

Introduction

The *Codex Mendoza* is a vivid pictorial and textual account of early-sixteenth-century Aztec life. This unique manuscript combines a history of imperial conquests, a tally of provincial tribute, and an ethnographic chronicle of daily life that collectively constitute the most comprehensive of the known Mesoamerican codices.

Although the subjects of this extraordinary document are commonly referred to as Aztecs, these people called themselves Mexica. They were but one of several Nahuatl-speaking ethnic groups inhabiting the Valley of Mexico during the Late Postclassic period (ca. A.D. 1250–1519). Collectively, all of these peoples are generally termed Aztecs.

The Mexica were the last of numerous nomadic groups to arrive in the Valley of Mexico from the northern desert regions. They established their island community of Tenochtitlan in 1325; by 1519 that settlement had become a metropolis of between 150,000 and 200,000 people. In 1430 the Mexica joined with their neighbors the Acolhua of Texcoco and the Tepaneca of Tlacopan to form the Aztec Triple Alliance. This powerful military confederation spread Aztec military might throughout much of central and southern Mexico, drawing sustained tribute from conquered city-states and battling perpetual enemies at their borders.

The Mexica that appear on the *Mendoza* folios are not only vigorous conquerors and warriors but also disobedient children, inveterate ballplayers, exuberant musicians, pious priests, and despised adulterers. We see their military power as they vanquish city after city to extend their dominion farther and farther afield. Subsequently, we view the vast tributes they demanded from those they conquered: shimmering feathers and sparkling greenstones, bowls of gold dust and axes of copper, reams of paper and loads of firewood, bins of maize and baskets of chiles, loads of textiles and piles of feathered warrior attire. We also monitor their progression from cradle to grave, following the avenues taken by “good” and “bad” Mexica as they pass through life’s prescribed stages. Children are reared, marriages are sealed, priestly novices are disciplined, wars are declared, and judgments are handed down. Clearly, there were many dimensions to Mexica life, and *Codex Mendoza* touches on most of them.

THE CONTENT AND CONSTRUCTION OF *CODEX MENDOZA*

The *Codex Mendoza* contains seventy-two annotated pictorial leaves and sixty-three pages of related Spanish commentary. These folios

are divided into three distinct sections. Part 1 (nineteen pictorial pages) documents the founding of Tenochtitlan and the history of Mexica imperial conquests, presented chronologically by individual ruler. This section of the codex shows us a generalized view of the settlement of the island city and an idealized victory chronicle of imperial expansion. It does not document all of the Mexica’s wars; nowhere are their disastrous defeats recorded. On the other hand, some enemy city-states appear more than once, under the laurels of successive rulers; this duplication most likely indicates wars but not conquests, or conquests and subsequent subdued rebellions. Some especially notable confrontations are featured: the heated dispute with Chalco under the Mexica ruler Chimalpopoca (folio 4v), the conquest of the powerful city-state of Coaytlahuacan under Emperor Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (folio 7v), and the ignominious defeat of the Tlatelolco ruler Moquihuix under Emperor Axayacatl (folio 10r).

The most important consequence of conquest was the imposition of tribute by the victors. Part 2 of *Codex Mendoza* (thirty-nine pictorial pages) served as a detailed account book of the rich and voluminous goods delivered by subdued city-states to their imperial overlords. The 371 city-states that bore these regular tribute obligations were grouped into thirty-eight geographically distinct provinces. *Codex Mendoza* sequentially presents these provinces roughly from north, to west, to south, and on to the east and northeast. It might be expected that the 202 vanquished city-states drawn in *Codex Mendoza*’s conquest history would all reappear among the 371 tribute-paying centers, but this is not quite the case. Some communities listed as conquests in part 1 (such as Yztepec) do not seem to have been incorporated into the empire on a regular tribute-paying basis. Instead they, like many other subjects, emerged more as clients paying “gifts” and offering strategic services such as borderland warfare or route security for the imperial powers. But many city-states with periodic tribute obligations (see *Codex Mendoza*, part 2) do not appear at all in the conquest history of part 1. These communities include the important provincial head towns of Malinalco, Cihuatlan, Tochtepec, and Oxitipan, all known to have been conquered and incorporated into the imperial structure.

Parts 1 and 2 are therefore complementary but not necessarily complete accounts of military conquest and economic control. Placed between the history and tribute sections are two enigmatic folios. They depict eleven lakeside communities and eleven imperial outposts, the latter all distant from the Valley of Mexico. These

transition folios relate partly to the history of conquests, and partly to the tributary obligations of subservience.

Codex Mendoza's conquest history and tribute tallies both appear to have been copied from extant prehispanic documents; in content and style they are reasonably faithful reflections of the Mexica's own view of their imperial strength and vitality. Part 3, however, "The Daily Life Year to Year," was a novel, postconquest creation with no known prehispanic prototype. Containing fifteen pictorial pages, this section provides an ethnographic account of Mexica daily existence. It begins with colorful images depicting infancy and childhood as Mexica children are named, disciplined, and educated. The life paths of these young people are then traced. Males attend formal schools, gain priestly training, capture enemies on the battlefield, engage in public works, marry, become entangled in litigation, learn crafts, and achieve high social rank. Some, however, go awry and are punished for adultery or other crimes. The members of a more disciplined group gain esteem and ultimately become elderly models of community morality and reap the attendant rewards, including the right to imbibe unlimited quantities of intoxicating *pulque*.

Females marry young, literally "tying the knot" around age fifteen. A few careless, less conventional women are subsequently shown in liaisons with errant young men, in legal disputes, or as partners in crime. Righteous aged matrons, however, conclude their disciplined lives exercising the coveted privilege of unrestricted access to *pulque*.

We see little of the pervasive Aztec religion in *Mendoza*, although the ethnographic section of the pictorial would seem the logical backdrop for the topic. We do glimpse priests performing a few of their duties, including the training of a young novice shown in one colorful vignette. Beyond that, only the rare deity peers at us from a place-name glyph, or an occasional temple looms in the background, or certain obscure elements of religious symbolism are coded into textiles and warrior attire. But these are only subtle references to religion; the flamboyant ceremonies that so forcefully punctuated Aztec daily existence are conspicuously absent.

Although the paper on which *Codex Mendoza* was compiled was of European origin, displaying watermarks characteristic of Spanish papermakers, the composers of the pictorial were themselves experienced native scribes. And whether they copied from extant pictorial codices (as in parts 1 and 2) or devised a new format (as in part 3), they tended to follow indigenous artistic canons and styles; the one major exception is the rather awkward attempt at perspective on folio 69r. Throughout the document, the hand of a single master painter is evident; other skilled natives worked with him, preparing the pigments and applying the colors in flat washes. They and knowledgeable elderly Aztecs interpreted the glyphs and paintings, apparently discussing particular meanings among themselves in Nahuatl. They did not always reach easy agreement (see folio 71v). Finally, this indigenous information was translated into Spanish by a bilingual friar who then wrote the accompanying explanatory Spanish commentaries—which for the most part face each pictorial page—as well as the Spanish glosses that appear directly alongside the pictorial images.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE *CODEX MENDOZA*

The *Codex Mendoza's* adventurous early history is as colorful as its prehispanic content. It was drafted some twenty years after the turbulent and traumatic Spanish conquest of the Mexica of Tenochtitlan. By 1541 the Mexica's imperial capital had been transformed

into Mexico City, viceregal seat of Spain's wealthy dominion of New Spain. It was there that the *Codex Mendoza* was compiled at the behest of the Spanish crown (Charles V) and under the supervision of Spanish friars. Native scribes and interpreters were solicited from a generation that could still claim firsthand knowledge of preconquest Aztec life.

The *Codex Mendoza* appropriately came to carry the name of the then-viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza, who may well have commissioned the manuscript. The document was produced in a bit of a flurry, by the Spanish commentator's own admission (see folio 71v). He was rushing to meet the departure of the annual flota, the Spanish treasure fleet. The manuscript was hastily finished, packed, and then dispatched by mule train to bounce along rough serpentine roads that descended over 7,000 feet to the Gulf of Mexico port of Veracruz. The document's destined voyage to Spain, however, was abruptly interrupted when French privateers attacked the Spanish flotilla and carried its rich booty to the coffers of Henri II of France. Fortunately, *Codex Mendoza* survived that transfer unharmed. At the French court, the king's cosmographer, André Thevet, himself fascinated with exotic lands and peoples, gained control of the manuscript; indeed, his name appears in five places, twice with the date 1553 (on folios 1r and 71v).

The document continued to change hands after Thevet's death. The next owner was Richard Hakluyt, chaplain to the English ambassador to France, who was also an aficionado of geographical and cultural exotica. He acquired the document for 20 French crowns and carried it to England. From Hakluyt it passed to Samuel Purchas sometime after 1616, then to Purchas's son, and subsequently to John Selden, an avid collector of Western Hemisphere manuscripts. In 1659, five years after Selden's death, the *Mendoza* finally came to rest in Oxford University's Bodleian Library, where it remains to this day. In the intervening years, the document fell into eclipse as it was quite forgotten for 172 years, not emerging for scholarly perusal until Viscount Kingsborough brought it to light in 1831.

In the years since Kingsborough's "discovery" of *Codex Mendoza* among the Bodleian's holdings, the document has so impressed scholars and publishers that it has appeared in several editions. Kingsborough's *Antigüedades de Mexico* (1831–1848) and James Cooper Clark's *Codex Mendoza* (1938, 3 vols.) are the most notable precursors to the University of California's deluxe and paperback editions.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *CODEX MENDOZA*

The *Codex Mendoza* combines Aztec pictorial and glyphic images with written text in Nahuatl and Spanish to provide a kind of Rosetta stone for Mesoamerican studies. The level of detail available in the document is greatly enhanced by its presentation in these different formats, allowing it to serve as a reference point for the interpretation of other Mesoamerican codices and cultures.

Given its breadth of content, *Codex Mendoza* has long been acknowledged as a major source for studies of Aztec history, geography, economy, social and political organization, glyphic writing, costumes, textiles, military attire, and indigenous art styles. This inclusive manuscript not only documents expected patterns of imperial organization, artistic symbolism, and the daily round but reveals unexpected variations as well: city-states were incorporated into the empire in creatively diverse ways, scribes made use of alternative glyphic and artistic devices, and individuals followed markedly diverse paths as they made their way through life's maze.

Codex Mendoza also offers suggestive insights into other cultures separated from the Aztecs in both time and space. Thanks to the inclusiveness of this manuscript, we are afforded a glimpse into the Mesoamerican past as well as geographic regions far removed from

the imperial Valley of Mexico. And inasmuch as an enhanced understanding of any one civilization helps us to unravel common developmental and structural patterns in others, this extraordinary pictorial manuscript enriches all those who study it.

VOLUME 2

Description of *Codex Mendoza*



