerindian scripts and calendars were deployed to create detailed historical records. From Alexander von Humboldt, *Vues des cordillères* (Paris, 1810). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, R.I.

religion in Mexico had changed dramatically in the wake of the Aztec invasions, transforming the benign cults of past Amerindian civilizations into the gory practice of human sacrifice.²³⁰

In any event, Humboldt repeatedly drew lessons on social psychology from indigenous sources. When compared to Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mexica scripts, for example, “[reflected] on the progressive steps which the human

mind appears to have followed in the invention of graphic means fitted to express ideas; we see that the nations of America were very distant from that perfection which the Egyptians obtained.”²³¹ By the same token, Humboldt thought that Amerindian sources under Spanish patronage were “superior” to precolonial ones, because the former revealed a greater mimetic capacity to observe and represent reality, “the progress of the arts toward perfection.”²³² Humboldt sometimes was not derivative and advanced theories of his own. For example, he suggested that certain Nahua precolonial documents (representing the extension of communities and land tenure disputes) had originated as a result of the Nahua judicial system, which required communities to represent their cases before magistrates. Under European colonial rule, communities at first represented themselves before the Spanish magistrates and kept the genre of cadastral maps alive; later, however, lawyers arrived and began to serve as intermediaries between the state and the Amerindians and the drawing of maps ended.²³³

After dismissing Humboldt's entire historiographical approach to Amerindian antiquities, the British reviewer of *Vues* commended Humboldt for his efforts at collecting indigenous sources, because Amerindian documents were useful for completing the history of the development of the human mental faculties. From the beginning, Humboldt himself maintained that he had collected and studied documents and ruins because they were “interesting to the philosophical study of man.”²³⁴ “[The] investigations of monuments erected by half-civilized nations,” he insisted, “have another kind of interest which we may call psychological; presenting to us a picture of the uniform progress of the human mind.”²³⁵ Humboldt was no Torquemada. For him, the mere deciphering of “shapeless writing of the Mexicans” represented but “little gain” for the sciences. The most important aspect of the enterprise of collecting and studying native sources lay elsewhere. Through the “study of the symbolic and sacred characters,” Humboldt concluded, “philosophers, [when presented with] the uniform progress of the language of signs in parts of the earth the most remote from each other, [will gain] an image of the first unfolding of the faculties of man.”²³⁶