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The Legacy  
of Mesoamerica  
History and Culture  
of a Native American Civilization

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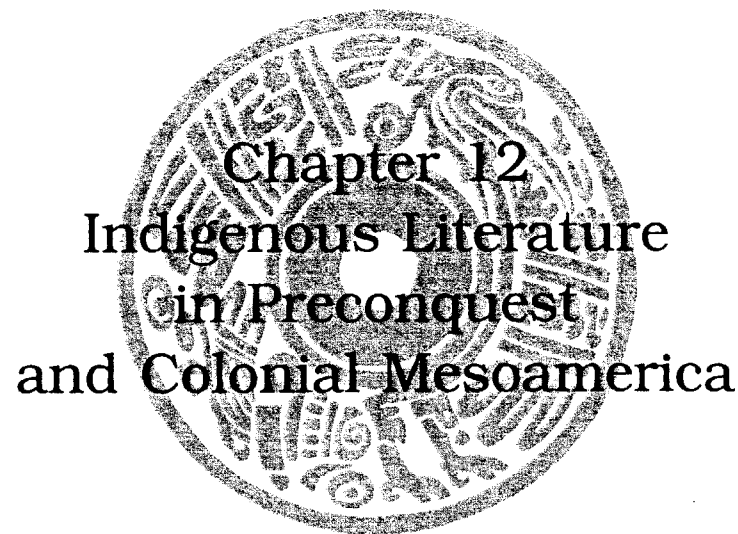
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## SUGGESTED READINGS

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## PRECOLUMBIAN LITERATURE

## Characteristics of Native Literature

Verbal art in preconquest Mesoamerica was predominantly an art of the spoken word, an art of oratory and of song. When systems of writing were invented, they were rarely if ever used to produce word-for-word transcriptions of speech, such that the reader would repeat the exact words of the writer. Rather, the written text provided a kind of model or key—widely varying in its degree of detail and specificity—that the speaker interpreted orally. The precise words chosen to express the text's meaning could vary among different readers or from one reading to the next. However, particularly in the case of very sacred texts, a particular wording that was considered the true or original one could be memorized and passed along word for word. But always the written form was intended to be the basis for an oral performance: There were no texts whose principal function was to be contemplated in silence and solitude.

When we look at literature from other civilizations, it is wise to keep in mind that what we think of as "reading" is a relatively recent phenomenon—given that writing was first invented around 7,000 years ago. It was not until the time of the Renaissance in Europe, when the invention of movable type made books much easier to produce, that the act of reading came to be separated from that of speaking aloud. Until then, books were normally read out loud. This explains

why the English word "lecture," which we now associate with an oral presentation, derives from the Latin word meaning "to read." To give a lecture originally meant to read aloud from a written text. You may know of some college professors who still follow this ancient custom.

To sit alone and read a text solely for the sake of one's personal entertainment or enlightenment is a very different act from the oral delivery of a text. The oral performer is directly engaged in a social transaction with at least one listener, and listeners may participate in various ways in the reading. As we examine native Mesoamerican literary forms, it is important to remember that these texts were (and are) always embedded in face-to-face social exchanges. There are no monologues or soliloquys, only dialogues.

This social dimension applies both to interpersonal communication and to communication with the gods. According to the *Popol Vuh*, a Maya creation myth, the gods created humanity in order to have beings who could speak to them articulately, name their names, and pray to them in lines of poetry. To be able to speak in a formal, polite, and aesthetically appealing manner was a social and ritual obligation. The sacred powers had to be addressed with beautiful prayers and invocations every time one interacted with them, even if one were just lighting the household fire in the morning or picking a few ears of corn from the garden. And social interactions were characterized by formalized dialogue. Even simple, everyday activities like greeting a neighbor involved the ritualized exchange of courteous pleasantries. Conversation was elevated to an art form.

Writing, too, was an art form, not just in respect to the spoken words being represented but also to the way they were represented. Speaking was a form of verbal art, and writing was a form of visual art. Mesoamerican writing systems were glyphic, or pictorial. Even when highly conventionalized, the individual glyphs were based on pictures of objects, plants, animals, people, and deities. In Mesoamerican languages, the same verbs refer to writing as to drawing, designing, painting, or embroidering. Much effort went into the execution of written texts: The scribe's goal was not speed, legibility, or efficiency, but rather ornateness and beauty.

We can compare Mesoamerican writing with the medieval European art of illuminating manuscripts, with Chinese calligraphy, or with the beautifully rendered texts from the Koran produced by Islamic artists. But the overlap between word and picture was even greater in Mesoamerica (see Chapter 11). Pictures were meant to be read, to be interpreted through an oral performance. Conventionalized symbols combined with more directly pictorial representations not simply on the same page but in the same image. Even in Maya writing, the most sophisticated Mesoamerican writing system, written texts were very often accompanied by pictures that conveyed some of the same information. The pictures could include glyphs, acting like labels, and the glyphic captions could incorporate small versions of parts of the accompanying picture.

The ability to read such texts was a highly specialized form of knowledge. The writing was intentionally cryptic, full of hidden meanings. It was never immediately obvious how the pictures should be interpreted. This left much space for

different interpretations to be made, depending on the reader's goals in the immediate context. In Nahuatl, the verb for "read," *pohua*, also refers to divination, or the discovery of hidden knowledge through arts of magic—as in interpreting omens or telling fortunes. To conjure a meaning out of a pictorial text demanded similarly esoteric skills. Learning to read and write—to paint or carve the pictures and signs and to sing and speak the appropriate words—demanded years of formal training in special schools.

The Maya had phonetic symbols so close to true alphabetic writing that they could easily have written clear and unambiguous texts, readable with little training. But they chose instead to complicate matters by having many different glyphs that could represent the same sounds; by having many different versions of the same glyph; by using glyphs that could have multiple readings—phonetic, pictographic (standing for the thing represented), logographic (standing for a word), or ideographic (standing for a concept); and by mixing phonetic and non-phonetic readings in the same text. The scribes who controlled these skills were influential members of elite families.

Another crucial dimension of Mesoamerican literature is its instrumentality. By this we mean the belief that the reciting of a text could have a real effect on the world, like the casting of a spell. Words were instruments of power; to speak or sing of the world in a certain way could actually make it so. And how much more power might those words have if carved into stone! This assumption may seem naive or superstitious, but it may be equally naive to assume the opposite. Our perceptions of reality depend heavily on our customary modes of describing it; the things we are told over and over again as children form attitudes that last our whole lives. Sometimes a single speech can have an effect on history, changing the way significant numbers of people think and act: Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech are two examples from U.S. history.

What we can know about literature in Precolumbian Mesoamerica is limited in several ways. With the performers and audiences long dead, much of what we would like to know about social contexts and performance techniques is impossible to recover. The written texts that we have may not tell us the full story, or may have the potential to tell us several different versions of a story, such that we cannot know which interpretation might have been used and when. And these surviving written texts are only a tiny fraction of those that were produced.

Another limiting factor is our ability to read and interpret the texts that do survive. This is an area in which tremendous advances have been made in recent years, particularly with respect to the decipherment of the Maya writing system, which scholars once believed would never be decoded. Even when we know what words or concepts are represented by all of the signs, even when we know the names of all the deities and historical personages mentioned or depicted, we are still a far cry from the text's full meaning in its original context. Nevertheless, the texts have taught us a great deal about Precolumbian Mesoamerica.

In Mesoamerica's tropical environment, paper decays quickly if discarded or buried. A handful of texts painted on paper survive from the Postclassic period. The only texts that survive from more ancient times are those inscribed on more durable media: stone sculptures; ceramic vessels; bones; shells; and, though rarely, the walls of caves, tombs, and buildings. Our knowledge of these depends on archaeological discovery and restoration. Many text-bearing objects are looted from their sites and end up in private collections completely divorced from their original contexts. Often they are damaged in the process of removal and transport. Some scholars decline to work with looted materials for fear that their studies might add to the market value of the stolen objects and help to grant legitimacy to the business of looting and collecting.

The largest corpus of such inscriptions are those of the Classic Maya. Classic Maya texts deal primarily with historical information, particularly the genealogies and exploits of rulers. This concern with elite personages extended to the inscribing of their personal effects with messages like "this is Ruler So-and-so's chocolate cup." Such a text hardly constitutes a work of literature, but some Maya inscriptions include hundreds of glyphs. The Hieroglyphic Stairway at the ancient city of Copán, Honduras—the longest stone inscription in the Americas—has approximately 1,300 glyphs.

Texts such as this are historical narratives that set their human protagonists into grand cosmological schemes that span millions of years. The actions of actual Maya leaders are related in the texts to those of primordial deities and to the movements of the moon, stars, and planets. The rulers claim to be descended from deities and to share their birthdays. They assert that their deceased parents and other ancestors have themselves been deified. At the same time, actual historical events such as accession to the throne or the designation of an heir are recorded with precise historical dates. Such glorification of human rulers obviously functioned as political propaganda. But the texts also reveal ancient Maya views of the cosmos and the nature of their historical consciousness, which cast human history in mythological terms. One such text is shown in Figure 12.1.

Though texts produced in a variety of media were important throughout Mesoamerican history, in the following discussion we will focus on books and other documents.

### The Precolumbian Codices

The civilizations of Mesoamerica differed from the other native peoples of both North and South America in that only they invented writing systems and created books. The keeping of written records allows people to communicate with others across distances of space and time. It allows people to develop a sense of their own past, their position in regard to a chronologically structured history, which is unavailable to those who depend solely on the spoken word. As keepers of books, Mesoamericans had something in common with the Europeans who conquered them, something that both sides recognized.



**Figure 12.1** This Classic Maya relief sculpture, carved at the ancient city of Palenque in A.D. 722, shows the apotheosis, or transformation into a deity, of Kan-Xul, a ruler of Palenque. Kan-Xul is depicted dancing his way out of the underworld to join his mother and father in the heavens. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Washington, D. C.

This mutual recognition—and the distinctiveness of the two traditions—is well illustrated by an anecdote included in one of the first European books that told of Spanish experiences in America. Peter Martyr of Anghiera, who interviewed returning Spaniards and published their stories, collected the following account from a Spaniard named Corrales who, in Panama around 1514, had met a man from the Mesoamerican interior:

Corrales was reading. The native jumped, full of joy, and by means of an interpreter, exclaimed: How is this? You also have books and use painted signs to communicate with the absent? And saying this, he asked to see the book in the belief that he was about to see the writing he was familiar with, but he discovered it was different. (León-Portilla 1992:317)

The native person's utterance—"you also have books"—conveys his sense of his own culture as a literate one and the importance he placed on this fact. Both he and the Spaniard, unlike the native people of Panama among whom they found themselves, understood the nature and value of books.

Only fifteen books, or fragments of books, are known to survive from pre-conquest Mesoamerica. Most of these were taken to Europe soon after the Span-

ish invasion of Mesoamerica and preserved as curiosities. Eventually they found their way from private hands into libraries in England, France, Germany, Austria, and Italy.

These manuscripts are usually called codices (singular, codex). The term "codex" originally meant a manuscript with its pages sewn together on one side. But since the late nineteenth century, scholars of Mesoamerica have used this term to designate any pictorial (or combination written and pictorial) manuscript executed in an indigenous artistic style. Early colonial pictorial manuscripts are included in this designation. Each codex has a name derived from its location, discoverer or former owner, place of origin, or some other criterion.

The codices were constructed of paper made from the bark of a type of fig tree, or of deerhide. The paper or leather was coated on both sides with a layer of gesso or plaster of paris. This provided a smooth, white surface on which to paint. Each codex consisted of a single long, rectangular strip, made by attaching together numerous pieces of paper or hide. This strip, called a *tira*, was painted on both sides and then was either rolled up like a scroll or, more frequently, folded up accordion-style into a type of book known as a screenfold. A cover made of wood or leather protected the book.

In a screenfold book, the text is divided into a series of individual pages, each separated from its adjoining pages at the folds. The book may be unfolded at any point to reveal two adjoining pages. Typically, the text reads horizontally across two pages at once, either in successive rows going from left to right or in a meandering pattern. Other pages, either adjoining these two or lying at other places in the series, can also be unfolded, such that several pages—or even half of the book, one entire side of the *tira*—may be viewed at once. This is an advantage over the type of book you are now holding in your hands, in which only two pages at a time may be viewed. Also, the screenfold lies flat when unfolded and does not have to be held open. Screenfold-style books were once used in Europe and in China. They are still used today in Southeast Asia for Buddhist literature.

The fifteen preconquest codices divide into three groups based on their style and area of origin. Five of them comprise what is known as the Borgia Group, named after the largest and most beautifully executed member of the group, the *Codex Borgia*. These codices come from somewhere in central Mexico, probably to the south and east of the Mexico City area and very likely a Nahuatl-speaking region. They date to shortly before the Spanish invasion. All of them are screenfold books of ritual and divinatory character. Their content focuses on the 260-day ritual calendar, its use in prognostication, and the deities and religious rites associated with the different days (Figure 12.2). Other calendrical cycles are also represented, particularly the cycle of the planet Venus, which was identified with the deity Quetzalcoatl.

These books are guides for priests and diviners, specialists who had the knowledge needed to interpret the pictures, to generate a spoken narrative based upon the painted illustrations. Depending on the occasion, such a narrative might take the form of a myth telling the exploits of gods shown in the book, a

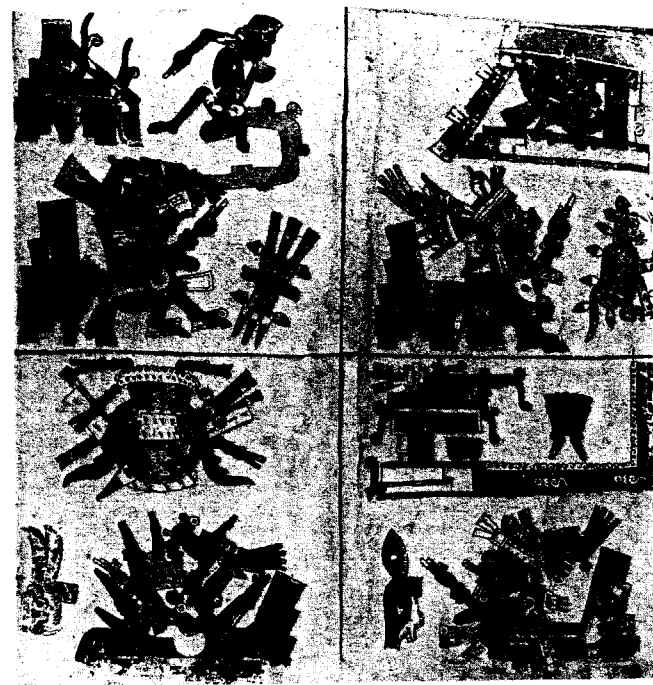


Figure 12.2 *Codex Borgia*. On this page of the screenfold book are depicted the deities associated with four of the twenty day-signs in the 260-day calendar. Reprinted with permission from *Codex Borgia*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1976, folio 12.

homily advising people on how they ought to behave, a prophecy telling of the future, instructions on how to perform a certain ritual, or some combination of these.

One of the codices in the group, the *Codex Laud*, includes a series of twenty-five pictures to be used for advising couples who planned to marry (Figure 12.3). Each picture shows a man and a woman, depicted with different features, poses, and gestures and accompanied by different objects. The diviner would add together the numerical signs of the prospective bride's and groom's birthdates in the 260-day ritual calendar. This would yield a number from 2 to 26. He or she would then consult the corresponding picture in this section of the codex, and make a pronouncement regarding the couple's future prospects. Given the ambiguous nature of the pictures, the diviner could make a wide variety of predictions combining the interpretation of the signs with knowledge of the two individuals and their families.

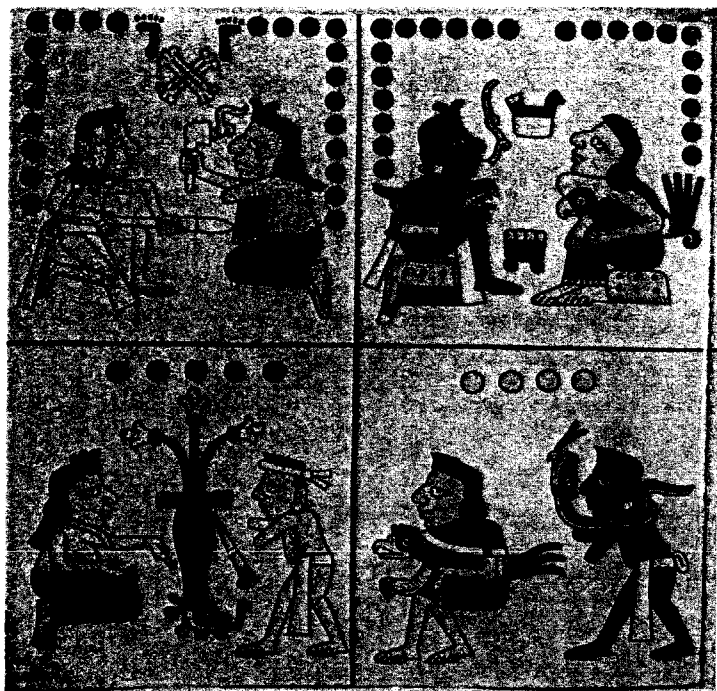


Figure 12.3 *Codex Laud*. A page from the marriage prognostication tables. Reprinted with permission from *Codex Laud*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1966, verso of folio 11.

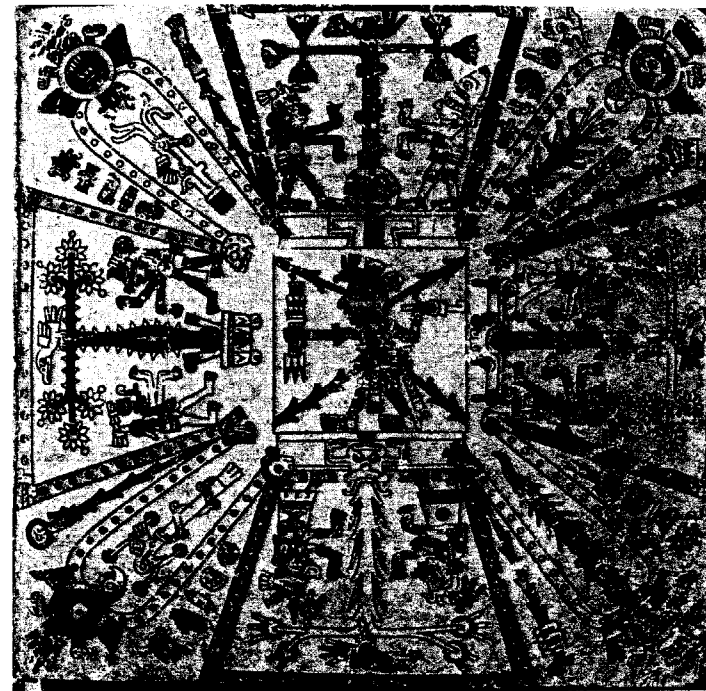
Another of the codices, the *Fejérváry-Mayer*, shows on its first page a map of the world, as Mesoamericans conceived of it (Figure 12.4). Space is divided among four quadrants representing the four directions. In the space at the middle stands the fire deity, who stands at the *axis mundi* or center of the cosmos—just as the hearth lay at the center of the Mesoamerican home. Each of the four directional quadrants contains a male-female pair of deities, one of the sacred world-trees that held up the sky, and a sacred bird representing the heavens. Additional trees stand at the intercardinal points. The day signs of the 260-day ritual calendar are arranged about the perimeter. Five of the twenty signs are associated with each of the four directions; 260 small circles represent the individual days in the count. In such a manner time and space, history and geography, were united in a single vision of creation.

A colonial Nahuatl text describing the role of the priests in preconquest society eloquently expresses the importance of such ritual and calendrical books:

It is said that they are sages wise in words. . .  
and they watch over, they read, they lay out  
the books, the black ink, the red ink.  
They are in charge of the writings.  
It is they who are in charge of us.  
They lead us, they tell us the way.  
They arrange in order how a year falls,  
how the count of the days follows its path,  
and they attend to each count of twenty days.  
Their charge, their business, their duty  
is the sacred words. (Sahagún 1986:140; trans. by L. Burkhardt)

The second group of surviving codices comes from the Mixtec civilization in what is now the Mexican state of Oaxaca. There are six of these, and they are known, after one of their number, as the Nuttall Group. Two of these manuscripts, the *Codex Nuttall* and the *Codex Vienna*, are believed to have been sent by

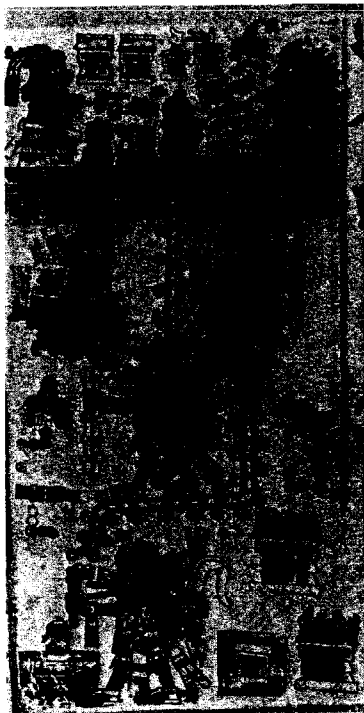
Figure 12.4 The frontispiece of the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer*, depicting the layout of the earth and the spatial distribution of the ritual calendar's 260 days. Reprinted with permission from *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1971.



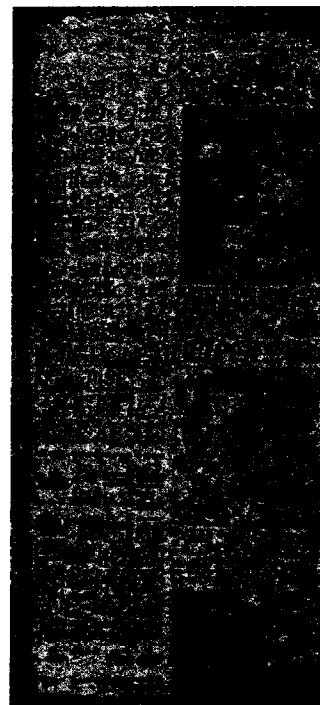
Hernán Cortés to Emperor Charles V. Two others, the *Codex Colombino* and the *Codex Becker I*, remained in Mixtec hands until they were used as evidence in legal suits over land rights, the *Colombino* in 1717 and the *Becker* in 1852.

These Mixtec codices are predominantly genealogical and historical in content. They tell the history of the ruling dynasties of particular towns and cities in the Mixtec region, including the exploits of various individual rulers, both male and female. These histories, however, include many elements of myth and ritual. The historical personages are shown engaging in religious rites and consulting priests and diviners. The mythological origins of the dynasties are also represented, with the lineage founders being, for example, born out of trees or out of the earth. An exception to this pattern is the *Codex Vienna*, which is genealogical on one side but on the other is devoted to mythology—particularly the story of the deity Nine Wind, the Mixtec version of the god that the Nahuatl called Quetzalcoatl (Figure 12.5).

The third group consists of four manuscripts that come from the Maya region. One of these, the *Codex Madrid*, consists of two parts that were formerly considered to be two separate manuscripts. Another, the *Codex Grolier*, emerged from a private collection in 1971. It had reportedly been discovered by looters in



**Figure 12.5** This scene from the *Codex Vienna* depicts part of the story of Nine Wind, the Mixtec equivalent of the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl. Reprinted with permission from *Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1963, folio 48c.



**Figure 12.6** *Codex Dresden*. Venus rises in the east as morning star. At bottom is the maize deity, sacrificial victim of the vengeful star: crop failure may be expected at this time. Reprinted with permission from *Codex Dresdensis*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1975, folio 48.

a dry cave. It is the only Precolumbian codex that was found in an archaeological context. Some scholars believe that it may be a forgery, but the prevailing opinion currently holds it to be authentic.

The Maya codices, like the Borgia Group, are ritual and divinatory in content. The most famous and complete one, the *Codex Dresden*, is thirty-nine leaves in length and is believed to date to the thirteenth century A.D. (Figure 12.6). It is particularly notable for its complex and very accurate astronomical calculations relating to lunar and solar eclipses and the cycles of Venus and Mars. The Maya were Mesoamerica's greatest mathematicians, discoverers of the concept of zero and of positional numeration. The purpose of their astronomical books was not, however, to represent natural phenomena in the manner of what we think of as "science." The astronomical bodies were deities whose actions had effects on human life; knowledge of their movements could help people to pattern their own activities after cosmic models. For example, the rising of the planet Venus as morning star was a time that throughout Mesoamerica was associated with wars and other disasters. Maya rulers would sometimes plan military attacks to coincide with this astronomical event, identifying themselves with the vengeful planet and seeking, at this time so ripe for destruction, to destroy their own enemies.



Thousands more of these Precolumbian books might have come down to us if not for the repressive policies of the Spanish colonial regime. Colonial authorities confiscated and burned many native books, thinking that the Devil's hand lay behind the strange pictures and unfamiliar writing. The religious rituals that went along with some of the texts were also suppressed. With no one performing these rituals, there was no incentive to replace the confiscated texts. Native people who wanted to keep their ancient books had to hide them. In these hiding places the books often rotted away or were eventually forgotten. In some places, though, books of divination survived along with the shamans who consulted them.

Our analysis of Precolumbian literature is greatly assisted by evidence from the Colonial period. Even while nearly all the older manuscripts were destroyed, some new texts were produced that retained preconquest style, at least to some degree. At the same time, European observers wrote about some of the texts and performances that they witnessed themselves or that native people described to them. And native people, once they had mastered the European alphabet, used alphabetic writing to record versions of some of their traditional oral and written texts.

## NATIVE LITERATURE OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD

### The Colonial Codices

Native people continued to create pictorial manuscripts during the Colonial period, especially through the sixteenth century. Four major changes occur in the tradition. First, ritual and divinatory codices cease to be produced except when commissioned by Europeans seeking ethnographic information on native religion—mainly for the purpose of recognizing and eradicating “idolatry.” Such manuscripts resemble their Precolumbian models but functioned in entirely different contexts. Second, alphabetic writing invades the pictorial text, first complementing the pictures and gradually coming to replace them. Third, the native artists adopt some conventions of European art, introducing perspective, landscape, and three-dimensionality into their paintings while still maintaining a representational style easily distinguished from that of European artists. Fourth, entire new genres of pictorial manuscript are created under European sponsorship.

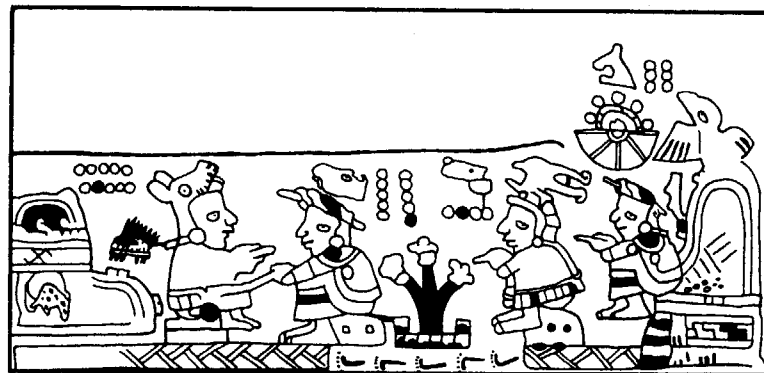
While religious manuscripts were largely suppressed—or at least driven underground—along with the native rituals and priesthood, there continued to be a need for other kinds of manuscripts that had long been in use. The Spanish colonial government tolerated and even encouraged the maintenance of these traditions, for a lot of information useful to Spaniards as well as natives was recorded and preserved in such texts. Spaniards considered native documents to be authentic and accurate representations of dynastic genealogies, imperial organization, and local history. Pictorial manuscripts were accepted as legal evidence by Spanish administrators in cases involving disputes over the inheritance of titles or property, the setting of tribute levels, or rights to land and water.

Probably the largest genre of these nonritual manuscripts that continued to be made by native people for their own use were historical accounts recording the history of a particular community. The account would deal with the origins of the group (often mythological); its migration to its current home; the founding of the community; and notable events in its subsequent history, such as the deaths and successions of rulers, wars, temple dedications, crop failures, comets, and earthquakes. Among the surviving Precolumbian manuscripts, the genealogical records from the Mixtec region fall into this historical category. Indeed, one of them, the *Codex Selden*, is partly preconquest in date but continued to be added to during the Colonial period, up to about 1560. A history of the royal lineage of the town of Añute, it covers a time span from the late eighth century A.D. to the year 1556 (Figure 12.7).

In much of Mesoamerica, these local historical chronicles took the form of a year count. A calendrical symbol representing each year would be painted along the margin. Next to or above this would be painted whatever significant event(s) happened to occur that year. For example, in central Mexican manuscripts, a portrait of a seated ruler accompanied by his name glyph represented the accession of a new king; a depiction of a corpse wrapped in white cloth labelled with the same name glyph was painted for the year that that ruler died. A military victory was shown as a burning temple labelled with the name of the defeated town. A comet was represented as a smoking star, an earthquake as a plot of ground with the calendrical symbol *ollin*, “movement,” above it. If nothing noteworthy happened in a particular year, the space would be left blank. Captions in alphabetic writing may explain or elaborate upon the information shown in pictures.

Perhaps what is most striking about these year-count annals, all surviving examples of which are postconquest, is the matter-of-fact way in which they deal with the transition to Spanish colonial rule. The count passes unbroken from pre-

Figure 12.7 One of the last events recorded in the *Codex Selden* is this wedding between a noble Mixtec lord and lady, which occurred in 1546. The groom's calendrical name is 10 Grass; the bride's is 10 Serpent. After *Codex Selden* 3135. Mexico City, Mexico: Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, 1964, folio 20.



conquest to colonial times. The only difference is that the noteworthy events begin to include the coming of Spanish soldiers, baptism by Catholic friars, deaths and successions of viceroys and bishops as well as local native governors, epidemics, the building of churches, and other previously unimagined occurrences. The scribes simply copied the earlier annals and appended recent events to the traditional account. This shows, perhaps as effectively as any other evidence, that for most native people the Spanish conquest did not represent an end to or even a transformation of their sense of their own identity and history (Figure 12.8).

Other kinds of pictorial manuscripts documented practical aspects of everyday life, such as the boundaries of a community's property, census lists, and records of tribute in goods and labor owed to native rulers or, in colonial times, to Spanish authorities. There is not much of a "literary" aspect to such manuscripts, but we must keep in mind that Mesoamericans could turn the most mundane events into elaborate performances. For instance, a property survey involved a formal tour of all of the boundary markers by the town's dignitaries. At each marker—a pile of stones or, in colonial times, often a cross—musical instruments would be played and speeches would be given, then the group would march in procession to the next. In the course of the tour, the town's history would be

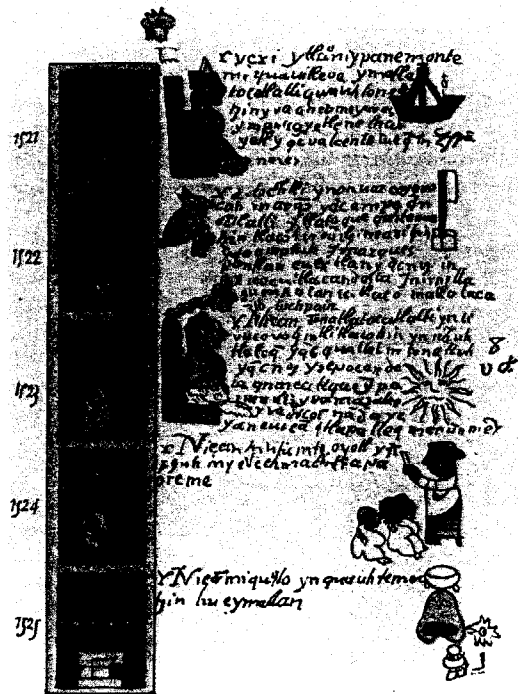


Figure 12.8 A page from the *Codex Aubin*, a year-count chronicling Mexico history from A.D. 1168 to 1608. This page records events of the years 1521 to 1525, including the succession of Cuauhtemoc as Mexica ruler, the occupation of the city by Spaniards, activities of Cortés, a solar eclipse, the coming of the Franciscan friars in 1524, and Cuauhtemoc's death. Reprinted with permission from Charles E. Dibble, ed., *Codex Aubin: Historia de la nación mexicana*. Madrid, Spain: J. Porrúa Turanzas, 1963. p. 87.

recalled and reinterpreted, its relations with neighboring communities reviewed and reestablished. A painted map resulting from such an event is but a dim shadow of the original performance.

The colonial codices that are best preserved and most widely studied are those that were produced for Europeans seeking to know more about native culture and history. These manuscripts tell us not only about Precolumbian traditions but also about the adjustments—in their daily lives and in their interpretations of the past—that native people were making as they learned to cope with their colonial circumstances.

Nearly all of these "ethnographic" codices come from the Nahuatl-speaking region of central Mexico, mainly from Mexico City and its environs. This area was conquered and evangelized earlier and more pervasively than the rest of Mesoamerica. The center of the former Aztec polity as well as the Spanish colony, it was home not only to many artists but also to the Spanish priests and officials who commissioned these works. Close working relationships between friars and native artists and consultants were possible here, especially in the Franciscan schools and college. The result was a florescence of manuscript painting during the mid- to late sixteenth century.

The majority of these codices are organized around the calendar: the 260-day ritual calendar, the 365-day year (broken into eighteen "months" of twenty days each), year counts, or a combination of these. Emphasis is on the deities and ceremonies associated with each calendrical period, sometimes with additional information on noncalendrical rituals or other aspects of native culture. Pictures painted by native artists are accompanied by written glosses, usually in Spanish. A number of these calendrical books are related to one another. These derive from now-lost prototypes ultimately based upon the work of a Franciscan friar, Andrés de Olmos, who began his ethnographic research in 1533. Box 12.1 provides an example of one of these calendrical codices from the Colonial period.

**Box 12.1** *Codex Borbonicus*

One of the earliest colonial codices is the *Codex Borbonicus*, once thought by some to be Precolumbian. Most colonial codices are bound along the left-hand margin like European books, but the *Borbonicus* retains the screenfold format. The first part is a 260-day calendar, painted in a style that is purely Precolumbian except for the fact that space has been left next to the painted symbols in order that Spanish glosses may be written in, as they are in some instances (Figure 12.9).

A later section of the *Borbonicus* consists of depictions of the ceremonies performed for the months of the 365-day calendar and the New Fire Ceremony, performed every fifty-two years. This was not something that Precolumbian codices ordinarily included, so there were few conventions regarding how such a document should look. The paintings are spread out across a blank background with much space left empty; this contrasts with the very dense and even distribution of figures across the page in Precolumbian manuscripts. Also, the artist makes some tentative and not altogether successful attempts to show perspective (Figure 12.10). The back of the screenfold is left blank, an unlikely circumstance had the manuscript been made for actual native use.

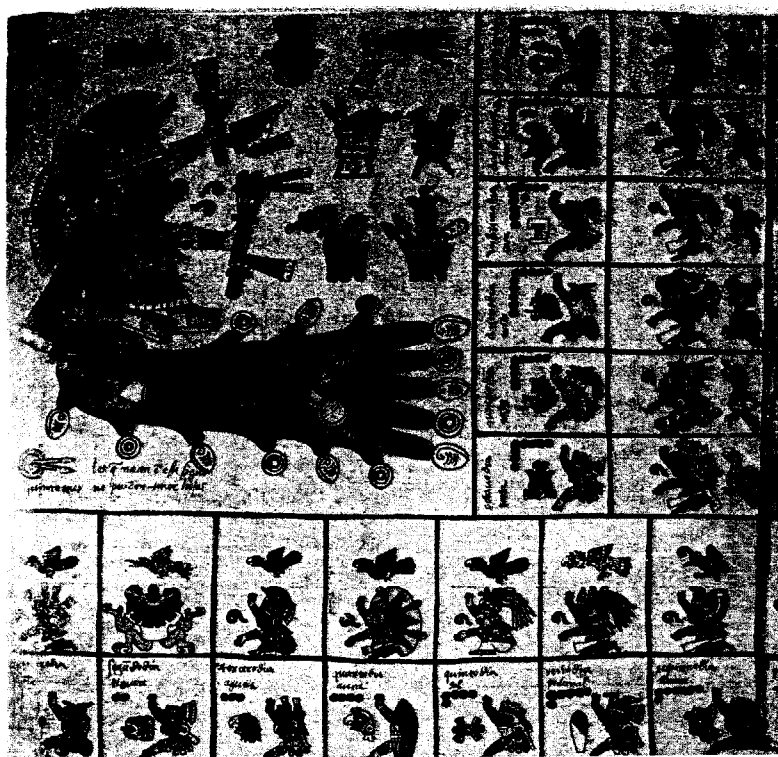


Figure 12.9 *Codex Borbonicus*. A page from the 260-day ritual calendar. The water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue, "She of the Jade Skirt," presides over the thirteen-day period commencing with the day One Reed. Reprinted with permission from *Codex Borbonicus*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1974, folio 5.

The *Codex Mendoza*, thought to have been commissioned in the early 1540s by the colony's first viceroy, is one of the most beautiful and informative of colonial codices (Figure 12.11). Illustrated by a master artist and glossed in Spanish by a priest, the codex is comprised of three parts. The first two are Pre-Columbian in style and based on earlier documents: One is a history of the Mexica rulers and their conquests; the second is a catalog of all the tribute those rulers demanded from each of their subject provinces. Such information was of obvious value to Spaniards wanting to know what riches they could wrest from their new territories.

The third section is unique. It deals with the life of the Mexica (Aztec) people: the upbringing of male and female children from birth to marriage (Fig-

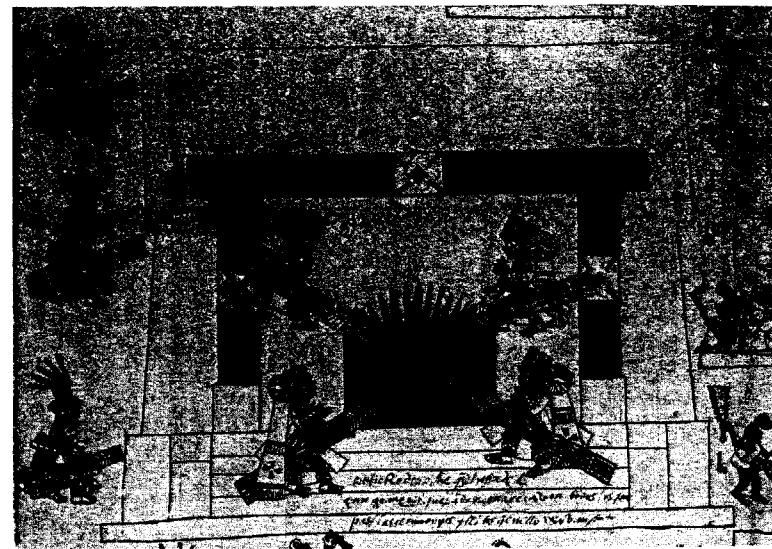
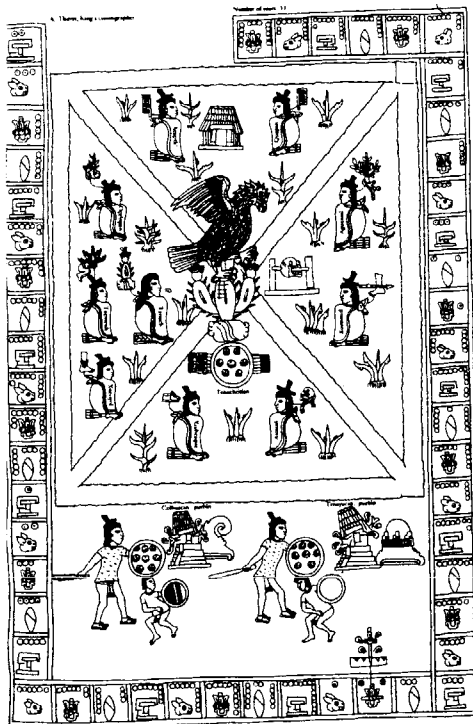


Figure 12.10 *Codex Borbonicus*. The New Fire Ceremony: every 52 years all fires were extinguished, and a new fire was kindled in a temple near the Aztec capital. Here four priests bring wood to feed the new fire. The lower two appear to stand on the temple stairs while the upper two float in space: the artist has only partially adopted European conventions of landscape and perspective. Reprinted with permission from *Codex Borbonicus*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1974, folio 34.

ure 12.12), the different professions for young men, the military and the priesthood with their various ranks, the conducting of warfare, and the operation of the courts of law and the royal palace. To create this pictorial ethnography, the artist had, in a sense, to stand outside of his own culture and look at it analytically, to play the role of interpreter between his own people and the foreigners who now ruled over them. The portrait he drew presents an orderly, disciplined, hierarchical society of a sort that Europeans of the time would be able to respect. The document is both a nostalgic, somewhat idealized recollection of the pre-conquest social order and an attempt to persuade Spanish viewers of the legitimacy of native society. Sent to Charles V, it was transported to France after French pirates attacked the Spanish fleet; eventually it ended up in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University.

The greatest monument of sixteenth-century ethnography is the work of a Franciscan friar named Bernardino de Sahagún. From the 1540s to the 1580s, Sahagún and a number of indigenous students and collaborators produced a series of ethnographic studies combining pictorial and textual materials, the latter not in Spanish but in Nahuatl. They interviewed experts in different fields,

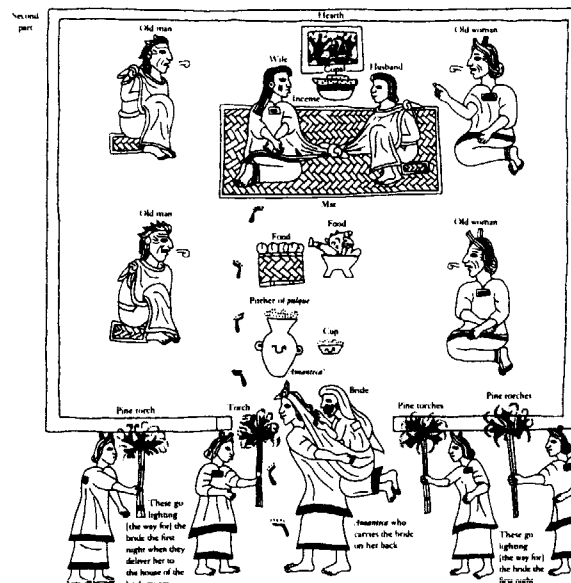


**Figure 12.11** Drawing of the frontispiece of the *Codex Mendoza*. The main scene represents the founding of the Mexica (Aztec) capital, Tenochtitlan, on an island in Lake Texcoco. Below this scene, two of the Mexicas' early military victories are represented. Courtesy of Frances F. Berdan. Reproduced with her permission from Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Anawalt, eds. *The Codex Mendoza, Volume 4: Pictorial Parallel Image Replicas of Codex Mendoza*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992, p. 9 (folio 2r).

such as medicine, divination, rhetoric, and the ancient ceremonies. Sahagún's goal was to create an encyclopedia of native culture that not only would assist priests in eliminating "pagan" religion but also would serve as an extended lexicon for the language and a record of native knowledge that was good (in his estimation) and useful.

The culmination of the project is a document known as the *Florentine Codex*, completed in 1577 and now housed in the Laurentian Library in Florence, Italy. Its twelve books are written in Nahuatl, with an accompanying Spanish text summarizing and commenting upon the Nahuatl. Though primarily a written rather than pictorial document, the small paintings by native artists found throughout the text are integral to the work as a whole. The *Florentine Codex* is the longest text in a native language from anywhere in the Americas and the most complete description of a native American culture created before the advent of professional anthropologists (figures 12.13 and 12.14).

We will mention just one more of the great colonial codices, the *Codex Badianus* or *Cruz-Badiano*. This book is an example of how native people combined their own traditions with European genres of writing, even European languages. It is an illustrated herbal, or book of herbal remedies, explaining cures



**Figure 12.12** *Codex Mendoza*. Drawing of the wedding ceremony: the bride and groom sit on a new mat in the groom's house, their clothing knotted together to symbolize their union, while elderly men and women offer advice. Below, the bride is carried to the groom's house by a woman doctor while other women light the way with torches. Courtesy of Frances F. Berdan. Reproduced with her permission from Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Anawalt, eds. *The Codex Mendoza, Volume 4: Pictorial Parallel Image Replicas of Codex Mendoza*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992, p. 127 (folio 61r).

for various ailments and depicting the plants to be used in preparing the medicines. It was produced in 1552 at the Franciscan college in Tlatelolco. A native doctor named Martín de la Cruz wrote the text in Nahuatl based on his own medical knowledge, which already shows some European influence. He left out the incantations and other ritual elements that might have gone along with these remedies. This Nahuatl text was then translated into Latin by a Nahua student at the college, Juan Badiano. Only this Latin version was included in the finished book. An unknown native artist painted the 184 pictures of plants, some of which include glyphic elements. Sent to Spain as a gift for Charles V, the document was discovered in the Vatican Library in 1929 (Figure 12.15).

### Alphabetic Writing

We have already mentioned two documents, the *Codex Florentine* and *Codex Badianus*, that include substantial components written by native people using the European alphabet. The combination of pictures and writing in the same document makes it impossible to draw a firm line between pictorial and alphabetic texts. But we will now focus more specifically on the use of the roman alphabet to record native literature.

The existence of a long tradition of books and writing made it easy for Mesoamericans to adopt the alphabet used by their Spanish conquerors. The alphabet was a more efficient—though less aesthetically appealing—method of record-



Figure 12.13 A page from the *Florentine Codex*. A merchant family is hosting a party to celebrate the birth of a child. Women guests receive gifts of flowers and tobacco, enjoy a meal of tamales and turkey, and dance in honor of the new baby. *Florentine Codex*, Book 4, folio 69v. Reprinted with permission from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España, Códice florentino*. Facsimile of the *Codex Florentinus* of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, supervised by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) de México, Florence, Italy, 1979.

ing the spoken word than the traditional pictorial systems. Its mastery also granted native people easier access to the bureaucratic apparatus of the colonial administration.

That native people recognized the new kind of writing as consistent with their own literate culture is indicated by its easy assimilation into already existing terminology: The same words were used for books, documents, scribes, paint or ink, and the act of writing, regardless of whether pictorial or alphabetic conventions were employed. As they did with other aspects of European culture introduced by the colonizers, Mesoamericans took alphabetic writing and made it their own, adapting it to their own needs and employing it as a tool for their own survival.

The early friars taught their indigenous students to read and write using the alphabet. They applied the letters of the alphabet to the sounds of the native languages, choosing the letters that, as pronounced in Spanish or Latin, corresponded most closely to native pronunciation. The fit was never perfect: Some linguistic features, such as vowel length and tone, went unrepresented while others enjoyed a surplus of alphabetic characters—the letters *o* and *u* were used interchangeably for a single Nahuatl vowel. But the fit was close enough to make the

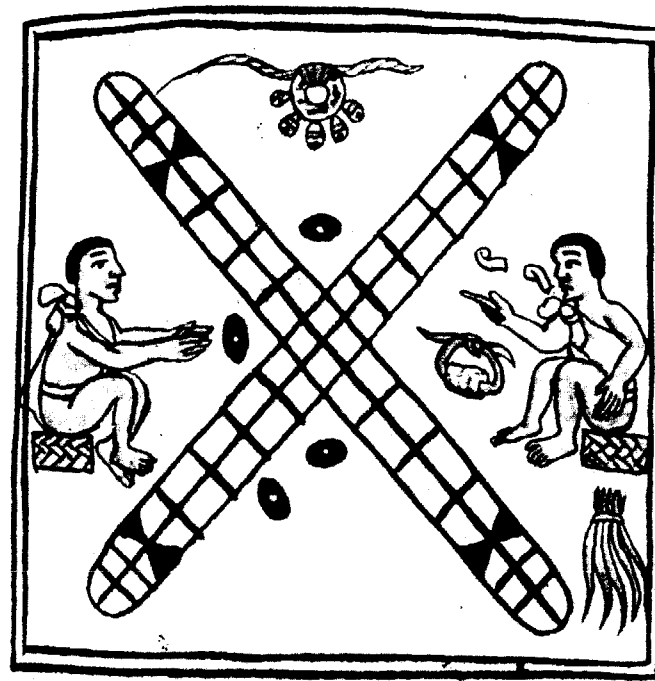
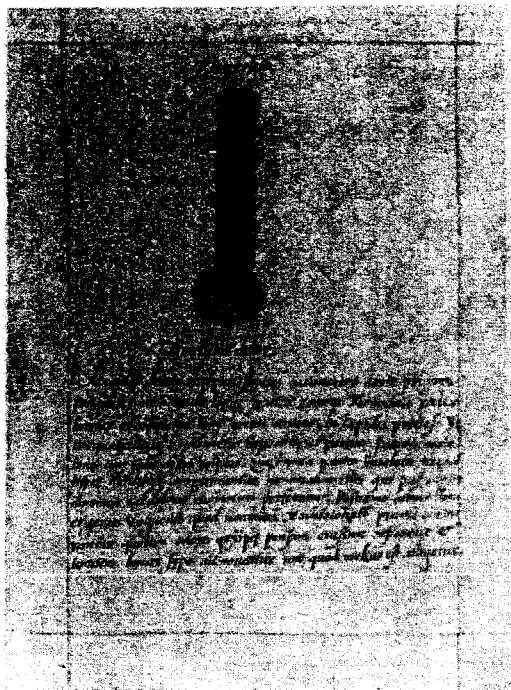


Figure 12.14 *Florentine Codex*. Aztec nobles play *patolli*, a game similar to Parcheesi. The playing pieces are black beans; the men gamble on the outcome by betting their ornaments of jade, gold, and feathers. *Florentine Codex*, Book 8, folio 19r. Reprinted with permission from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España, Códice florentino*. Facsimile of the *Codex Florentinus* of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, supervised by the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) de México, Florence, Italy, 1979.

writing comprehensible. Documents written by and for native people begin to appear perhaps as early as 1528.

Alphabetic writing as used by native people remained closely tied to speech: It was a method of transcribing the way spoken speech actually sounded rather than sequences of individual “words” with standardized spellings. This can be seen in the way that words are often run together if they were spoken without pauses between them; conversely, words are arbitrarily divided at the end of a line, with the flow of sound simply continuing on the next line. Spelling varies considerably, with much of the variation attributable to actual pronunciation differences in local dialects. These points are important because they remind us that we are still dealing with what is primarily an oral literature. Texts could now be transmitted precisely word for word, without the ambiguity inherent in picture



**Figure 12.15** A page from the *Codex Badianus*. A species of cactus is employed in a cure for toothache. Reprinted with permission from Emily Walcott Emmart, ed. and trans., *Badianus Manuscript (Codex Beberni, Latin 241)*, Vatican Library: *An Aztec Herbal of 1552*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940, folio 17v.

writing, but oral performance remained the mode by which texts were dictated and then read by others.

Even though alphabetic writing was much easier to master than the preconquest writing systems, literacy remained limited to a small minority of the population, principally males of noble rank. Mass literacy was not yet a feature of European societies, and so neither Spaniards nor native nobles felt it necessary to teach the common folk how to read. Literate women appear to have been quite the exception—though not entirely nonexistent—in preconquest society, and this remained the case after the conquest. Control of writing helped the nobles to maintain their positions of authority in the native social structure.

The office of scribe or notary was a standard part of native town government throughout the Colonial period. The records of municipal affairs kept by these scribes and other literate individuals comprise a documentary corpus—some of it in Spanish but most of it in native languages—that has only recently begun to be studied. With the end of the Colonial period, this tradition of local record-keeping vanished along with the administrative structure that had fostered it. Native people literate in their own languages nearly disappear from the Mesoamerican scene until the twentieth century.

### Colonial Transcriptions of Oral Literature

Many literary compositions that had formerly been passed along through pictorial writing, oral transmission, or a combination of the two were, during the Colonial period, transcribed using alphabetic writing. As a result, we have access to a great deal of verbal art reflecting native experience before and during Spanish rule. Much of this literature is probably very similar—sometimes virtually identical—to versions used before the Spanish invasion. However, since the texts were transcribed during the Colonial period we can never rule out the possibility that the performers have adapted them in light of their current experiences. Nor should we assume that there was one original or correct Precolumbian version, for all of these texts may have developed and changed over time and existed in multiple versions.

From this rich trove of literary treasures—oratory, poetry, song, myth—we have selected three works representing different regions, different literary genres, and different production contexts. We will describe these texts and give some brief excerpts in English translation.

In some cases, alphabetic transcriptions of traditional literature were executed by native people for their own use and kept within the native community. This is the case with our first example, the *Popol Vuh*, “Book of the Mat” or “Book of Counsel,” of the Quiché Maya people of highland Guatemala. The single most important mythological text from Mesoamerica, this sacred book was written down by Quiché noblemen between 1554 and 1558, based on a glyphic text and oral tradition. Statements made within the text imply that these men wished to preserve the story while the glyphic version and the ability to read it still existed, but they also needed to keep the work hidden from Spanish eyes since they lived “in Christendom now” and could no longer perform the text in its traditional ritual contexts. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a friar working among the Quiché made a copy of the text. This copy, now the only version of the text known to have survived, eventually found its way to the Newberry Library in Chicago.

The *Popol Vuh* tells the history of the world and of the Quiché people from the time of the earth’s creation to the early decades of Spanish rule. At the beginning exist only the sky and the primordial sea:

There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock, hollow, canyon, meadow, forest. Only the sky alone is there; the face of the earth is not clear. Only the sea alone is pooled under all the sky; there is nothing whatever gathered together. It is at rest; not a single thing stirs. It is held back, kept at rest under the sky.

Whatever there is that might be is simply not there: only the pooled water, only the calm sea, only it alone is pooled.

Whatever might be is simply not there: only murmurs, ripples, in the dark, in the night. (Tedlock 1985:72)

Then Heart of Sky, Plumed Serpent, and other deities come together and converse in the primordial sea:

"How should it be sown, how should it dawn? Who is to be the provider, nurturer?"

"Let it be this way, think about it: this water should be removed, emptied out for the formation of the earth's own plate and platform, then comes the sowing, the dawning of the sky-earth. But there will be no high days and no bright praise for our work, our design, until the rise of the human work, the human design," they said.

And then the earth arose because of them, it was simply their word that brought it forth. For the forming of the earth they said "Earth." It arose suddenly, just like a cloud, like a mist, now forming, unfolding. Then the mountains were separated from the water, all at once the great mountains came forth. By their genius alone, by their cutting edge alone they carried out the conception of the mountain-plain, whose face grew instant groves of cypress and pine. (Tedlock 1985:73)

The gods endeavor to create human beings who will appreciate the gods' work, live orderly lives according to the days of the calendar, and pray to them. First they create the animals, but these wander about aimlessly and are incapable of articulate speech. Two more attempts, one using wood and the other mud, also fail to yield the kind of beings the gods have in mind.

The text then digresses into what probably was originally a separate myth. This myth tells how a pair of magically conceived twin brothers defeat the nasty lords of the underworld—gods of death and sickness—and other primordial monsters. These beings had to be destroyed or constrained before the earth could be safe for human society. At the climax of the story, the twins appear in the court of the underworld lords disguised as roving acrobats. They dance and do magic tricks, which include sacrificing first animals and then people and bringing them back to life. Swept away in the excitement, the underworld lords beg that they too may be sacrificed and brought back to life. The boys kill them—but do not bring them back!

The narrative then returns to the gods who are still trying to create human beings. On their fourth try they are successful. They use a dough made from white and yellow corn, ground up by a female deity and mixed with water in which she has rinsed her hands: The oil from her skin turns into the body fat of the four men who are formed from the dough. These four men thank their creators with the following prayer. The text is built with a variety of parallel constructions—the same or similar ideas expressed in two or more ways. For the Quiché and other Mesoamericans, mastery of this poetic strategy signalled good literary style:

Truly now,  
double thanks, triple thanks  
that we've been formed, we've been given  
our mouths, our faces,  
we speak, we listen,  
we wonder, we move,  
our knowledge is good, we've understood  
what is far and near,  
and we've seen what is great and small

under the sky, on the earth.  
Thanks to you we've been formed,  
we've come to be made and modeled,  
our grandmother, our grandfather. (Tedlock 1975:166)

These very articulate men of corn are actually superior to what the gods intended, for they are able to see and know everything that is in the world. They are too similar to the gods themselves—and a bit too familiar, addressing them as grandparents! The gods therefore dull the men's vision, so that they are able to see only things that are close to them. As compensation, the gods create four women to be the men's wives, and the men are happy once more.

These four couples become the ancestors of the Quiché people. The rest of the *Popol Vuh*, approximately half of the total text, deals with the migrations, wars, settlements, and ruling lineages of the Quiché. Myth passes gradually into history, and we come at the end to the middle of the sixteenth century.

Many other works were written down at the behest of Europeans, with the resulting documents removed from native hands. Some such transactions occurred in an atmosphere of cooperation, as in the case of Sahagún's project: The friar was popular among the native people; teams of native researchers and consultants worked together on the texts. Even in contexts like this, however, the native consultants knew that much of their traditional culture—especially in regard to religious beliefs—was considered by the Spanish priests to be idolatrous or immoral.

Book Six of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* preserves a collection of Nahuatl orations pertaining to a genre of oral literature the Nahua called *huehuehtlahtolli*, "ancient words" or "speech of the elders." These were formal speeches delivered on special occasions. They are packed with moral philosophy, religious teachings, and poetic devices such as metaphors and parallel constructions. The speeches were first transcribed around 1547, probably in Tlatelolco, the northern part of Mexico City.

Excerpts from one of these orations, a prayer to Tlaloc, the principal rain deity, is presented in Box 12.2.

Sometimes the transcription of oral literature involved coercion. Early in

**Box 12.2** *The Prayer to the Rain God Tlaloc*

The following excerpt describes the earth languishing in need of life-giving rain. The "elder sister of the gods" is the corn, sister of the rain gods. "He of the Near, He of the Nigh" is the important deity Tezcatlipoca; by the time the text was transcribed this title was also being applied to the Christian God. Tlatecuhtli is the earth deity.

And here it is true,  
today the crops lie suffering,  
the elder sister of the gods lies dragging herself along.

The crops already lie covered with dust,  
 already they lie wrapped with spider webs,  
 already they suffer, already they are weary.  
 And here are the vassals,  
 the tails, the wings [the common people],  
 already they are perishing,  
 for their eyelids are swollen, their lips are parched,  
 they are bony, they are bent,  
 they are emaciated.  
 They are just thin-lipped, pale-throated,  
 the tails, the wings.  
 With pallid eyelids go about the little children,  
 The little babies,  
 they who toddle, they who crawl,  
 they who pile up earth and potsheards,  
 they who sit on the surface of the earth,  
 and they who lie on the wooden plank,  
 they who lie on the cradleboard.  
 And already every person knows torment, exhaustion;  
 already every person sees anguish.  
 And there is none whatsoever who is left out,  
 for already all the little creatures are suffering.  
 The troupial bird, the roseate spoonbill,  
 they just drag their wings along,  
 they tumble over, they fall on their heads,  
 they open and close their beaks.  
 And the animals, the four-footed ones  
 of He of the Near, He of the Nigh,  
 they just wander about,  
 they just rise up upon us,  
 in vain they lick the surface of the earth.  
 And already they go crazy for water,  
 already there is dying of thirst,  
 already there is perishing,  
 already there is destruction.  
 Already the vassals, the animals perish.  
 And here is the one who is our mother, our father,  
 Tlaltecuhli.  
 Already her chest is dry,  
 no longer can she nourish, no longer can she feed,  
 no longer is there anything with which she might suckle  
 that which germinates, that which lies germinating,  
 that which is the maintenance, the life, of the vassal.  
 And that which is life,  
 there is no more,  
 it has gone away, it has perished. (Sahagún 1969:35–36; trans. by L. Burkhart)

The final appeal to the rain gods at the end of the oration goes as follows:

Oh master, oh precious noble, oh giver of gifts,  
 may your heart concede it, may it do its job,

may you console the earth,  
 and all that live upon it,  
 that travel about on the surface of the earth.  
 I call to you, I cry out to you,  
 you who occupy the four quarters,  
 you the green ones, you the givers of gifts,  
 you of the mountains, you of the caves!  
 May you carry yourselves here,  
 may you come, may you come to console the vassals,  
 may you come to water things on the earth!  
 For they lie watching, they lie crying out,  
 the earth, the animals, the herbs, the stalks.  
 For they all lie trusting in you.  
 May you hurry, oh gods, oh our lords! (Sahagún 1969:40; translation revised by L. Burkhart)

The repetition, the elaborate imagery, and the tone of desperation serve not only the aesthetic purpose of creating beautiful and moving poetry. Such a text would have the power also to get the attention of Tlaloc and oblige him to fulfill his function and send the rains.

the seventeenth century a priest named Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón ran an anti-sorcery campaign among Nahuatl-speakers living toward the south and west of Mexico City, in what is now the states of Morelos and Guerrero. This was a relatively rural context compared to the Basin of Mexico, where most of the codices and other ethnographic documents were produced. Ruiz de Alarcón arrested and punished Nahua religious practitioners—men and women whom he believed were in league with the Devil. He understood enough Nahuatl to write down many of the chants these specialists used in their rites of curing and divination. The result is an invaluable collection of Nahuatl ritual poetry, though one gained under unfortunate circumstances.

The chants employ a specialized vocabulary characterized by elaborate metaphors. The practitioners personified the various phenomena involved in the ritual. They granted identities to, for example, the patient's injury or illness, the medicines being used, the fire and the offerings of incense and tobacco that were made to it, and the curer's own hands and fingers. They invoked mythological precedents for the situation at hand, thus casting it in grandiose terms and bringing the sacred power of the myth to bear on the problem.

One of the simplest of the ritual cures is this procedure a woman named María Salome used for curing eye problems. First she addresses the pain, personifying it as a series of serpents and thus giving a concrete form to the patient's sensations. She then threatens the serpent with the water she is about to use to wash the eye. "Jade-Skirted One" is the Nahuatl name for the female water deity: The water here is being treated as a supernatural force.

Well now, please come forth,  
 1 Serpent,  
 2 Serpent,



3 Serpent,  
 4 Serpent:  
 Why do you harm  
 The enchanted mirror,  
 The enchanted eye?  
 Lie down I know not where,  
 Remove yourself to I know not where.  
 But if you do not obey me,  
 I shall call the Jade-Skirted One,  
 The Jade-Bloused One:  
 For she will scatter you,  
 She will disperse you,  
 Upon the plain  
 She will leave you dispersed. (Coe and Whittaker 1982:234)

In a spell for setting broken bones, a curer named Martín de Luna cast himself in the role of the god Quetzalcoatl, or Plumed Serpent. According to a myth recorded in the sixteenth century, this god had stolen one or more bones from the Lord of the Underworld with which to create the human beings of the present age of creation. In one version of the myth, quail startle the fleeing god and he stumbles, breaking the bones. The spell seems to allude to such an episode:

I am the Priest,  
 I am the Plumed Serpent,  
 I go to the Land of the Dead,  
 I go to the Beyond,  
 I go to the Nine Lands of the Dead;  
 There I shall snatch up  
 The bone of the Land of the Dead.  
 They have sinned—  
 The priests,  
 The dust-birds;  
 They have shattered something,  
 They have broken something,  
 But now we shall glue it,  
 We shall heal it. (Coe and Whittaker 1982:268–269)

The curer identifies the patient's broken bone with this primordial bone over which gods fought and from which humanity was formed. Ruiz de Alarcón dismissed these chants as a combination of superstitious nonsense and diabolical deception. However, it is now recognized that symbolism such as this can work upon the mind and yield healing effects. At the very least, such cures boost the patient's morale, which in turn contributes to recovery.

#### Native Historians

The tradition of keeping pictorial manuscripts telling of historical events was both reinforced and transformed by the adoption of alphabetic writing. By adding written captions to the records of migrations, genealogies, and year counts, native his-

torians were able to record more detailed information. Previously, the full story that went along with the pictures had had to be passed along by word of mouth. But now, the scribe could record as much as he pleased of these oral interpretations.

Some native historians gave up the pictures altogether and created year-count annals written entirely in alphabetic writing. These still follow the traditional pattern of listing the year and noting one or more important events that occurred therein. But others began to think about their history not as a sequence of separate episodes but in terms of a more continuous narrative, such as European historians—following a pattern established in ancient Greek and Roman times—tended to produce. Instrumental in the development of this new historical consciousness were the native men who were educated according to European models, particularly at Franciscan and Jesuit institutions. Literate in Latin, these men read the same classical sources as learned Europeans.

A few native scholars took the old pictorial chronicles and began to convert them into narrative histories that told the story of a people. Like both the pictorial records and the Old World models, these histories focused on politics and warfare, telling of the glorious deeds of the great men of the past. They also reflect the kinds of issues with which native people were especially concerned: the founding of noble lines and their dynastic history, the granting and inheritance of special titles, the patronage of deities, and the building of temples.

The authors were motivated by a desire not only to preserve information about the past but also to seek legitimacy in the present. The authors play up the roles of their own ancestors and their own communities. They sometimes seek to downplay, or to blame on other groups, practices such as human sacrifice. Some of them wrote in Spanish, clearly intending that their accounts be read by non-native people. They present their history in a style and format that Europeans will understand and respect.

The Texcocan historian Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, author of several Spanish-language chronicles from the early seventeenth century, was the grandson of one of Cortés's principal allies and a direct descendant of Nezahualcoyotl, a long-lived fifteenth-century ruler of Texcoco who was an important ally of the Mexica rulers in Tenochtitlan. Not surprisingly, Alva Ixtlilxochitl emphasizes Texcoco's alliance with the invading Spaniards and also glorifies his ancestor along the lines of the Old Testament's David or Solomon: Nezahualcoyotl becomes an almost super-human patriarch, poet, philosopher, law-giver, judge, and prophet; he is even said to have believed in only one god.

The most prolific historian to write in a native language is a Nahuatl who gave himself the imposing name Don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin. His writings—eight historical chronicles, a diary, and miscellaneous shorter pieces—comprise the largest body of native-language texts from colonial Mesoamerica that can be attributed to a single author. Most of his work dates to between 1600 and 1620. Chimalpahin was born in 1579 in the town of Chalco Amaquemecan (today's Amecameca de Juárez) in the southeastern corner of the Basin of Mexico. He spent his adult life in Mexico City, employed as a

steward or sacristan at a small church. He based his writings on older documents and on interviews with relatives and acquaintances.

Chimalpahin's histories cover a time span from the twelfth century to 1620. Like other native historians, he treats this known period of the past as an unbroken sequence of years, those following the arrival of Cortés not qualitatively different from the preceding span. His accounts focus on his hometown and nearby communities, but also include extensive information regarding the Mexica (who conquered Chalco in the mid-fifteenth century), the Spanish conquest, and events in the colonial capital. Some of his writings take the form of year-count annals.

In some cases men of mixed parentage, products of unions between native noblewomen and Spanish men, wrote histories of the native communities to which they bore maternal ties. Such is the case with Diego Muñoz Camargo's *Historia de Tlaxcala*, written between 1576 and 1595, and Juan Bautista Pomar's *Relación de Texcoco* of 1582. Though these men identify more closely with their Spanish heritage than with their native roots, their familiarity with native culture and their reliance on older documents and oral tradition place their work at some intermediate point between native and Hispanic literature.

A particularly interesting genre of historical document comes into existence later in the Colonial period, becoming especially popular in the eighteenth century. These documents, known as *títulos primordiales*, "primordial titles," give an account of a community's founding, history, and original boundaries. They often include pictures done in a native—though not Precolumbian—style. Some are made out of particularly coarse and ragged native paper. Both the pictures and the rough paper were intended to make the documents look ancient (Figure 12.16).

In essence, these are late-colonial attempts to reclaim a historical tradition that many communities had lost. The ancient-seeming documents are meant to make it look as if the community has preserved these records ever since the early Colonial period. But the information they contain is, in respect to actual historical realities, characterized by inaccurate dates, events placed out of chronological sequence, and events that could not have occurred as described. Mythological elements are included. The original founding of the community may be conflated with its conversion to Christianity. Attempts are made to make the community look good in Spanish terms: The ancestors allied themselves with the Spanish invaders; they welcomed the friars and were baptized immediately. Authorities such as Cortés or early Spanish viceroys are said to have granted the community permanent rights to certain lands.

These documents are an excellent source of insight into how native people viewed their own history during these later colonial times. They also indicate the continued reverence that native people held for ancient documents as a source of community rights and legitimacy, an attitude fostered by the colonial courts, which accepted such ancient documents as evidence in land claims.

The primordial titles proliferated at a time when many native communi-

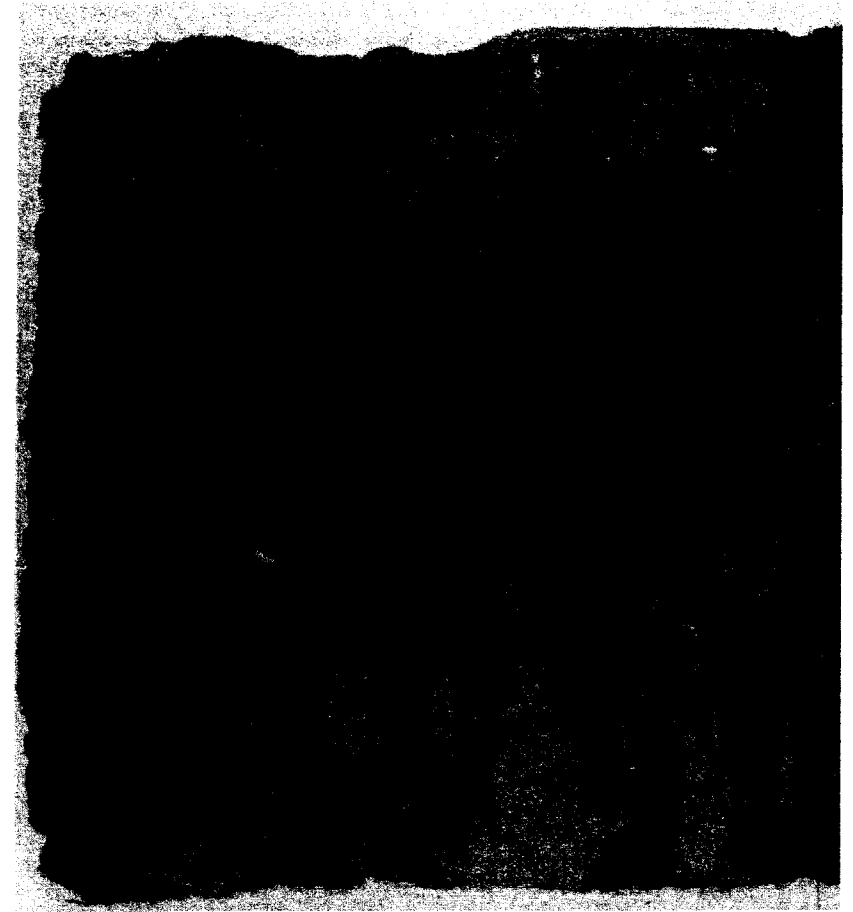


Figure 12.16 A page from an eighteenth-century "primordial title," from a Nahua village called Santa María Tetelpan, which was used to help defend the village's property in a land dispute. The four men are supposed to be ancestors who founded the community. *Croyacan Codex, Codex Indianorum 1*. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

ties were experiencing a serious shortage of resources owing to population growth. In the wake of the early colonial demographic collapse, lands that once belonged to these communities were appropriated by Spaniards. When population levels finally rebounded, communities not only recovered a sense of identity and interest in their past, but also found themselves in dire need of more land. Most of these communities had no authentic early documents that could help

them reestablish their claims to these lands. Primordial titles were sometimes presented in court to back up such claims. However, Spanish defendants and judges could easily dismiss them as inauthentic by noting their factual inaccuracies.

The Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula continued throughout the Colonial period to keep books of history and prophecy organized around one of the native calendrical systems. Several of these books, known as the *Books of Chilam Balam*, survive in copies written down just after the end of the Colonial period. "Chilam Balam" means priest or spokesperson of the jaguar; this title refers to the official Maya prophet whose words these books purport to represent. These books are written in a highly specialized form of poetic language, full of metaphors and other figures of speech; this makes them quite difficult for scholars to interpret.

The *Books of Chilam Balam* are based on the *katun* calendar. One *katun* corresponded to 20 *tuns*, or "years" of 360 days each; hence, one *katun* was equal to 7,200 days, or 100 days less than 20 of our 365-day years. Thirteen *katuns* comprised a *may*, a unit of 260 *tuns*, or 160 days short of 256 years. The Maya believed that each of the *katuns* within the *may* was characterized by certain kinds of events. To compare this with our calendar, imagine that in every century the decade of the twenties was associated with invasion, the thirties with sickness, the forties with prosperity, the fifties with changes in government, and so forth.

As with the more straightforward chronicles kept by other peoples, these Maya books do not treat the Spanish invasion as a significant discontinuity in history. The coming of the Spaniards is recorded in the same manner as invasions by other native groups and is sometimes confused or conflated with these other conflicts, all of which were remembered as occurring during a certain *katun*.

### Indo-Christian Literature

During the Colonial period, a tremendous quantity of textual material was written for use in the context of the Catholic Church. This includes catechistic materials for teaching Catholic doctrine to native people and devotional texts, such as prayers and songs, for native people to use themselves. Some of these works were published. Indeed, the first text ever published in the Americas was a Nahuatl catechism issued in 1539.

Most of this Christian literature was authored by priests. However, even those who were fairly fluent in the native language being used relied extensively on native assistants and interpreters, to the extent that what we really have are collaborative texts in which natives and non-natives participated to varying degrees. In a few cases, the known ones being in the Nahuatl language, native style and imagery are so prevalent that we may consider the texts to be works of native literature. Examples of such Christian literature are given in Box 12.3.

Drama, like song, was a performance genre in which native people participated with enthusiasm. Native-language plays based on Christian subject matter were performed in Mesoamerica beginning in the early 1530s. Unfortunately, scripts from these plays are extremely rare, apart from a few that survive in much

#### Box 12.3 Nahuatl-Christian Songs

A collection of Nahuatl songs transcribed during the later sixteenth century contains several with predominantly Christian subject matter. These are undoubtedly of native authorship. The following is the opening stanza of a Christmas song composed in 1553 by a Nahuatl nobleman named Don Francisco Plácido:

May he be prayed to! Uncover your sacred jewels of turquoise, your compassion, oh you children! May there be jewels of jade, jewels of gold, your rosary beads! With these may we entertain the one who lies now in Bethlehem, the savior of the world! Let us go! Come on! Hurry!

May we depart from the place of waiting, oh our nephews, oh our brothers! Red popcorn flowers are scattering, there where God's compassion has descended to the world!

In a house of quetzal feathers by the side of the road, there you are, you maiden, Saint Mary. Right there you have given birth to the child of God. With various jewels may he be prayed to!

You are simply exalted, as if you surround yourself with jewels. Now he is in your arms, God the child, various jewels! (Bierhorst 1985:254; translation revised by L. Burkhart)

Bernardino de Sahagún and four of his Nahuatl assistants composed a collection of Nahuatl songs for Christian festivals, published under the friar's name in 1583. In much of the work, the friar seems to take a back seat to the literary skill and creativity of the native authors. A song for Easter morning conjures up a vision of a beautiful garden populated by native species of flower, tree, and bird:

You green-corn flower, you heart flower, you cacao flower, you red jar flower: put forth a shady ring of fronds, send forth boughs! You have come to arrive in your place of sprouting.

You ceiba tree, you cypress, you fir, you pine: why do you still stand sadly? It is the time, it is the moment for you to renew your flowers, your leaves, for you to send forth boughs, for you to bloom!

You oriole, you blue grosbeak, you mockingbird, you hummingbird: where had you gone? Where had you entered? And all you various spoonbills, you various troupials, come! Let there be flying, let there be unfolding, let there be unfurling of wings! May your speech resound! May there be chattering, may your songs resonate like bells! (Sahagún 1583:59r-59v; trans. by L. Burkhart)

Later in the song this sacred place is identified as the churchyard, the flowers representing the worshipping women, the trees representing the men, and the birds representing visiting angels circling above.

later copies. The earliest known script dates to approximately 1590. It is the oldest manuscript of a drama written in any Native American language. A Nahuatl playwright's adaptation of a Spanish play, it dramatizes a farewell scene between Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary prior to his going to be crucified. Because of the native playwright's changes and additions—he more than doubled the length of the text—and his skilled use of oral-poetic style, the work, though based on a Spanish source, may be considered a native composition.

This excerpt is one of Christ's speeches, as he strives to persuade his mother that his imminent death is truly necessary. Mary has just suggested that since Christ is all-powerful he could accomplish the redemption of humanity without having to undergo death.

You blessed and perfect maiden,  
 you noblewoman and sovereign,  
 you who are my precious mother,  
 what you have said is very true and correct.  
 It is true that I have total power.  
 Everything can be done, whatever I may wish,  
 since I am divine, I am sovereign.  
 But first may you know  
 that in no way will I turn things around.  
 It is true that I will cause to come true  
 that which the prophets left foretold.  
 Regarding me they left it said  
 that I would rescue people here on earth.  
 It will certainly come true,  
 that I will endure everything that they left declared,  
 which lies written in the sacred book.  
 Nothing whatsoever will be lost,  
 even if it is a little spatter of ink.  
 It will all come true.  
 And it was he, my precious father, God,  
 he decreed it,  
 that is how the words were set down in this way.  
 And they will not be the least bit broken.  
 I will cause everything to come true.  
 Oh my precious mother,  
 may you not be very sad,  
 may you not be very distressed on my behalf,  
 for the rescue of the people has already been left in my hands,  
 the Sentence has already been set down.  
 I will endure everything that is hurtful to people.  
 And this:  
 already it has come to arrive,  
 the day of sadness,  
 the day of sadness and weeping.  
 For it is necessary that I destroy  
 the sad fasting-garment of the dead,  
 the winding-sheet of the dead,  
 that the people on earth go about wearing.  
 It is the old error, original sin.  
 Their souls are dressed in it,  
 the demon, Lucifer, enslaved them with it.  
 And this:  
 oh my precious mother,  
 if I am not stretched by my arms upon the cross  
 there on Mount Calvary,  
 then how will people be rescued?  
 I speak truthfully to you,

oh my precious mother,  
 and indeed you know this well.  
 If I do not cause to come true,  
 if I do not carry out,  
 the command of my precious father, God,  
 then there can be no rescue.  
 Therefore may you know  
 that absolutely never will God lie,  
 he will never break his word,  
 because he is a truthful divinity.  
 This:  
 oh my precious mother,  
 it is essential that I die,  
 it is essential for the people of the world. (Burkhart 1996)

The respectful attitude the speaker shows to his mother, the many parallel constructions, and the emphasis on prophecy are all traces of the native author's thinking.

Literature such as this dates mainly to the second half of the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century. As the native population level reached its lowest point with the epidemics of the 1570s and 1590s, and as the friars who sponsored so much of the work were replaced by parish priests, the production of written literature declined. But the relative scarcity of written records does not mean that native people ceased to sing, pray, and enact dramas as part of their religious life. Rather, the texts employed in such activities became dependent once again on oral tradition.

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