

Preface

The painted books and manuscripts of Mesoamerica are increasingly the focus of scholarly and popular interest. Those who see the manuscripts for the first time are both astonished at the gorgeous and complex imagery in the books and intrigued by the reality of a system of graphic communication that was fully figural. As Western culture increasingly moves beyond alphabetic writing to embrace other graphic systems that convey information, scholars from a number of disciplines are beginning to look more closely at the painted books of Mesoamerica. Literary theorists, linguists, and specialists in cultural studies are joining anthropologists, art historians, and historians in their efforts to understand the special features of the indigenous codices. Two inexpensive paperback facsimiles of ancient Mexican codices, *The Codex Nuttall* and *The Codex Borgia*, as well as several overviews of the manuscript tradition have brought Mesoamerican manuscript painting to the general public.

Despite this interest, however, the world of the divinatory codices (the books of fate) has remained a particularly impenetrable one for nonspecialists. The very features that allow these books to hold their specialized knowledge—the complexity of the imagery, the multiple calendrical system in many different permutations, their particular graphic structure, and their esoteric content—impede an easy understanding. There are detailed commentaries on individual codices, to be

sure, but what has been needed is a larger synthetic treatment that can introduce and draw people into the field. The present study is intended to help fill this lacuna by providing an overview of the genre, one that explains the esoteric world of Mesoamerican fortunetelling, the canons that governed the creation of the painted books, their content, and the rules by which they were read. In the process it explains how most of the almanacs operate and offers new interpretations of several passages. My goal is to open up and provide an entrance into the world of codical divination. In this way, the book stands as a complement to *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs*, which similarly treats the historical genre.

This book has been long in gestation. The idea for it grew out of a Summer Research Seminar that H. B. Nicholson and I organized in 1982 at Dumbarton Oaks. That seminar brought together Nicholson, Ferdinand Anders, Carlos Arostegui, John Carlson, Maarten Jansen, Edward Sisson, Peter van der Loo, and me to focus our attention for the summer on the codices of the Borgia Group. We were a raucous and agreeably argumentative group, and we learned much from each other. The diagrams of the Borgia Group codices that appear in the Appendix to this book draw their inspiration from the brilliant diagrams that Anders developed for the seminar. The seminar culminated in a two-day symposium that brought an additional fifteen scholars into

the effort at Dumbarton Oaks, and it was followed by a session on the Borgia Group at the Manchester International Congress of Americanists.

As Sisson (1983) noted in his summary article recapping the Summer Research Seminar, the core participants agreed on a list of recommendations for further study. Importantly, two have come to fruition. The need for an inexpensive publication series on the codices has been admirably filled by the *Códices Mexicanos* series of the Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt and the Fondo de Cultura Económica (1991–1996), coordinated and largely edited and written by Anders and Jansen. The need for a translation of Karl Anton Nowotny's *Tlacuilolli* has been met by George Everett and Edward Sisson's (2005) fine translation.

My project for the seminar was the manuscripts' painting style, but my long-term goal was to conceptualize the Borgia Group codices, within the entire corpus of Mesoamerican manuscripts, as a single study. Over time, however, that larger project has split into several separate efforts. Initially my research focused on comparing the codical canons and almanac structure in the Maya and Mexican codices. I am thankful for a residential fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1986–1987, where I composed an early treatment of the divinatory codices. At the institute, Irvin Lavin, Marilyn Lavin, and John Elliott were especially insightful and helpful colleagues. This eventually led to a two-day seminar on the Mexican divinatory codices that I organized at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 1991, which drew in a broader range of Precolumbian and early colonial specialists.

Between 1991 and 1999, however, my attention turned away from the divinatory books to the pictorial histories. A Senior Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Art in 1993–1994 allowed me to research the Mixtec histories, including the cosmogony of the Codex Vienna, which figures in the present study. I am grateful to Henry Millon, Stephen Mansbach, and Therese O'Malley for their encouragement and support during my fellowship and for the earlier seminar.

Once the pictorial histories book went to the editor, I again turned back to the divinatory codices, this time in earnest. In the fall of 1998 Victoria Bricker and

I team-taught a graduate seminar on "Mesoamerican Divinatory Codices," which featured lectures and discussions by visiting scholars Anthony Aveni, William Hanks, and John Monaghan. Bricker and I are grateful for the rich perspectives that they brought not just to the seminar but to our own research as well. This and other seminars on Mexican manuscripts at Tulane drew into the project a dynamic group of graduate students, including William Barnes, Lori Bornazian Diel, Richard Conway, James Cordova, Markus Eberl, Erika Hosselkus, Bryan Just, Victoria Lyall, Atlee Phillips, Danielle Pierce, Susan Spitler, Jonathan Truitt, and Margarita Vargas. A sabbatical leave from Tulane University in 2001–2002 allowed me to immerse myself in the material once again. Early versions of Chapter 4 and parts of Chapter 5 were presented as talks at Dumbarton Oaks, the University of Chicago, the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas in Mexico City, and the Royal Academy of Art in London. Parts of Chapter 7 were presented at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Among the many other colleagues who helped shape this study by their comments, insights, and sharing of unpublished information, I thank Harvey Bricker, Robert Bye, David Carrasco, Tom Cummins, Beatriz de la Fuente, Christine Hernández, Robert Hill, Nicholas Johnson, Cecelia Klein, Edelmira Linares, Leonardo López Luján, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Susan Milbrath, H. B. Nicholson, Michael Smith, Karl Taube, Teresa Uriarte, and Peter van der Loo. I am especially grateful to Anthony Aveni, Vicki Bricker, Jeanette Peterson, John Pohl, and Mary Elizabeth Smith, who also read and commented on all or part of the manuscript and saved me from many mistakes; those that remain are my own. Finally, I thank John Verano, whose unfailing encouragement and summer field seasons in Peru eased the project along.

Illustrations and diagrams are key to explaining the divinatory codices. This book has been blessed with the assistance of several outstanding graphic artists. Heather Hurst did almost all of the drawings; Markus Eberl did almost all of the diagrams. Emmett Luty of Tulane's Latin American Library and art history graduate student Danielle Pierce scanned many of the images. Pierce also sized, configured, arranged, and

labeled most of the drawings and contributed several diagrams and most of the directionals. The acquisition and the production of the images were supported by the Martha and Donald Robertson Chair in Latin American Art and the George Lurcy Charitable and Educational Trust Fund for Faculty Research of Tulane University, as well as a Millard Meiss Publication Grant of the College Art Association.

I would like to thank Theresa May and the production staff at the University of Texas Press, especially Lynne Chapman and Leslie Tingle. I am very grateful to Kathy Lewis for her superb copyediting and to Linda Webster for such a thorough index.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Mary Elizabeth Smith, the greatest Mixtec codex scholar of her generation and a pioneer in Precolumbian art history.

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Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate

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