

ANCESTRAL LEGACY · HISTORY OF MEXICO · VOLUME 10

The Codices: Pictographic Memory

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Investigación exhaustiva académica

Investigación: Esteban Gutiérrez A.

Editado por EGA

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Series Prologue

The history of the Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica has been told, for far too long, through the eyes of the conqueror. This series is born of the conviction that only by understanding the worldview, science, art, and social organization of the Mexica from within their own internal logic can we come close to their greatness and the tragedy of their fall.

Ancestral Legacy: History of Mexico is the result of exhaustive academic research drawing on primary sources —the codices— and on the foundational works of Mexican anthropology and archaeology: Jacques Soustelle, Miguel León-Portilla, Alfredo López Austin, and Ross Hassig, among others. This is not another tale of sacrifices and wars, but a deep immersion in the civilizational fabric that built the Empire of Anáhuac.

The thesis holding these twelve volumes together is clear: the greatness of Mexica culture did not lie solely in its military might, but in its exceptional capacity to create a civilizational synthesis. In barely two centuries, the Mexica forged a complex imperial state that articulated a structured religious worldview, a social engineering of castes and guilds, a meticulously recorded tribute economy, and a deeply ritualized everyday life —all of it in the lake environment of Tenochtitlan. Its fall was not the end of a barbarian culture, but the abrupt murder of a civilization in full development,

whose legacy endures in Mexican identity today.

Each volume of the series explores one chapter of that story in depth: the origin and founding, the prodigious city, religious thought, the pantheon and sacrifice, the state, society, tribute, daily life, science and war, the codices, the conquest, and finally the legacy. Each book includes its own index, illustrations, a glossary of Nahuatl terms, a timeline, and an annotated bibliography, so it can be read on its own or as part of the whole.

May this work help vindicate the memory of a people murdered in the fullness of their development, and may new generations come to know —with rigor and with pride— the roots of Mexico.

Research: Esteban Gutiérrez A.

Edited by EGA

Chapter 1 — The Nahua Writing System

When the Spaniards entered Tenochtitlan in 1519, they found something they had not expected in a land they imagined as barbarous: books. They were not books like their own, with letters in rows and bound pages, but they were real books: long strips of paper folded like a screen, scrolls of deerskin, painted cloths that preserved a people's history, its laws, its accounts, and its gods. The Mexica called them amoxtli, and the one who knew how to paint and read them was the tlacuilo, the scribe-painter, one of the most respected crafts in the empire.

For centuries, Europeans doubted that this was writing at all. Accustomed to their alphabet, in which each sign stands for a sound and words are built letter by letter, they looked at the codices and saw only drawings. It was a costly prejudice: for failing to recognize painting as a writing system, the conquistadors and the first friars burned entire libraries believing they were destroying mere "paintings of idols." Today we know they were wrong. Nahua writing was a complete system, capable of recording personal and place names, exact calendar dates, quantities, tributes, royal genealogies, peoples' migrations, and even the intimate life of a family. It needed no alphabet to do so: it had its own resources, and it commanded them with admirable precision.

This chapter explains how that system worked. It is not a story of letters, but of images that speak: of pictograms that show what they name, of ideograms that stand for ideas, of phonograms that play with the sounds of the Nahuatl language. And it explains something even more important: that a codex was not read in silence the way we read a book today. A codex was the score for a reading aloud; the image fixed the structure, and the reader's memory supplied the words. To understand this is to understand the mind of a civilization that entrusted its memory to painting and to voice.

It is worth pausing over the prejudice that for centuries prevented observers from seeing the obvious. The first Europeans to leaf through a codex described it as "paintings" or "figures," never as "writing," and that word condemned it: what is not writing does not deserve to be preserved as a book, and what looks like idolatry deserves the fire. The alphabet served as a universal yardstick, and everything unlike it was declared inferior. It was the same yardstick used to measure — and find wanting — American languages, American religions, American cities. The codex was a victim of graphic ethnocentrism.

The vindication began in the nineteenth century, when the first Americanists — Humboldt, Kingsborough, Seler — began to study the manuscripts seriously, and it culminated in the twentieth with modern epigraphy. Today no one disputes that Nahua writing is writing: the debate is about its limits, its conventions, and its history, like that of any other system. And there is a final irony: even as the West learned to read the codices, Western culture itself was becoming ever more pictographic — traffic signs, digital icons, emojis — rediscovering on its own what the tlacuilome had always

known: that a well-designed image communicates faster than a thousand letters.

This chapter, then, is not only the description of an ancient system: it is an invitation to broaden the very idea of writing. What follows — the types of signs, the art of reading, the genres of books — will give the reader the tools to leaf through a facsimile and begin deciphering it on their own. For that is the best way to honor the tlacuilome: to learn to read what they painted.

One last caution before we begin: this chapter — and this book — speaks of "the Nahuas" and "the Mexica" as if they were a homogeneous bloc, but reality was more diverse. There were Nahuas of the city and of the countryside, of Tenochtitlan and of Tlaxcala, nobles and commoners, men and women, and each group had its own particular relationship with books. What follows is a necessary synthesis, but the reader should remember that behind every generalization lies a diversity the documents only partly reveal.



The Language That Was Painted

Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica and of many Mesoamerican peoples, is an agglutinative language: it builds long words by joining roots and particles. That feature turned out to be an advantage for an image-based writing system, because it allowed scribes to play with the sounds of words. A place name, for instance, could be broken into its parts, and each part could be represented with a drawing whose name sounded similar. Nahuatl writing never needed to invent an alphabet: combining three types of signs was enough.

The first type is the pictogram: a drawing that directly represents what it means. A hill drawn in its characteristic shape means "hill"; a house means "house"; a rabbit means "rabbit." These are the most transparent signs in the system, and anyone who knows the visual repertoire can understand them. But a system made only of

pictograms would be very limited: how does one draw an abstract idea like "war," "tribute," or "year"? For that there was the second type of sign.

The ideogram is a drawing that stands for an idea by convention. A shield pierced by arrows, for example, does not mean "a shield with arrows": it means "war." A stream of water flowing from the mouth of a hill means "place," because in Nahuatl the concept of a "settled place" was expressed with the paired words *atl-tepetl*, "water-hill." A tied bundle can mean "tribute," because tribute was delivered in bundles. Ideograms demand learning: one must know the code to decipher them, just as one must learn that in our writing the word "justice" looks nothing like the idea it names.

The third type is the most ingenious: the phonogram, a sign that stands for a sound, not a meaning. It works on the rebus principle, the same wordplay we use when we draw an eye and a tin can to say "I can." In Nahuatl, the "tooth" sign (*tlantli*) could represent the syllable *tla-* at the start of a word; the "flower" sign (*xochitl*) could supply the sound *xo-*. This is how proper names were written, since names do not always have a drawable meaning: a person's or town's name was broken into syllables, and each syllable was painted with the corresponding sign. Scribes combined the three types of signs with complete freedom, mixing the pictographic, the ideographic, and the phonetic in a single glyph as needed.

Something essential must be stressed: this system was not primitive or incomplete. It was different. Modern scholars, from the pioneering work of the nineteenth century to current research in Mesoamerican epigraphy, have shown that Nahua writing could record spoken Nahuatl faithfully enough to transmit names, dates, quantities, and narratives. It was not an alphabet, but it was writing

in the full sense of the word: a conventional system of visible signs that records language.

The advantage of the mixed system becomes clear when compared with "pure" systems. A purely pictographic system — only drawings of things — cannot write abstract names or conjugated verbs; a purely phonetic system — only sounds — loses visual immediacy and forces the reader to spell out every word. The Nahua system combined the best of both: the speed of the pictogram for the concrete, the precision of the phonogram for names. It was a pragmatic compromise, and it worked.

And there is definitive proof of its effectiveness: the Spaniards used it. During the first decades of the colony, the administration — which did not have enough scribes who spoke Nahuatl — accepted glyphic documents for censuses, tributes, and maps. Had the system been a game of ambiguous drawings, it would not have served fiscal bookkeeping. It served, and served well, for two generations. Nahua writing passed the most demanding test of all: that of bureaucracy.

Pictograms, Ideograms, and Phonograms

To appreciate the elegance of the system, it helps to linger over concrete examples of the kind that appear again and again in the codices. Take place names, the daily bread of Nahua writing, since tribute maps and migration histories are full of toponyms.

A place glyph is built, in most cases, on a pictographic base: the "hill" sign or the "water-hill" sign already mentioned. On that base sits the element that distinguishes that place from all others. The town of Coatepec, "on the serpent hill," is painted as a hill with a

coiled serpent on top: coatl (serpent) + tepetl (hill). The town of Tzompanco, "in the place of the tzompantli," is painted as a hill crowned with a skull rack. Some toponyms are purely phonetic: the scribe chooses signs for their sound rather than their sense, and only one who knows the language can read them.

Personal names work similarly. Mexica lords bore calendrical names or descriptive names that lent themselves to painting: a ruler might be called "Fire Serpent" or "Rabbit," and his personal glyph combined the stylized portrait of the figure with his name-sign placed beside the head, joined to it by a line. That convention — the name attached to the head by a line — is one of the most characteristic of Nahua codices and makes it possible to identify each figure in scenes with dozens of characters.

Dates were written with the 260-day ritual calendar combined with the solar year, a system the Mexica shared with other Mesoamerican peoples. Each day had a sign and a number; each year bore the name of its starting day. A scribe could fix an event in time with a precision we can convert to our own calendar today. And quantities were recorded with a vigesimal number system of dots, flags, feathers, and bags that could register anything from single units to enormous figures, like those of the imperial tributes we will see in Chapter 3.

All of this was painted in a reading order. In historical codices, reading advances boustrophedon — like the furrows of a plow, left to right and then right to left — or follows trails of footprints that guide the reader along the strip. In tribute codices, reading goes by registers and columns, almost like a table. The scribe did not improvise: each genre of book had its format, its reading direction, and its conventions, and the trained reader knew them all.

Reading a complex toponym shows the system in full action. Take a typical — if hypothetical — example: a hill with a serpent and, beside it, the "water" sign. The reader breaks it down: hill (tepetl) + serpent (coatl) + water (atl). Is it "Coatepec by the water"? Or does the water modify the serpent — "water serpent"? Visual syntax has its rules: position, size, and connecting lines indicate how the elements combine. The trained reader applies those rules automatically, as we apply grammar on hearing a sentence.

And when the glyph is purely phonetic, the reader switches modes: stops looking for meanings and looks for sounds. That cognitive flexibility — alternating between ideographic and phonetic reading on the same page — is one of the system's most sophisticated skills, and children learned it in school with graded exercises, like our dictations. Nahua writing was not more "primitive" than ours: it demanded comparable training, and it produced comparable readers.

How to Read a Codex: Image, Voice, and Memory

Here we reach the point hardest for a modern reader to grasp: a codex was not read the way we read today. When we open a book, the letters deliver the author's exact words; our task is only to pronounce them silently. In the Nahua world, the painting did not record every word of the discourse: it recorded its skeleton, its landmarks, its structure. The flesh of the story was supplied by the reader, with voice and memory.

Imagine a historical codex narrating the Mexica migration. The strip shows, scene by scene, the places the people passed through, the years each stage lasted, the chiefs who led, the omens and the battles. All of that is painted precisely. But the discourse

accompanying each scene — the chiefs' words, the songs, the dramatic details, the explanations — was not written out letter by letter: it lived in the reader's memory, learned by heart in school and unfolded before an audience with the images as support. The codex was, in this sense, a musical score: it fixed the melody and the rhythm, and the performer supplied the execution.

This explains why reading codices was an art reserved for specialists. It was not enough to decipher the glyphs; one had to know the stories, the genealogies, the ritual formulas, and the songs each image evoked. An inexperienced reader could describe what was painted, but only the trained sage could "read" the codex in the full sense: turning painting into discourse. The colonial testimonies confirm it: when friars asked elders to explain a codex, the elders did not spell out signs; they narrated, they sang, they unleashed a torrent of words the friars could barely follow with the pen.

This alliance of image and orality had a profound consequence: collective memory did not depend on a single medium. If a codex burned, the story could survive in the memory of those who had learned it; if a sage died, the codex preserved the structure for another to learn anew. It was a redundant system, designed to resist forgetting. That is why the destruction of books that followed the conquest was so devastating: not only paper was burned — readers were killed, schools were banned, and the chain of transmission was broken. Without readers, the surviving codices fell mute for centuries, until modern research learned to give them back their voice.

The Order of Knowledge: Genres of Books

Not all codices served the same purpose, and the Nahuas distinguished them by content and format. Knowing the genres is like knowing the sections of a library: each kind of book had its place in the order of knowledge.

First came the historical books: the *xiuhamatl* or "books of years," annals recording year by year the people's events — a ruler's enthronement, a war, a famine, an eclipse, a temple's founding. They were organized by the year sign and advanced in sequence; they were the backbone of official memory. Close to them were the genealogical books, which fixed the lines of descent of the lords and legitimized their right to rule: in a world where power was inherited, painted genealogy was a first-order political document.

Then came the tribute books, like the *Matrícula de Tributos*, which recorded with accounting precision what each province delivered to the empire: mantles, warrior costumes, maize, beans, cacao, feathers, gold, slaves. They were instruments of state, and their exactness was vital to administration.

There were the ritual and divinatory books, the *tonalamatl* or "books of days," containing the 260-day calendar with its patron gods, omens, and prescriptions: which days were propitious for birth, for marriage, for sowing, for going to war. These are the most beautiful and enigmatic surviving codices, belonging to the group scholars call the "Borgia group," of pure pre-Hispanic tradition.

There were books of songs, maps of lands and boundaries — legal documents that continued to be painted throughout the colonial era to defend communal property before Spanish courts — and books of dreams and of medicine. Each genre had its graphic conventions, its page formats, and its modes of reading. A competent reader

commanded all those codes, just as a modern reader distinguishes a novel from an accounting report without being told.

This classification into genres is no modern invention: the Nahuas named their books accordingly. *Xiuhamatl*, "books of years," for annals; *tonalamatl*, "books of days," for ritual almanacs; and other terms for tribute records and maps. Each name designated not only a content but a format, a mode of reading, and a place of keeping. It was an Indigenous library science, with its own classificatory logic.

And each genre had its specialized readers: the palace annalist read the *xiuhamatl*, the divining priest the *tonalamatl*, the accountant the tribute records. The specialization of books generated the specialization of readers, and vice versa, in a virtuous circle that raised the level of both. A civilization is measured, among other things, by the diversity of its books and its readers; by that measure, the Nahua world scores very well.

Painted Numbers: The Vigesimal System

The Mexica counted in base twenty, and their pictographic number system was as functional as it was elegant. The unit was the dot or finger; twenty units were represented by a flag (*pantli*); four hundred — twenty twenties — by a feather; eight thousand — twenty times four hundred — by a bag or sack. With those four signs and their multiples, a scribe could write down any quantity, from the price of a turkey in the market to the maize loads an entire province delivered as tribute.

What is interesting is how numbers combined with what they counted. The number did not float in a void: it was painted beside the object — so many dots beside so many mantles, so many flags

beside so many warrior costumes. And when the quantity was fractional or approximate, the system had resources: half signs, repeated signs, glosses. Modern researchers have managed to decipher complete tribute accounts and convert them to our figures, and the result balances: the totals noted in the margin match the sum of the entries. It was real accounting, audited by imperial officials.

The vigesimal system was no whim: twenty is the number of fingers and toes, and many of the world's languages count by twenties. What is remarkable is the coherence of the graphic system: with four basic signs and clear combination rules, the tlacuilome handled magnitudes that in Europe demanded the abacus or the far clumsier Roman numerals. When the Spaniards wanted to understand the empire's finances, the first thing they had to learn was to read those dots, flags, and feathers.

One aspect of the number system deserves emphasis: its visual transparency. A Mexica child learning to count saw the quantity: four dots are four things, a flag is twenty, and the combination reads at a glance. Roman numerals — I, V, X, L, C — demand memorizing arbitrary values; Nahua glyphs show their value. That iconicity made the system a natural teaching tool: it was learned by counting on fingers and with the eyes.

And there is a curiosity researchers have noted: the vigesimal system also appears in social organization. The *calpulli* — the wards — were grouped in twenties for communal labor and military service; tributes were calculated in multiples of twenty; the army was organized in base-twenty units. The number twenty was not only an arithmetic base: it was a principle of world organization, and the codices reflect it in every account.

The Calendar in the Codices

No aspect of Nahua culture is as present in the codices as time. The Mexica managed several interlaced calendars, and painted books were the instrument for operating them. The most famous is the *tonalpohualli*, the 260-day count formed by combining twenty day signs with thirteen numbers: each day had a unique name — like "4 Movement" or "7 Serpent" — and the full cycle served divination, fixing feasts, and naming people.

The second calendar was the *xiuhpohualli*, the 365-day solar year divided into eighteen twenty-day months plus five leftover days, considered dangerous. Years were named for the *tonalpohualli* day on which they began, and grouped into 52-year cycles — the Mesoamerican "century" — at whose end the great New Fire ceremony was held.

In the codices, time is painted in several ways. In annals, each year appears as a frame with its sign, and events are placed beside their year: a pictographic timeline. In ritual *tonalamatl*, the 260 days unfold across full pages, each day with its patron god, omens, and offerings: sacred almanacs priests consulted for every important decision. And in genealogies, dates legitimize: a ruler not only descends from such a father but was born on such a day and took the throne in such a year, and those calendrical data are part of his right to rule.

Reading time in a codex demands command of both calendars and their correlations, and it is one of the epigrapher's most technical skills. But it is also one of the most rewarding: when a date painted five hundred years ago converts to our calendar and matches an eclipse modern astronomy confirms, the reader feels time fold, and

the tlacuilo speaking directly.

The calendar also had a political dimension the codices record clearly. Controlling time was controlling legitimacy: only the state — through its priests and sages — could declare when a month began, when a feast was held, when it was propitious to crown a king. Annals show rulers tied to precise dates, and that tie is not decorative: a king without an enthronement date was an illegitimate king. Painted time was painted power.

And the calendar was an instrument of imperial coordination. Tributary provinces had to deliver goods on fixed dates of the solar year; ritual calendar feasts gathered delegations from across the empire; military campaigns were planned by the days' omens. Without a shared calendrical system and books to record it, an empire of several million people could not have functioned. Calendrical codices were, in this sense, the state's temporal infrastructure, as vital as causeways or storehouses.

Reading Aloud: The Art of the Interpreter

Let us return to the reading scene, for it deserves more attention. Picture a palace hall or a school courtyard: a sage unfolds a codex before his audience and begins to speak. What he says is not written letter by letter in the painting; the painting tells him what to say, in what order, and with what emphasis, and his memory — trained over years of schooling — supplies the words, the songs, the details.

This art had its techniques. The reader used the voice expressively: shifting tone for dialogues, singing poetic passages, pausing before the most solemn images. He used the body: pointing with a pointer

or hand at each glyph as he named it, so the audience saw and heard at once. And he used memory structurally: stories had opening and closing formulas, refrains, rhythmic enumerations that kept him from losing his way.

The colonial testimonies describe these readings with amazement. Friars asking for a codex's explanation found themselves facing elders who spoke for hours, unfolding a seemingly inexhaustible discourse, and who grew indignant if the interpreter interrupted: the reading was a complete performance, not a dictation. Some modern researchers have compared this art to that of the Greek rhapsodes who sang the Iliad or the African griots: in every oral-tradition culture, the "book" is only half the text; the other half lives in the performer.

This is perhaps the system's deepest lesson: for the Nahuas, knowledge was not a thing stored in an object but an action occurring between people. The codex without a reader was a mute instrument; the reader without a codex was a memory without an anchor. Only together — image and voice, painting and word — did they produce knowledge. When we open a facsimile in silence today, we see only half the book; the other half was lost with the last readers, and recovering it is research's pending challenge.

The trained voice did more than vocalize words: it gave the image its tempo, its emphasis, its drama. The reader slowed before a battle scene, letting the audience absorb the warriors' array; quickened through tribute lists, in a litany of quantities; lowered his voice at the omens, signaling the sacred. Those intonations are lost forever — no notation preserves them — but their effects survive in the texts: the parallel structures, the rhythmic repetitions, the rhetorical questions were composed to be intoned, not read silently.

The prose of the huehuetlatolli, with its balanced phrases, only makes sense as spoken music.

The audience, moreover, was no silent congregation: it participated. Feast songs were sung in chorus, with the crowd answering the soloist's strophes; discourses were received with ritual exclamations; and in some ceremonies, the audience was invited to correct or complete the reader's memory, in a collective exercise of remembrance. That participation had a mnemonic function: what is sung together is not forgotten. The codex was, then, the score of a communal performance, and its reading bound the community each time it was opened.

Color as Sign: The Chromatic Language

In the codices, color is not decoration: it is information. Each color has a conventional value the trained reader decodes automatically, and changing a color can change a glyph's meaning. This chromatic language is one of the system's most sophisticated aspects, and one of the most lost when we see black-and-white or low-resolution reproductions.

Red, in its variants, is associated with blood, the sun, the east — the direction of sunrise — and with preciousness: cochineal's deep red marks the valuable and the sacred. Black is the color of night, of the north, of the underworld, but also of drawing itself: the black outline is the skeleton of all painting. White, the color of lime and bone, belongs to the south and ritual purity. Ochre yellow is the color of ripe maize and fertile earth. Turquoise blue — the color of turquoise, the most precious stone after jade — means water, sky, preciousness: water gods and royal attributes are painted turquoise. Green, mixing blue and yellow, is the color of vegetation and living

things.

These associations are not whimsical: they form a cosmological code. When a god appears painted black with yellow stripes, the reader does not see "a colorful god": he sees a theological statement about that god's nature, direction, element, and function. Researchers have reconstructed much of this code by comparing hundreds of depictions, and the results are consistent: the same god is painted with the same colors in different manuscripts, proving the code was shared and stable.

Color also ranks. In scenes with many figures, size and color distinguish the protagonist: the lord is larger and in richer colors; servants smaller and in duller tones. In tribute registers, color groups: goods of the same kind share hues. And in ritual calendars, each day's or trecena's color signals its propitious or fateful character. A competent reader "read" the color before deciphering the glyphs, just as we catch a traffic light's tone before reading any sign.

Modern chemical analyses have added an unexpected dimension: some colors had, besides symbolic value, economic value. Cochineal and Maya blue were expensive long-distance trade goods; using them in a codex was a declaration of wealth and power. A book painted with abundant cochineal was not just a book: it was a luxury object, and its very materiality communicated its commissioner's status. Color, in short, spoke on several levels at once: cosmological, hierarchical, and economic.

The Page as Map: Composition and Space

A codex is not composed like a modern book page, with lines of text

left to right. It is composed like a map: the page's space is a territory with directions, centers, and peripheries, and each element's position means something. Learning to read a codex is largely learning to read that space.

The most general principle is the hierarchy of the center. In ritual scenes, the god or main event occupies the composition's center, with secondary elements distributed around. In the Mendoza's tribute pages, the province — represented by its glyph — takes the center or head, and the tribute goods align in ordered registers. In genealogies, the line's founder goes at top or center, and descent flows downward or sideways. Space reproduces social order: lords above, commoners below; power at the center, subordinates at the margins.

The second principle is reading direction, marked graphically. We mentioned the footprint trails guiding readers through historical strips: those footprints are not decoration but the story's punctuation, the equivalent of our periods and commas. In annals, the year frames form a continuous band the eye follows like a ribbon. In calendars, grid or circular layouts show how days combine. The tlacuilo designed the eye's journey as carefully as an architect designs a visitor's path through a temple.

The third principle is significant density: in a codex there are no empty spaces by neglect. If a page zone is clear, the painter wanted air around the main scene; if it is full of small glyphs, the information is dense — a tribute list, a date series. Readers learn to calibrate attention by density: clear zones are contemplated, dense zones deciphered.

Finally, there is a cosmographic level: some pages — especially in

the Borgia group's ritual codices — are organized as cosmograms, with the four directions and the center, each direction's gods and symbols laid out in a cross. Reading those pages means orienting oneself in the Nahua universe: the reader not only sees an image but takes a place in the cosmos. It is the pictorial equivalent of a medieval *mappa mundi*, and like those, it combines practical information with a worldview.

Writing Without Words: The Limits of the System

It would be dishonest to present Nahua writing as a system without limitations. It had them, as all systems do, and knowing them helps explain why history took the course it did. This section states them as honestly as its virtues were stated.

The first limitation was dependence on the reader's memory. Since painting did not record every word, a codex was legible only to one who already knew the story or had been trained in its reading. That made the system vulnerable: if the transmission chain broke — if masters died without training disciples — books became illegible. And that is exactly what happened after the conquest. An alphabet, by contrast, lets a stranger, centuries later, reconstruct the text word by word without ever having heard it. Nahua writing bet on the living community; the alphabet, on the autonomous document. The conquest proved the risk of the first bet.

The second limitation was difficulty with the abstract and the new. The system shone at recording names, dates, quantities, and concrete narratives; it struggled more to express philosophical reasoning, grammatical nuances, or concepts without visual correlate. Phonograms helped, but writing an argumentative discourse in glyphs was laborious. And facing the unknown —

Spanish names, Christian concepts — the system had to improvise, with results sometimes ingenious and sometimes clumsy.

The third limitation was economic: producing a codex demanded months of specialized labor and costly materials. It was no medium for everyday communication — messengers and the spoken word served that — but for official and sacred record. Alphabetic writing, once learned, is cheap and fast: anyone with a pen can write a letter. That democratization of writing was one reason the alphabet ultimately prevailed, even among Indigenous people themselves.

None of this diminishes the achievement. Every writing technology is a compromise among fidelity, economy, and accessibility, and the Nahua one optimized visual fidelity and significant density at the cost of document autonomy. Judging it by the alphabet's yardstick is like judging a temple for not being a cathedral: they are different answers to different needs. And on its own ground — a state's public memory, a religion's sacred archive, a people's painted identity — the system worked admirably for centuries.

Writing in Mesoamerica: A Family of Systems

Nahua writing was not born in isolation: it inherits a Mesoamerican writing tradition more than two thousand years old, which produced several related systems, each adapted to its language and society. Understanding that family helps place the Nahua system in context and appreciate what it borrowed and what it invented.

The origins lie in the Preclassic, some 2,500 years ago, with the first inscriptions of the Olmec and Zapotec zones: the Cascajal block, Monte Alban's Zapotec stelae. From those roots sprang the two great Classic traditions: the Maya in the southeast and central

Mexico's. The Maya developed the most complete system: a true logo-syllabic script, with signs for words and signs for syllables combining to write spoken language with great fidelity. Maya scribes — the *aj tz'ib*, "the painter-scribes" — recorded their kings' history, rituals, and astronomy on stone stelae, polychrome ceramics, and amate books.

In central Mexico, tradition took another path. The Classic-period Teotihuacanos used a more pictographic, emblematic system about which we still know little. The Postclassic Mixtecs perfected the genealogical book: their codices record with dynastic precision the marriages, births, and conquests of their lordships. The Nahuas inherited elements from all these traditions — the calendar and day signs are common Mesoamerican heritage — and adapted them to their agglutinative language and their empire's needs.

What is remarkable is that these systems, though distinct, were partly mutually intelligible: a Mixtec reader could understand the day signs of a Nahuatl codex and vice versa, because the ritual calendar was shared. Mesoamerica was, in this sense, a writing area: a region where several peoples used related systems, as medieval Europe used variants of the Latin alphabet. That community of conventions eased trade, diplomacy, and the transmission of ideas among peoples of different tongues.

And there is a final lesson: the diversity of systems shows there is no single "natural" path in writing's history. The Maya approached the alphabet via the syllabic route; the Nahuas stayed on a mixed pictographic-phonetic path sufficient for their ends. Both were rational solutions to real problems. Writing's history is not a ladder with the alphabet at the top: it is a tree with many branches, and the Nahuatl branch flowered in its own way for centuries.

The Day Glyph: Reading a Full Date, Step by Step

Enough theory: let us read. This section proposes an exercise — simplified but faithful — in reading a date in a codex, so the reader experiences firsthand how the system works. Picture an annals page: a band of frames, each with a year sign, and beside one of them a scene: a burning temple over a city's glyph.

First step: identify the year sign. Years are named by four signs — Rabbit, Reed, Flint, House — combined with thirteen numbers. The frame shows, say, the Reed sign with eight dots: the year 8 Reed. Second step: place the year in sequence. Annals advance in order, so counting from a known year — Tenochtitlan's founding, for instance — yields the exact date. Third step: read the scene. The burning temple over the toponymic glyph is the "conquest" convention: the city whose glyph appears was taken that year. Fourth step: identify the city. The glyph combines, suppose, a hill with a serpent: Coatepec, "on the serpent hill." Conclusion: "In the year 8 Reed, Coatepec was conquered."

What we just did — in simplified version — is what epigraphers do every day, except they command hundreds of conventions, collate several sources, and debate each reading in specialized articles. But the mechanism is the same: break the image into elements, identify each sign, recompose the sense. And there is a magical moment in the process: when the elements click and the image becomes a sentence, the reader feels five centuries crossed in a leap.

This exercise also reveals the system's honest limits, already discussed: the scene tells us what happened and when, but not who ordered the conquest, how many died, what the vanquished thought. For that we have alphabetic chronicles and archaeology.

The codex gives the skeleton; other sources supply the flesh. Good history, like good reading, combines all the bones.



There is a final, hopeful note to this chapter. After five centuries of silence, the glyphs are being read again — and not only by academics. In workshops across Mexico, young Nahuas learn to paint their names with rebus, to write their towns with toponymic glyphs, to compose new lienzos with the old conventions. Contemporary artists incorporate glyphs into murals, tattoos, and graphic design; typographers design fonts that digitize the ancient signs; teachers use them in classrooms to show children their language can be written — and painted.

Those new readers will never be identical to the old ones: they lack the oral tradition that completed the image, and they read through grammars and dictionaries, not from masters' voices. But something essential is recovered: the conviction that the ancestors'

marks are not decoration but writing, and that a writing system is not an antiquarian curiosity but a living tool. The glyphs survived the bonfires; they may yet survive oblivion.

Behind each of those glyphs, however, stood a hand: a man — or a woman — who ground the pigments, stretched the paper, and traced the signs. The next chapter is devoted to them: the *tlacuilome*, the painter-scribes whose craft made everything we have read possible.

Chapter 2 — The Tlacuilo's Craft

Before there was a painted glyph, there was a tree. Before there was a book, there were hands beating bark, grinding colored stones, sharpening reeds. The codex was the end of a long chain of crafts, and each link demanded specialized knowledge. This chapter follows that chain: from tree to paper, from paper to book, from book to the hand that paints it.

The word *tlacuilo* means "one who writes by painting." The Nahuatl verb *tlacuiloahua* covers both actions without distinguishing them: writing and painting were, for the Nahuas, a single activity. That conceptual unity is the key to the craft. The *tlacuilo* was not a copyist reproducing letters nor an artist decorating for pleasure: he was the technician of collective memory, the man who turned discourse, accounts, and history into lasting images. His work sustained the state — without tribute books there is no empire — sustained religion — without ritual books there is no calendar — and sustained the people's identity — without annals there is no past.

There is a detail that reveals the craft's importance: in the tribute lists paid by subjected towns, *amate* paper appears as a tribute good, and palace records note entire wards devoted to producing book materials. The Mexica state did not only consume codices: it produced them as planned, as it produced weapons or maintained

causeways. Memory was infrastructure, and the tlacuilo was its engineer.

That centrality explains the respect the craft enjoyed, but also its vulnerability. When the state that sustained it collapsed, the palace workshops lost their reason for being overnight. Surviving tlacuilmome had to find new patrons — friars, colonial officials, town caciques — and adapt their art to commissions their masters would not have recognized: catechisms, censuses, maps for lawsuits. That they managed it, and that the tradition survived two more centuries, speaks of extraordinary resilience: the craft reinvented itself without losing its core.

This chapter follows the complete chain, from tree to book and from book to hand. By the end, the reader will know what lay behind each painted page: how many trees, how many ground stones, how many hours of labor, how many years of learning. A codex will stop being a pretty object and become what it truly is: the most refined product of an economy of knowledge.

Amate Paper

The most characteristic support of the Nahua book is the amatl, the bark paper the Spaniards called "amate paper," still made today in some Mexican communities with techniques very like the pre-Hispanic ones. Its raw material is the inner bark of several fig trees of the genus ficus — the amates and jonotes — growing in the hot lowlands.

The process began with gathering: long strips of bark were cut and the fibrous inner layer separated, discarding the rough outer bark. Those strips were boiled in water with ash or lime, an alkaline bath

that softened and cleaned the fibers. Then came the roughest and most delicate work at once: on a smooth stone the wet strips were laid out, crisscrossed in layers, and beaten with a grooved stone until the fibers interwove into a continuous sheet. The beating demanded strength and rhythm, but also judgment: too much broke the sheet, too little left it falling apart. The sheets dried in the sun and were then polished, sometimes with a smooth stone or starch, to give a surface fit for painting.

The result was a light-brown, fibrous, tough paper, very unlike European paper. It was not cut into loose leaves for binding: long strips were joined and then folded screen-like, like an accordion. That format — the folded strip — lets a codex be unfolded on a table and a whole story read at a glance, scene by scene, without turning pages. Some surviving amate codices measure several meters long when fully unfolded.

Amate also had symbolic value. It was the paper of sacred books and important documents, and its making was surrounded with care. When the Spaniards introduced European rag paper, colonial tlacuilome adopted the new support for many documents — it is smoother and takes the quill's ink better — but amate never wholly disappeared: it kept being used for certain ritual books and community documents, and its technique survives to this day in artisans' hands.

Amate, moreover, had its own ritual life: it was not only a writing support but a sacred object. Amate paper was burned in offerings, gods were dressed in paper garments, the names of the dead were written on amate. The paper partook of the sacredness it recorded, and that sacredness explains the care of its making: making amate was, in a way, a ritual act. The artisans of San Pablito still keep

prayers and offerings tied to the making, an echo of that sacredness.

And amate was a political good: producing towns delivered it as tribute, and the state redistributed it to the workshops. Controlling paper was controlling writing, and controlling writing was controlling memory. It is no accident that, after the conquest, the Spaniards tried to monopolize European paper: whoever controls the medium controls the discourse. Amate's history is also a history of power.



Deerskin and Cloth

Amate was not the only support. For the most luxurious and durable books, tlacuilome used cured deerskin: cleaned, thinned, and polished to a smooth cream-colored surface on which colors sat with extraordinary vividness. Deerskin was costly and scarce — each book demanded the hunting and curing of several animals —

so it was reserved for masterpieces: the great ritual books of the Borgia group, for instance, are painted on deerskin, and it is partly thanks to that support that they reach us with colors nearly intact after five hundred years.

The third support was cotton cloth, the lienzo. On large cloths were painted maps, extensive genealogies, and the so-called "foundation lienzos" many towns kept as primordial titles to their lands. The Lienzo de Tlaxcala, painted in the colonial era, is a famous example: a great cloth narrating the Tlaxcalans' alliance with the Spaniards and their military campaigns, meant to be shown and read in public, almost like a portable mural.

Each support imposed its technique. On amate, paint was applied in washes the fiber absorbed; on polished skin, colors sat on the surface with an almost enameled brilliance; on cloth, drawing had to be broader and legible at a distance. The tlacuilo commanded all three, choosing the support by the book's destiny: a tribute record for the palace archive needed none of a ritual tonalamatl's luxury, while a communal map meant for lawsuits before colonial justice was best large and clear.

Formats varied too: the screen-folded strip for annals and ritual books; the scroll for certain documents; the spread lienzo for maps; and, after the conquest, the European-style bound book, with sewn folios, which colonial tlacuilome adopted for works like the Florentine Codex. That adaptability of format is further proof that the painted-book tradition was a living system, able to incorporate new materials without losing its inner logic.

The large lienzos, for their part, had a public function distinguishing them from books: they were exhibited. At feasts, trials, and

ambassadors' receptions, lienzos were unfolded before the audience while a reader interpreted them aloud, pointing at each scene. They were portable murals, and their size answered that function: they had to be read at a distance, hence large figures and clear compositions. The Lienzo de Tlaxcala, with its battle and alliance scenes, was conceived to be seen by multitudes, not studied in private.

That public dimension of the lienzo reminds us of something essential: Mesoamerican painting was not an art of intimate contemplation but of collective communication. Books were read before audiences, lienzos exhibited in plazas, murals covered temples. It was a public art for a public memory, and that collective vocation gave it its force and meaning.

Inks, Colors, and Brushes

If the support was the book's body, color was its voice. The tlacuilo's palette came from earth, insects, plants, and minerals, and each color demanded its own preparation. Modern chemical analyses of the codices have identified the ingredients precisely, yielding an inventory of the Mesoamerican pharmacy of color.

Black came from charcoal or soot, ground superfine: the color of drawing, of the outlines structuring all painting. White came from calcium carbonate, lime, or white clays like tizatl. Red had several sources: red earth ochre, and above all cochineal grana, the nopal-cactus parasite producing one of the most intense and stable reds humanity knows; cochineal was so valuable it became a prized tribute item and, after the conquest, one of New Spain's most lucrative exports. Yellow and ochre came from ferruginous earths; blue from indigo or the extraordinary "Maya blue," a

mineral-vegetable pigment of nearly miraculous stability; green by mixing blue and yellow; brown from burnt earths.

Pigments were ground on metates to an impalpable powder and mixed with a binder — usually a vegetable gum or plant mucilage — fixing them to the support. Preparation was itself a craft: a badly ground red turned out sandy, a mismeasured binder made paint flake off over the years. That pre-Hispanic codices' colors remain alive after five centuries speaks of their makers' mastery.

The tlacuilo's instruments were simple and effective: brushes of thin reed or feather, with superfine tips for outline drawing; awls for tracing; rudimentary rulers and compasses for straight lines and calendar circles. Drawing was done first in black, with a sure, continuous stroke scholars still admire: codex lines have a calligraphic fluency only years of practice achieve. Then flat colors were applied, without shading or perspective, because codex painting did not seek volume or depth: it sought the sign's clarity. Each figure had to read at a glance, and color served to distinguish, to rank, and to beautify — not to imitate reality.

Grinding pigments was an art demanding ear as well as eye: the experienced grinder told by the metate's sound whether the grain was right, and by touch whether fineness sufficed. A badly ground pigment ruined a whole page: coarse grains left a sandy texture no fine drawing could disguise. Color preparers were therefore respected specialists, with their own standing in the workshop.

And binders deserve mention: without the vegetable mucilage fixing pigment to support, colors would have faded within decades. Binder recipes — which plant, in what proportion, with what boiling — were workshop secrets passed from master to disciple. Modern chemistry

has identified some of these compounds, but not all: the codices still keep laboratory secrets, and each analysis opens new questions about the Mesoamerican pharmacy of color.



The Scribe-Painter and His Guild

Who were the *tlacuilome*? The sources describe them as a specialized group, trained in the schools and attached to palaces, temples, and wards. It was no casually learned craft: it demanded years of training in drawing, in the glyph system, in each book genre's contents, and in support- and color-making techniques. A *tlacuilo* had to be, at once, draftsman, scribe, accountant, knower of the calendar, and versed in history and religion. He was, in the fullest sense, an intellectual.

His social standing was high. They worked for the *tlatoani* and the lords, in palace workshops producing the state's books; others

served in temples, painting ritual books; still others worked for wards and towns, recording local lands and genealogies. Women also took part in the craft, above all in weaving and material preparation, and there are hints of paintresses in some colonial workshops. The craft tended to be hereditary: tlacuilo families passed their secrets from father to son, like artisan guilds in any civilization.

The tlacuilo's training began in childhood and followed a rigorous curriculum. The apprentice started grinding pigments and making brushes, humble tasks teaching materials from the inside; then copied models — strokes, glyphs, figures — until commanding the line; then learned contents — the calendar, toponyms, each genre's conventions —; and only at the end, after years, was entrusted with a page of his own. It was a classic guild system: apprentice, journeyman, master, with implicit examinations at each stage.

And learning never ended: masters kept studying the old books, copying and commenting on them, in an erudite tradition recalling medieval scribes. Some tlacuilome specialized — some in annals, others in tributes, others in rituals — and that specialization generated schools and styles. The workshop was at once factory and academy: it produced books and produced sages.

After the conquest, the craft did not vanish: it transformed. The friars needed tlacuilome for their evangelizing projects — who better than an Indigenous scribe to paint an image catechism? — and the colonial administration needed them for tribute records, land maps, and censuses. Colonial tlacuilome learned to use the European quill, rag paper, and even the Latin alphabet, and produced an enormous number of documents: they authored most of the codices preserved today in archives and libraries. Their art

mestizo-ized — shading, incipient perspective, more naturalistic faces appear — but the glyph's logic and the page's structure survived for generations.

Style study has, moreover, a forensic application: detecting forgeries. The antiquities market has produced fake codices since the nineteenth century, and experts unmask them by analyzing stroke, pigments, and conventions: a forger may copy figures but rarely commands calligraphic line or ancient color chemistry. Several famous "codices" proved modern frauds thanks to stylistic analysis, and that authentication labor matters as much as decipherment: it protects the archive from contamination.

And style, finally, is the gateway to aesthetics: when we stop seeing codices only as documents and start seeing them as art, a new dimension opens. The Borgia's or the Nuttall's finest pages need no deciphering to move us: their composition, color, and line speak directly to sensibility. The tlacuilome were artists as well as scribes, and recognizing it is no aestheticist luxury: it does them full justice.

The Palace Workshop: Organizing the Work

A large codex was not painted by one person in an afternoon: it was the product of an organized workshop, with division of labor and quality control. Colonial sources and manuscript analysis let us reconstruct how those workshops functioned, above all those attached to the tlatoani's palace, which produced the state's books.

Work began before drawing: the support had to be prepared — cutting and joining amate strips, curing and polishing skins — pigments ground, brushes made. Assistants and apprentices likely did these tasks, while masters reserved drawing and composition.

Then came tracing: the master drew in black the skeleton of the whole page or strip — figures, glyphs, divisions — sometimes with stencils or models copied from earlier books. Next, colorists applied flat colors, each perhaps specializing in one color or zone. Finally, the master reviewed, corrected, and added fine details: faces, hands, small glyphs.

Modern codex analysis confirms this organization: in a single manuscript several hands can sometimes be distinguished — a firm draftsman and a shakier one, a colorist commanding red and another preferring blue — and there are pages showing second thoughts: a corrected glyph, a painted-over color, a repainted figure. Those mistakes are a gift to researchers, showing the work process, the doubts and decisions of the workshop.

Palace workshops worked on state commission: official annals, tribute records, conquest maps. Temple workshops produced ritual books under strict priestly supervision, since an error in a sacred almanac could have religious consequences. And there were ward or town workshops, humbler, serving local commissions: land titles, cacique genealogies, confraternity records. This workshop network explains the variety of styles we see in codices: there is no single "Mexica style," but regional and workshop traditions, like any civilization's pictorial schools.

Apprenticeship began early and was long. A boy destined for the tlacuilo's craft — usually a calmecac pupil, often the son or nephew of a master — entered the workshop as a child and spent years on menial tasks: grinding pigments, preparing paper, copying borders and frames. Only gradually was he entrusted with simple glyphs — day signs, numerals — and then with compositions of increasing complexity. The master corrected by painting over: in some

codices, modern analysis detects underlying strokes, the fossil record of learning.

The workshop had its hierarchy: apprentices, journeymen, and masters, each with tasks and responsibilities. Masters directed important commissions, designed compositions, and taught; the experienced painted central figures and delicate details; apprentices filled backgrounds, ruled lines, prepared materials. In great state projects — a new tribute register, a temple's annals — several workshops could collaborate, each painting sections later joined, like a modern publishing house's departments.

Discipline matched the schools': precision was demanded, errors punished, and slowness reproached. But there was also pride: finishing a fine page, having it approved by the master, seeing it read before the community, were rewards that compensated the years of grinding cochineal. And there was something more: the apprentice knew he was entering a lineage. The workshop's tools — brushes, burnishers, pigment pots — passed from master to disciple like a legacy, and with them passed the secrets: which plant yielded the most lasting blue, how to fix gold dust, what order to paint a complex scene in. The tlacuilo's craft was, in that sense, hereditary knowledge, and each generation guarded it as its most precious capital.

The Tlacuilo's Signature: Style and Authorship

Codices bear no signature — no tlacuilo painted his name at his work's foot — but they have authors: style. Each painter had his hand, his way of tracing a line, drawing an eye, composing a scene, and modern specialists have learned to recognize those individual hands with surprising precision. In the Florentine Codex, for

instance, several different painters have been identified by style; in the Pilgrimage Strip, by contrast, everything indicates a single hand from start to finish.

This hand identification is no connoisseur's game: it is a historical tool. If two manuscripts were painted by the same hand, they were probably made in the same workshop at the same time; if one manuscript shows two hands, it was perhaps painted in two campaigns or finished by the master's disciples. Style allows dating, locating, and relating manuscripts, thus reconstructing the workshops' geography.

There is more: style reveals personality. Some tlacuilome were sober and precise, of contained line and clear compositions; others exuberant, of loose stroke and scenes full of anecdotal detail. Some copied models faithfully; others innovated, introducing European elements, playing with perspective. Behind official anonymity stand individuals with tastes, quirks, and talents, and learning to see them is one of the pleasures of studying codices: suddenly, among hundreds of anonymous figures, a familiar hand is recognized.

Researchers have proposed conventional names for these anonymous masters — "the Master of the Boturini," "the Strip's painter" — and though we will never know their true names, those nicknames are an act of justice: they return authorship to those official history denied it. Each codex is the work of someone who spent months bent over paper, and he deserves to be remembered as an artist, not only as a craftsman.

From Screenfold to European Book: Colonial Adaptation

The conquest did not finish the tlacuilome, but it changed their working conditions, and colonial codices show that transformation page by page. The most visible change is format: the screen-folded strip yields ground to the European-style bound book, with numbered, sewn folios. The change affects reading: the screenfold unfolds and reads in one panoramic glance; the book is leafed through page by page. They are two different experiences, and tlacuilome had to relearn composing for the new format.

The second change is support: European rag paper, smoother and more uniform than amate, prevails in urban workshops. The stroke turns finer, details smaller, and the feather quill appears beside the reed brush. The third change is style: Indigenous painters absorb European elements — shading, incipient perspective, three-quarter faces, background landscapes — and combine them with glyph tradition. The result is the so-called "mestizo style," visible in the Florentino, the Mendoza, and dozens of lesser manuscripts: neither purely Indigenous nor purely European, but an original synthesis.

The fourth change is deepest: literacy. Youths trained at the College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco learned to write Nahuatl in Latin letters, and that technology transformed the painting-word relationship. Now the discourse that once lived in the reader's memory could be written at the image's foot, and many colonial codices combine painted glyphs with alphabetic texts in Nahuatl or Spanish. That combination is a mine for modern researchers — alphabetic text helps decipher the glyph — but it also marks the beginning of the end: as alphabetic writing imposed itself, painting lost its recording function and remained as mere illustration.

Even so, tradition resisted longer than usually believed. In the towns, scribes kept painting primordial titles and land maps into the

eighteenth century, and in some cases the nineteenth, because before colonial courts a painted lienzo with the town's history outweighed a thousand words. The tlacuilo art's last flame did not go out in the conquest: it burned, ever fainter, for two more centuries.

Amate Today: Artisanal Survival

The amate technique did not die with the tlacuilome: it survived in Puebla's mountains, in the hands of the Otomi artisans of San Pablito Pahuatlan, who never stopped making bark paper. For centuries they used it for their own ends — paper for ritual cuttings, offerings, ceremonial uses — keeping the boiling, beating, and sun-drying technique alive with astonishing fidelity.

In the mid-twentieth century, San Pablito's amate found a new destiny: painters. Artists and middlemen discovered that brown, fibrous paper was an extraordinary painting support, and commercial "amate paper" was born, decorated with scenes of peasant life, feasts, dances, and pre-Hispanic motifs, sold in markets and craft shops across Mexico. The business transformed the town's economy — hundreds of families now live from paper — but also transformed the technique: to meet demand, processes were simplified, more bark species are used, and paper is dyed in colors.

Purists lament commercialization; anthropologists study it as cultural adaptation. But one fact nobody disputes: thanks to San Pablito, the amate technique is no academic reconstruction but a living, unbroken tradition. When a researcher wants to understand how tlacuilome made their paper, there is no need to guess: he can go to San Pablito, sit beside an artisan woman, and watch. Her

hands repeat thousand-year-old gestures.

And there is an artistic epilogue: great twentieth-century Mexican painters — Rufino Tamayo, Francisco Toledo among them — used amate as a support for contemporary artworks, closing a five-century circle: the codex paper returned to great painting. Every time a tourist buys a painted amate sheet in a market, unknowingly he touches pre-Hispanic book technology.

The amate technique found, in the twentieth century, an unexpected ally: ecology. The fig trees used for paper — the jonotes — grow fast and resprout after bark harvest, making amate a renewable, sustainable material. In a world worried about ecological footprint, pre-Hispanic paper turns out to be an avant-la-lettre green technology: biodegradable, low-energy, locally produced. San Pablito's artisans, unknowingly, practice a millennial circular economy.

And demand keeps growing: designers, architects, and artists worldwide seek amate for art, decoration, even fashion projects. The codex paper, born to keep an empire's memory, has become a global material. Each sheet leaving San Pablito invisibly carries the tlacuilome's technique: the boiling, the beating, the sun-drying. The chain did not break; it only changed hands and destiny.

The Techialoyan Codices: The Last Flowering

One group of manuscripts deserves its own place in this history, representing the painted book's last great flowering: the Techialoyan codices. Some five dozen documents produced between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in central Mexican towns, combining traditional painting with

alphabetic Nahuatl texts to defend communal lands.

Their name comes from San Antonio Techialoyan, whence the most studied exemplar originates, but they were made in many localities. Their format is characteristic: strips or quires of amate paper — yes, still amate, two centuries after the conquest — painted in an unmistakable, naive, vigorous style mixing traditional glyphs with churches, saints, and colonial scenes. Their content is juridical-narrative: the town's founding, the Spaniards' arrival, boundaries, titles, all painted to be shown before judges and authorities.

The Techialoyan posed researchers a decades-long enigma: were they authentic documents or pious forgeries? Some looked "too perfect," with a suspicious patina of age. Modern studies — led by Donald Robertson's work and continued by Mexican researchers — have shown they are essentially authentic: genuine products of late Indigenous scribes still commanding the pictographic tradition and using it for legal ends. Their "archaizing style" is no forgery but deliberate conservatism: for the document to seem venerable and legitimate, it suited it to look old.

The Techialoyan prove the tlacuilo tradition did not die in the sixteenth century but adapted, sheltered in the towns, and kept serving its people for two hundred more years. They are the painted book's swan song, and one of the most moving testimonies of Indigenous cultural resistance: when nobody in the cities could read glyphs anymore, in the towns there were still hands painting them to defend the land.

The Techialoyan have, moreover, a feature making them unique: they are performative documents. They were not meant for a silent

archive but to be exhibited: unfolded before the judge, shown at town assemblies, carried in procession. Their large format, vivid colors, and blend of old and new were calculated to impress. They were, in the most literal sense, a staging of legitimacy: the town presenting itself before justice with its painted history under its arm.

And their study has transformed our image of the late colony. For long it was believed that by 1700 Indigenous pictographic culture was dead; the Techialoyan show it alive, adapted, and functional. They force revising the tradition's "death" chronology: not a sharp cut in 1521 but a two-century decline, with late flowerings. Cultural history rarely has exact death dates, and the Techialoyan are the proof.

Women in the Workshop: The Forgotten Paintresses

The tlacuilo's story has been told almost always in the masculine, and it is time to ask about women. Did Nahua women paint codices? The honest answer is: we know little, but what little we know suggests their participation was greater than usually admitted.

Start with the certain: women commanded textile techniques — spinning, weaving, embroidery — and Mesoamerican weaving is, in many ways, a parallel writing: huipil designs encode identity, rank, and cosmology in a visual language kin to the codices'. The boundary between "weaving designs" and "painting glyphs" was permeable, and many women likely handled the visual repertoire as fluently as male tlacuilome.

In material preparation, female participation is documented: bark

boiling, pigment grinding, brush making were domestic tasks involving the whole family. And in colonial workshops there are hints — signatures, testimonies, recorded payments — of women who painted, above all in minor document production and manuscript illumination. The Florentine Codex mentions female crafts in detail, and though it names no painters, the context suggests their presence.

Why, then, the invisibility? Partly because the sources — written by male friars and officials — recorded public, masculine crafts and ignored domestic, female labor. Partly because the palace *tlacuilo*, painter of the state's great books, was indeed a masculine elite craft. But reducing the painted-book world to the palace workshop is a mistake: *amate* production, color preparation, *lienzo* weaving, and probably much local document painting involved women whose names history did not record.

Recovering them is pending work. Every time a researcher finds in an archive a payment to a "paintress" or mention of a woman who "knows how to paint," a slit opens onto that invisible workshop. The forgotten painters deserve their place in this history, even if — for now — it is the place of an open question.

There is, besides, an indirect argument for female participation: iconography. In several codices women appear doing activities implying image handling — weaving complex designs, preparing offerings with elaborate visual arrangement, joining rites where body painting is central. Those images suggest a shared visual world, where women were not passive spectators but producers of visual meaning. The modern boundary between "art" and "craft," "painting" and "weaving," did not exist: all was *tlahcuilolli*, all was writing-painting.

And there is a late but eloquent testimony: in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century land lawsuits, women appear — *cacicas*, *principales* — presenting, defending, and interpreting painted documents before courts. Those women could read glyphs, and probably some could paint them. Visual literacy was no masculine monopoly, though elite workshops were. Each document defended by a woman proves pictographic knowledge circulated beyond the palace workshop.

The Price of a Book: The Codex Economy

How much did a codex cost? The question seems prosaic, but it illuminates the whole system: a pre-Hispanic book was an expensive object, and its cost explains who could commission them, who read them, and why they were kept so jealously.

Start with materials. A several-meter amate strip demanded dozens of trees' bark and weeks of gatherers', boilers', and beaters' work. A cured, polished deerskin demanded hunting — a regulated, elite activity — curing, and polishing: each skin book represented several deer and weeks of labor. Costly pigments — cochineal, Maya blue, ground turquoise — came from long-distance trade at luxury prices. A large ritual codex's materials alone could equal a small town's annual tribute.

Then, labor. A master *tlacuilo* took months to paint an important manuscript: tracing a five-meter strip at one or two pages a day, plus color preparation and correction, summed hundreds of workdays. And he did not work alone: apprentices, material preparers, and the sage supervising contents also ate during those months. A palace workshop was a firm with fixed costs, sustained by the state.

Who paid? The state, temples, and nobility: the only ones with resources. Official annals, tribute records, and great ritual books were institutional commissions, funded from the empire's surplus. Towns and wards commissioned humbler documents — a land title, a local genealogy — paid with communal labor or collective funds. A rich private person might commission a personal tonalamatl to learn his omens, as one today commissions a luxury horoscope.

This economy explains two things. First, why books were kept in institutional libraries — palace, temple — not private homes: they were capital goods, the state's patrimony. Second, why their destruction was also economic destruction: burning a library destroyed generations of accumulated investment. And it explains, finally, why colonial codices are humbler: without the Mexica state to fund them, workshops survived on lesser commissions — land suits, censuses, catechisms — and the great pre-Hispanic luxury book was never produced again.

Copying to Preserve: The Ancient Facsimile Tradition

Long before printing and photography, the Nahuas practiced the art of copying: workshops produced replicas of old books, whether to replace deteriorated copies, to endow new institutions with archives, or to update records. That practice — manual facsimile — is one reason the tradition survived so long, and understanding it illuminates the relationship among the manuscripts we keep.

Copying a codex was no mechanical job: it was an erudite operation. The copyist had to understand what he copied, since glyphs cannot be traced without comprehending them; and in copying, he inevitably updated: correcting the model's errors,

adding recent events, adapting toponyms to his era's pronunciation. Each copy was thus a critical edition in the modern sense: faithful to the original, but alive. Researchers sometimes distinguish several "layers" in a manuscript — an ancient core and later additions — precisely from these updates.

The *Matrícula de Tributos* and the *Codex Mendoza*, seen in the previous chapter, are the classic example: two divergent copies of a lost original, each with its updates and errors. But there are more cases: the Pilgrimage Strip shows signs of having been copied from an earlier model; several Techialoyan codices copy formulas from one another; and colonial annals — like the *Anales de Tlatelolco* — combine copied glyphs with new alphabetic texts.

This copy culture had an institution: the schools. *Tlacuilo* apprentices learned by copying the workshop's books, and those learning copies — sometimes clumsy, sometimes brilliant — were the mechanism by which models passed from generation to generation. A workshop was, in this sense, a publishing house: it produced, reproduced, and distributed books.

And there is a consequence for modern research: when we date a codex, we must distinguish copy date from content date. A manuscript painted in 1550 may contain 1350 annals faithfully copied; an "archaic" glyph may be the copyist's deliberate archaism. Source criticism — asking not only what a document says, but when and why it was copied — is as necessary with codices as with European medieval manuscripts. The *tlacuilo*me, unknowingly, invented philology.

The last *tlacuilo* on record worked well into the eighteenth century, painting land titles for his town. For him, the painted-book tradition

was ending, displaced by alphabetic writing. But it did not die entirely: it survived in peoples' memory, in lienzos kept in communal houses, and it was reborn in the twentieth century when researchers learned to read the glyphs anew. Every time an epigrapher deciphers a codex page today, a tlacuilo dead five hundred years speaks again.

A final reflection on the tlacuilo's art. We are used to thinking of the "artist" as a modern invention — the solitary genius, the signed work, the original creation. The tlacuilo fits none of those molds: he worked in teams, signed nothing, and repeated inherited conventions. Does that make him less an artist? Only if we accept a narrow definition of art. If art is the mastery of materials in service of meaning, the tlacuilo was an artist of the first rank: his line had the confidence of long training, his compositions the intelligence of one who thinks in images, his color the sensitivity of one who knows what each hue says.

The European Renaissance, contemporary with the late tlacuilo, was inventing the artist as individual; the Nahua world kept the artist as functionary of the collective — and both produced masterpieces. There is no need to choose: the lesson is that art takes the forms each society needs. The tlacuilo's anonymity is not a lack but a statement: the work mattered more than the hand, the message more than the messenger. And yet, paradoxically, the hands speak: modern scholars can distinguish individual painters by their stroke, their palette, their habits, like paleographers distinguishing medieval copyists. The tlacuilo did not sign, but they left fingerprints.

The most famous of all the books those hands painted — the one that best shows what the tlacuilo's art could achieve when empire,

craft, and history converged — is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3 — The Codex Mendoza

Of all the painted books of the Nahua world, one scholars consider American ethnohistory's masterpiece: the Codex Mendoza. It is not the oldest nor the most beautiful in the ritual sense, but it is the most complete as a civilization's document: in its pages stand the Mexica kings' history, the empire's accounting, and its people's daily life, painted by Indigenous tlacuilome barely twenty years after Tenochtitlan's fall, when memory was still fresh and the elders who had lived the pre-Hispanic world could still tell it.

The codex owes its name to Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza, New Spain's first ruler, by whose order — or at least under whose patronage — it was painted around 1541 or 1542. The story of its commission is itself a colonial-history lesson: the Spanish administration needed to understand how the empire it had conquered worked — how tribute was collected, who the lords were, how society was organized — to govern and exploit it. And who better to explain it than the tlacuilome themselves, working under Indigenous informants' supervision with Spanish glosses added by an interpreter? The result is a unique mestizo document: Indigenous painting with European explanations, the Mexica empire described by its own scribes for its new masters.

The original manuscript, painted on European paper, crossed the

Atlantic bound for Spain but never arrived: the ship carrying it was captured by French pirates, and the codex ended up, by paths historians have reconstructed with detective patience, in Oxford University's library, where it remains today. Its rediscovery for modern science came in the nineteenth century, and it has been studied ever since. The current reference edition is the one Frances Berdan and Patricia Anawalt published in 1992, four volumes reproducing each page in color with exhaustive commentary: the obligatory gateway for anyone wanting to know the Mexica world from inside.

Before entering its three sections, it helps to place the reader before the physical object, for the Mendoza is no ordinary book: a 71-folio European-paper manuscript, painted in color by Indigenous hands, with Spanish glosses, European-bound, kept at Oxford. Each feature tells a story: the European paper speaks of the colony; the Indigenous painting, of surviving tradition; the glosses, of two worlds' encounter; the binding, of adaptation; Oxford, of the mishap voyage. Holding the facsimile — or on screen — means holding a mestizo object in the most literal sense.

And a word on this chapter's tone: the Mendoza deserves admiration, but not idolatry. It is an exceptional document, but also an interested one — commissioned by a viceroy, painted under colonial supervision, filtered by European glossators. Reading it well demands both attitudes at once: wonder at what it preserves and caution toward what it hides. That double attitude is, at bottom, the historian's toward any source, and the Mendoza is an excellent school for learning it.



A Story Written by a Viceroy's Order

Let us dwell on the commission's circumstances, for they illuminate the whole document. Around 1540, New Spain was barely two decades old. The Spaniards controlled the territory, but the Mexica empire's administrative machinery — the tribute system feeding Tenochtitlan — still functioned largely with Indigenous personnel

and criteria. For the viceroy's officials, understanding that system was no academic curiosity: it was fiscal necessity. They needed to know which towns paid, how much, how often, and through which local chiefs.

The solution was to commission the tlacuilome an updated copy of the imperial records. The painters worked from pre-Hispanic documents — very likely an original *Matrícula de Tributos* — and elders' memory, producing a manuscript combining old and new: Indigenous tradition's structure and glyphs, plus Spanish glosses explaining each page for the Spanish reader. Those glosses are a treasure and a problem at once: treasure, because they clarify many glyphs otherwise ambiguous; problem, because sometimes the glossator misunderstood what he saw, and the modern researcher must collate painting with text to decide which to believe.

The codex comprises 71 painted folios organized in three well-differentiated sections. That tripartition is no accident: it answers three questions the colonial power needed answered — who were the kings and what did they do? what does each province tribute? how do these people live? — and, by happy coincidence, those three questions are also the ones a modern historian would ask. The Codex Mendoza is, unintentionally, the best Mexica history manual in existence.

First Section: The History of the Lords

The first section takes the opening folios and narrates Tenochtitlan's history from its founding to the conquest, reign by reign. Each ruler appears with his personal glyph beside his head, seated on his command mat, and around him unfold his reign's events: conquests

represented by the vanquished city's glyph crowned with a burning temple; years counted with calendar signs; descent lines connecting fathers to sons.

What is notable about this section is its official sobriety. It is history seen from the palace: a succession of legitimate lords, each greater and more powerful than the last, whose conquests justify the empire. There are no dissidences here, no alternative versions; it is the memory the Mexica state wanted to bequeath. But even that official version is rich: it gives the complete tlatoque list, reign dates, conquest order, and a clear idea of how the empire saw itself.

Researchers have collated this painted history with alphabetic chronicles by Indigenous and mestizo authors — like those by Texcocan nobility descendants — and the agreement is notable. Where they differ, the difference itself is informative: each source defends a legitimacy, and comparing them lets us reconstruct not only what happened but how each group remembered what happened. The Codex Mendoza, in this sense, is not only a data source: it is a monument of Indigenous historiography, proof the Mexica had a structured historical consciousness and an apparatus to preserve it.

One revealing detail of this section is the treatment of defeated or illegitimate rulers: they simply do not appear, or appear diminished. Official Mexica history is a gallery of winners, and failures — rebellions, deposed kings, defeats — are silenced or minimized. Researchers must read between lines: when a reign is presented without conquests, or succession jumps from one king to another unexplained, there is probably a crisis the painting prefers not to tell. Official history's silences are, paradoxically, among its most

eloquent sources.

Another notable aspect is women's presence in this men's history. They appear little — wives, mothers, daughters — but when they appear, their presence is significant: a marriage to another lordship's princess sealed an alliance, and the wife's glyph beside the king's recorded that pact. Genealogies, read attentively, are also marriage-alliance maps, revealing Mexica power was woven in beds as much as on battlefields. It is a patriarchal history, no doubt, but not an exclusively masculine one.

What is most striking about the conquest narrative is its compression: a century of imperial expansion — dozens of campaigns, sieges, alliances, betrayals — told in some seventy pages, each conquest reduced to a town glyph pierced by the symbols of war. It is history at a gallop, and its speed is deliberate: this section was not meant for study but for display, a visual summary of Mexica power for readers who already knew the details from songs and annals. The codex gives the skeleton; memory supplied the flesh.

That compression had a political function aimed at the Spanish reader too: the Mendoza's conquest section is, in effect, an argument. It says: this is the empire you inherited; these are the towns that paid tribute to Moctezuma and now owe it to the King of Spain; this is the order you must preserve. Each conquered glyph is a title deed, each burning temple a proof of legitimate dominion transferred. The Mexica past is exhibited not as antiquarian curiosity but as legal precedent.

And yet, beneath the administrative logic, the section preserves something the Spaniards did not commission: the Mexica vision of

their own history. The omens preceding the conquest — the celestial prodigies, the prophecies of Quetzalcoatl's return — appear in this section's margins and in related manuscripts, and they reveal a people trying to make sense of catastrophe with their own categories. The Mendoza does not narrate the Spanish conquest itself — its history stops at the empire's height — but the shadow of what followed falls across its pages for the modern reader. It is a portrait of power painted on power's eve of collapse.

Second Section: The Tribute of the Provinces

The second section is the codex's most famous and most valuable for economic history: a complete record of imperial tribute, province by province. Each page — or page pair — covers a tributary province: the margins show its towns' glyphs, and at center, painted with accounting clarity, the goods owed and the quantities.

The inventory amazes by detail. There are warrior costumes and shields for the army; cotton mantles of various sizes and qualities, functioning almost as currency; maize, beans, chia, and amaranth in measured amounts; cacao, the precious lowland grain; quetzal and other birds' feathers tied in bundles; gold in dust and pieces; jade and turquoise; copal for temples; amate paper; mats and gourds; even slaves for sacrifice or service. Each good bears its quantifier: the number system's dots and flags tell whether four hundred mantles or four thousand maize loads.

This section is, literally, the empire's painted budget. Thanks to it we know which regions produced which goods, which were the richest provinces, how burdens distributed, what wealth volume flowed yearly to Tenochtitlan. Economists and historians have calculated, from these pages, the imperial economy's size with a

precision few ancient states allow. And there is a moving detail: on several pages, beside pre-Hispanic goods, appear annotations of new tributes imposed by the Spaniards — a painted proof of transition between two worlds, from Mexica empire to colony.

The Matrícula de Tributos, a twin manuscript kept in Mexico, contains essentially the same information, and both are believed to derive from a common pre-Hispanic original. Comparing them has let researchers distinguish traditional from colonial in the record, and refine the reading of quantity glyphs, one of Nahuatl writing's most technical aspects.

The logistics of this information system impress. Each year, the empire's provinces delivered tribute to Tenochtitlan's storehouses, and each delivery was recorded: what arrived, in what quantity, from which town, on which date. Those records were not kept in a single book but in a distributed archive: the palace kept master copies; each province, its local records; each storehouse, its receipts. When a dispute arose — a town claiming to have paid, an official accused of skimming — the painted records were consulted, compared, and used as evidence.

The scribes worked, then, within a bureaucracy with its own rhythms: annual cycles of recording, periodic audits, copies sent to the capital. A matrícula like the surviving one was not an isolated luxury object but the tip of an archival iceberg, most of it lost. What survives gives an idea of the whole: standardized formats, consistent hands, professional quality sustained over decades. It was, by any measure, one of the ancient world's most efficient information systems.

And it was a system that ran on paper — on amate — in quantities

that stagger the imagination. Each year, hundreds of sheets were painted, filled, filed, and eventually retired; workshops consumed tons of pigments and thousands of labor-hours. The empire's administration was also an industry of writing, employing armies of scribes, painters, paper-makers, and pigment traders. When we admire a single tribute page's elegance, we should picture behind it the vast machinery that produced it: the Mesoamerican equivalent of a civil service, working in color.

Third Section: Daily Life

The third section changes register completely: it leaves palace and accounting and enters homes. In a series of admirably observed pages, the tlacuilome painted a common Mexica's life cycle, from birth to death: the child born and named, the differentiated education of boys and girls, school punishments and rewards, the crafts — artisan, merchant, priest, warrior — marriage, the soldier's life on campaign, public offices, and old age.

These pages are a mine for social history. We see how children were educated by rank: nobles' sons in the *calmecac*, commoners' in the *telpochcalli*; we see punishments — nettles, chile smoke, prickings — applied with a severity that chills us today but the Mexica considered character formation; we see girls learning to spin and weave beside mothers, boys learning to fish, farm, and fight beside fathers. We see weddings with their rites, burials with offerings, and the warrior's career capturing prisoners and rising in military hierarchy.

What is extraordinary is that Indigenous people who had lived that world, or known it through parents, painted all this. It is no European friar's curious gaze: it is a society's memory describing

itself. Hence the Mendoza's third section has a human warmth the others lack: here there are no kings or accountants, but families. And hence, when modern readers tour these pages, they feel something like leafing through a five-hundred-year-old family album: they recognize in those punished children, those weddings, those elders, a humanity time has not erased.

There are pages in this section researchers cite moved: the weeping child receiving punishment, the newlyweds tying mantles at the wedding, the bent elder receiving youths' respect. The *tlacuilome* painted social types, not individual portraits, but now and then a gesture of humanity escaped them — a posture, a glance — crossing five centuries. Those gestures make the Mendoza more than a document: a testimony.

And one dimension must not be overlooked: this section proves Mexica society thought of itself as a moral order. Each life stage has its duties, each rank its obligations, each fault its punishment. It is no spontaneous society: it is a society normed to the detail, and the *tlacuilome* painted it as such. For modern readers that normativity may feel oppressive — so much control over private life? — but it also reveals coherence: the Mexica believed social order sustained cosmic order, and educated children accordingly.

The Glossators: Between Two Languages

The Codex Mendoza we study today is not only Indigenous painters' work: it is also the glossators' work, those who added the Spanish explanations accompanying each page. Without those glosses the codex would be far harder to read; with them, it becomes a bilingual document where image and word illuminate each other. But who were those glossators, and how reliable are they?

Everything indicates the main glossator was a Spaniard working with Indigenous interpreters: his Spanish is a colonial official's, and his explanations show someone looking at the painting and asking what it meant. Sometimes he hit the mark, and his gloss is the key deciphering an ambiguous glyph; sometimes he got confused — reading a phonetic sign as pictographic, or attributing to a scene a sense it lacked — and his error stayed fixed in ink for posterity. Modern researchers must thus read the glosses critically: they are the testimony of the first European reading of a codex, valuable and fallible at once.

There is a second, less visible gloss level: the Nahuatl annotations in Latin characters on some pages, probably by the Indigenous collaborators themselves. Those notes are pure gold, representing the Indigenous voice explaining itself in the new writing. And a third level: later corrections and additions by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European readers leafing through the manuscript at Oxford, jotting conjectures in margins. The Mendoza is, in this sense, a palimpsest of readings: each generation left its mark on its pages, and studying the codex means also studying its interpretation's history.

This collaboration — forced, unequal, but collaboration nonetheless — between Indigenous painters and European glossators is the model of many colonial codices. It reminds us these documents are not "pure": they are encounter products, and must be read as such, attending to both voices and the tension between them.

Reading the Mendoza in the sixteenth century was, for a Spaniard, an exercise in productive misunderstanding. The viceroy or the chronicler who opened it saw strange pictures and read the Spanish glosses, believing he understood; but the glosses simplified, the

images said more than the words, and the deepest meanings — the ritual, the cosmological — escaped him entirely. The codex was designed to be read at two levels, and the Spanish reader only reached the first. That partial reading was enough for tribute administration, which was what mattered; the rest remained sealed, waiting for readers the book's makers could not imagine.

The glossator himself — the anonymous hand that wrote the Spanish explanations — deserves a thought. He was probably a mestizo or an Indigenous scholar trained by friars, someone who stood between two worlds and translated one into the other's terms. His glosses are sometimes precise, sometimes confused, occasionally wrong; but without them, the Mendoza would have been unintelligible to its intended readers, and the whole enterprise would have failed. He is the forgotten mediator of this story, the hinge between the tlacuilo's brush and the viceroy's eyes.

That mediation continued in later centuries: each generation of scholars has re-read the Mendoza with new questions — the nineteenth century sought origins, the twentieth structures, the twenty-first agency and resistance — and the manuscript has answered them all, because great documents are inexhaustible. The Mendoza is not a book that is read once: it is a book that is re-read, each time finding something the previous readers missed.

What the Mendoza Does Not Say: The Document's Silences

As important as what the Codex Mendoza says is what it keeps silent. Every document has its silences, and the Mendoza's are eloquent about who commissioned it and why.

The codex does not speak, for instance, of religion with the expected detail: gods appear, feasts are mentioned, but there is nothing like a ritual *tonalamatl*. The reason is practical: the viceroy cared about administration, not theology, and Indigenous informants probably kept the most sacred things silent before the new masters. Silence here is a form of resistance: what is not painted cannot be burned.

Nor does it speak of the conquest from the Mexica side: official history stops, bashfully, before defeat. The historical section's last folios show the empire at its apogee, as if time had halted before 1519. It is grief's silence: the *tlacuilome* painted the world they had lost and refused to paint its destruction.

And it does not speak of the vanquished: the Mendoza's history is Tenochtitlan's history, not the subjected peoples'. Tributary provinces appear as goods lists, not as peoples with their own history. To hear those other voices one must turn to other codices — Texcoco's, Tlaxcala's, the Mixtec towns' — which tell history from tribute's other side.

Recognizing these silences does not diminish the Mendoza's value: it increases it, teaching us to read it as what it is — an official document with a viewpoint — not as absolute truth. Good history is made by crossing sources, and the Mendoza is the first of them, not the only one.

The most strategic silence, perhaps, is the palace economy's: the Mendoza records what entered as tribute, but not what went out — court expenses, officials' salaries, public works' cost. It is an income book without an expense book, and that asymmetry is no accident: the colonial power wanted to know what it could extract, not how

things were administered before. Economic historians must reconstruct the other half with complementary sources, and the resulting picture is inevitably partial.

And there is a final silence, the saddest: the authors'. We do not know the names of the tlacuilome who painted the Mendoza, nor of the elders who advised them, nor of the glossator who wrote the explanations. We know the commissioning viceroy's name and the pirates who stole it, but not its creators'. It is history's usual injustice: remembering the powerful, forgetting the makers. This book, at least, names them by craft — tlacuilome — and returns them, even anonymously, a masterpiece's authorship.

The Berdan-Anawalt Edition and Modern Research

For three centuries, the Codex Mendoza was a poorly known treasure: scholars knew of its existence, some had leafed through it at Oxford, but there was no complete, reliable edition. That changed in 1992, when Frances Berdan and Patricia Anawalt published their four-volume edition: color facsimile reproduction of each folio, transcription and translation of the glosses, and exhaustive page-by-page commentary summarizing all then known about each glyph, toponym, and tribute good.

The Berdan-Anawalt edition is a monument of erudition and, at once, a working tool: thanks to it, a student anywhere in the world can study the Mendoza without traveling to Oxford. But research did not stop in 1992. Since then, epigraphers have refined many glyphs' readings, historians have crossed the Mendoza with new sources, and digital projects have put the facsimile online with interactive annotations.

The Mendoza keeps bearing fruit. Every few years, a researcher discovers in its pages something nobody had seen: an identified toponym, a reinterpreted quantity, a scene illuminating an unknown aspect of Mexica life. It is great documents' privilege: they are not exhausted. And it is also a lesson in method: the 1992 edition did not close debate; it ordered it and made it possible. Science advances when documents are well published, and the Mendoza is the proof.

The 1992 edition also had a democratizing effect its authors perhaps did not foresee: by making the Mendoza accessible, it multiplied the number of people able to study it, and among those new readers were Mexicans. For long, codex research was dominated by Europeans and North Americans; the Berdan-Anawalt edition — and the Mexican facsimiles that followed — let a new generation of Mexican epigraphers speak about their own heritage. Today, some of the best glyph readers work at UNAM and INAH, and that academic reappropriation matters as much as manuscripts' physical repatriation.

And research continues: each year articles appear correcting a reading, identifying a toponym, reinterpreting a Mendoza scene. It is the sign of a living document: great books are not exhausted, because each generation asks them new questions. Our generation's question — how do the tlacuilome's descendants read their ancestors' book? — is only beginning to be formulated, and its answer will change again what we think we know.



The Matrícula de Tributos: The Mexican Twin

The Codex Mendoza is not alone in its genre: it has a twin kept in Mexico, the Matrícula de Tributos. It is a manuscript in pure pre-Hispanic style — painted on amate paper, without European glosses — containing essentially the same tribute information as the Mendoza's second section: the same provinces, goods, and quantities.

The relationship between the two documents has occupied researchers for a century. The most accepted hypothesis is that both derive from a common pre-Hispanic original, now lost: the Matrícula would be a faithful copy of that original, made by tlacuilome keeping tradition intact, while the Mendoza would be a version "translated" for colonial consumption, with glosses and adaptations. Comparing them is like having two photographs of the

same object taken with different cameras: the differences reveal each one's filter.

The Matrícula has special value for epigraphy precisely because it lacks glosses: it forces researchers to read glyphs by themselves, without Spanish's crutch. Decipherments achieved on its pages — identified toponyms, verified quantities — are pure victories of pictographic reading. And it has symbolic value: it is the empire's record kept on Mexican soil, without passing through pirates or foreign libraries.

Together, the Mendoza and the Matrícula form the pre-Hispanic world's most complete tribute archive. Thanks to them we know, with a detail no other ancient empire allows, how an American state's political economy worked: what each region produced, how goods were transported, who received them, how often. It is economic history with hard data, painted by hand.

One technical aspect specialists value in the Matrícula is its quantification system: lacking glosses explaining quantities, the manuscript forces deducing them from pure sign combinatorics, and that exercise has refined our understanding of the number system. Several principles we now take for granted — how flags group, how fractions are indicated — were established by collating the Matrícula with the Mendoza, in a back-and-forth between the two manuscripts that models epigraphic method.

And it has patriotic value, in the best sense: the Matrícula is kept in Mexico, guarded by Mexican institutions, studied by Mexican researchers. Against the great pre-Hispanic codices' diaspora — divided among Oxford, Florence, the Vatican, and London — the Matrícula proves documentary heritage can also stay home. Every

time a Mexican student leafs through it in facsimile, he exercises a right: to read his people's history in the original document, without foreign intermediaries.

The Manuscript's Journey: From Mexico to Oxford

The Codex Mendoza's story after its painting is an adventure novel worth telling, for it explains why the most important document on the Mexica is kept in England, not Mexico. It all began with a robbery on the high seas.

Around 1542, the manuscript was shipped to Spain, probably destined for Charles V's court. But the ship was captured by French corsairs — at the height of Francis I's rivalry with the emperor — and the codex, an exotic, incomprehensible booty for the pirates, ended up in France. There it fell into the hands of royal cosmographer Andre Thevet, a curious scholar collecting New World rarities who annotated the manuscript with his own observations: his signature and notes are still visible on some pages.

From Thevet the codex passed, by not entirely clear paths, to England, where geographer Richard Hakluyt, the great promoter of English voyages of exploration, acquired it. Hakluyt lent it or bequeathed it in academic circles, and finally the manuscript entered Oxford University's Bodleian Library, founded in the early seventeenth century. It has remained there ever since, catalogued, studied, and — in recent decades — digitized.

Each journey stage left its mark: Thevet's French glosses, later English readers' annotations, the library's stamps. The Mendoza is a document with a biography, and its biography is that of European curiosity about the New World: from pirate booty to scholar's

cabinet, from cabinet to university library. That we can consult it online today from anywhere in the world is — for now — that nearly five-century journey's last chapter.

The story has an uncomfortable moral: had the ship not been captured, the codex would have reached Spain, where it might have been lost in some archive, or preserved. Piracy, paradoxically, put it in the hands of those who preserved it. Documents' history, like people's, is made of accidents.

Reading the Mendoza Today: A Guide for the Modern Reader

How does a twenty-first-century reader approach the Codex Mendoza? The good news is it was never so easy: the Berdan-Anawalt facsimile sits in libraries worldwide, and digital versions let one leaf through it page by page in high resolution, zooming to examine each glyph. The bad news is that, unguided, readers get lost: 71 folios of dense painting in a code not ours.

The first advice is to start with the third section, daily life. Its scenes — birth, school, wedding, war — are the most legible to modern eyes, representing recognizable human actions. Once familiar with the painters' style, readers can move to the historical section: following the tlatoque reign by reign, identifying their names' glyphs, counting each reign's years. And last, the tribute section: the most demanding, but also the most rewarding once quantities read and those dots and flags reveal exact accounting.

The second advice is to read with the glosses, but against them: use the Spanish explanations as first approach, but always verify with the image, since the glossator sometimes erred. The third advice is

to compare: having the Matrícula de Tributos at hand — also in facsimile — and collating corresponding pages sharpens reading enormously.

And the fourth advice is the most important: take your time. A codex is not skimmed like a magazine; it is contemplated like a painting and deciphered like a riddle. Each well-read page pays a reward: suddenly, a glyph that was a squiggle becomes a name — "here it says Coatepec" — and readers feel the decipherer's thrill. That thrill, multiplied by hundreds of researchers over a century, is what has given painted books back their voice.

Tenochtitlan in 71 Folios: The City the Mendoza Reveals

Read attentively, the Codex Mendoza is also a portrait of Tenochtitlan, the city that produced it. It has no panoramas or plans — tlacuilome drew no European-style city maps — but information scattered through its pages lets us reconstruct the empire's capital with notable vividness.

The historical section shows the palace as the world's center: enthroned tlatoque, councils, ambassadors' receptions, Great Temple ceremonies. The tribute section shows the city as an economic empire's center: the palace storehouses — the petlacalli — where mantles, maize, and feathers arriving from the provinces were kept; officials recording each delivery; redistribution to army, temples, and nobility. And the daily-life section shows the lived city: the wards — calpulli — with their schools and local temples, the markets, houses, and water streets.

There are details only the Mendoza preserves. Its pages tell us how

each social rank dressed, since the tribute section paints costumes precisely: warrior costumes with insignia, nobles' mantles with designs, commoners' clothing. We know how a warrior armed himself, which shields and devices matched each military grade. We know what common people ate and what was served at palace banquets. It is painted material history: a civilization's visual inventory.

And there is something subtler: the Mendoza conveys the city's self-image. Tenochtitlan presents itself as the ordered center of an ordered world: kings in legitimate succession, provinces paying tribute punctually, families living by the norm. It is propaganda, no doubt, but the propaganda of a city that believed itself — and in many ways was — the greatest and best organized of its world. When Cortes and Bernal Diaz described Tenochtitlan with amazement, they were seeing the city the Mendoza had painted from inside.

The Three Readings of the Mendoza

The Codex Mendoza has been read in three different ways through its history, and each reading reveals as much about the reader as the book. Reviewing them means reviewing the European gaze's history on the Indigenous world.

The first reading was the colonial-administrative: the viceroy's officials leafed through the manuscript seeking practical data — how much does such a province tribute? who are the local lords? For them, the Mendoza was a government manual, and the Spanish glosses were what mattered; the painting was exotic ornament. This utilitarian, superficial reading dominated for two centuries: the codex slept in European libraries, consulted now and then by the

curious.

The second reading was the nineteenth century's antiquarian-romantic: Kingsborough and contemporaries saw in the Mendoza a mysterious monument of a lost civilization, reproducing it in monumental facsimiles. Their interpretation was fanciful — Kingsborough believed Mexicans descended from Israel's lost tribes — but his dissemination labor was invaluable: for the first time, the manuscript circulated among scholars worldwide.

The third reading is the scientific one, twentieth century to today: Berdan, Anawalt, and successors read the Mendoza as what it is — a complex historical document, with layers of authorship, interests, and silences. This reading combines epigraphy, economic history, anthropology, and source criticism, seeking neither quick data nor romantic mysteries but understanding. It is the most demanding and most fruitful reading: each decade adds a new layer of comprehension.

Will there be a fourth reading? Probably: that of Indigenous communities reclaiming their heritage and reading the Mendoza not as a study object but as their own memory. That reading is only beginning, and it promises to change again what we think we know of the manuscript. Books, like peoples, do not finish saying what they have to say.

The Codex Mendoza is, in sum, three books in one: an official history, an imperial budget, and a portrait of daily life. No other sixteenth-century document offers so much about an American civilization. But the Mendoza, complete as it is, is not alone: around it stands a whole family of codices, each with its survival story, which the next chapter tours.

The Mendoza's afterlife in Mexican culture deserves a final note. For the modern Mexican reader, the codex is more than a historical source: it is a family album. Its pages appear in textbooks, museum displays, and popular histories; its tribute lists are quoted in debates about the pre-Hispanic economy; its images — the eagle, the cactus, the warriors — circulate as emblems of identity. Few Mexicans have read the Mendoza page by page, but many recognize its images: they are part of the visual vocabulary of *mexicanidad*.

That familiarity is a double-edged sword. It makes the codex beloved, but it can also make it seem obvious, as if its images needed no interpretation. Nothing is further from the truth: the Mendoza we think we know — the colorful, orderly, legible Mendoza of reproductions — is the product of centuries of scholarly labor that made the strange familiar. Recovering the strangeness, remembering that these pages were once an empire's working documents and not illustrations for schoolbooks, is part of reading them honestly.

And there is a final paradox: the Mendoza, painted to explain Mexico to a Spanish king, ended up explaining Mexico to Mexicans. The book that crossed the Atlantic to justify an empire became, four centuries later, a cornerstone of the national imagination. The *tlacuilome* who painted it could not have foreseen that destiny; but they would have understood it. They knew what they were doing when they painted memory: they were building something to outlast them.

The Mendoza, however, is only the brightest star of a constellation. The next chapter introduces the others.

Chapter 4 — Other Codices of the Tradition

The Codex Mendoza is the brightest star of a constellation. Around it gravitate dozens of painted manuscripts — some pre-Hispanic, most colonial — preserving fragments of Nahua memory: migrations, genealogies, maps, rituals, local tributes, land suits. Each has its own survival story, often novelistic, and together they form the richest pictographic archive of ancient America. This chapter introduces the most important and tells the other story: how so many books were lost, and how the survivors were rescued.

A note on method before starting: when we speak of "codices," we speak of concrete manuscripts, each with its support, date, history, and interpretation problems. This chapter presents them one by one, like characters in a choral novel, because that is the best way to understand them: not as "examples" of a category, but as survivors with biographies. By the end, readers will have a map of the family — who is who, where each one is, what it tells — and can keep exploring on their own.

It is worth starting with a painful figure: of the thousands of books that must have existed in the libraries of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and the other lordships, only about fifteen pre-Hispanic codices survive from all Mesoamerica, and barely a handful are in central Mexico's Nahua tradition. Everything else — the vast majority — was lost:

burned by conquistadors and friars, rotted by damp, devoured by insects, discarded by those who could no longer read it. Colonial codices are more numerous, several hundred, because they kept being painted for two centuries; but they too have suffered terrible losses. Every codex we can open today is a survivor, and its survival is almost always owed to a chain of accidents and of people who decided to keep it.

The Pilgrimage Strip and the Boturini Codex

There is a manuscript every Mexican should know, for it narrates his nation's very origin: the Pilgrimage Strip, also called the Boturini Codex after the Italian antiquarian who rescued it in the eighteenth century. It is an amate-paper strip over five meters long, screen-folded, painted by a single hand in a sober, elegant style, telling the Mexica migration from mythical Aztlan to Tenochtitlan's founding.

Reading advances along a trail of footprints — the graphic convention of travel — snaking through the strip. We see the departure from Aztlan, the white island with its seven caves; the road's stages marked by each place's glyphs and the years each stay lasted; portents and internal discords; arrival at Lake Texcoco and the final prodigy: the eagle on the cactus. It is the Mexica people's founding story, legitimizing their right to land and empire, painted with a great narrator's economy of means: each scene says the essential, nothing more.

The Boturini was probably painted in the sixteenth century's first half, already in the colonial era, but copying a pre-Hispanic tradition. Its later history is a novel: it passed through chroniclers', antiquarians', and collectors' hands; Lorenzo Boturini gathered it in

the eighteenth century as part of his great collection of Mexican antiquities, which authorities confiscated; the manuscript survived fires, moves, and oblivions, and today it is kept in Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology, where it can be seen unfolded in a case. To see it is to see a people's memory spread out like a road.

Close in spirit is the Codex Azcatitlan, another migration story in a more naive, colorful style, and the Codex Mexicanus, combining Mexica history with Christian calendar elements in a fascinating exercise in synchronizing two worlds.



The Florentine Codex: The Franciscan Encyclopedia

If the Mendoza is ethnohistory's masterpiece, the Florentine Codex is the encyclopedia: twelve books, over two thousand pages, thousands of illustrations — the whole of Nahuatl knowledge gathered by a Franciscan friar and his Indigenous collaborators between 1540 and 1580. Its intellectual author was Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, who arrived in New Spain in 1529 and devoted his life to an unprecedented enterprise: systematically documenting the Nahuas' language, religion, natural history, medicine, morals, and customs before they vanished.

Sahagún's method was revolutionary for his time. He gathered wise elders from Tlatelolco, Texcoco, and other towns, questioned them

following a questionnaire, and his collaborators — Indigenous youths trained at the College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, commanding Nahuatl, Latin, and Spanish — recorded answers in Nahuatl in Latin letters and illustrated them with tlacuilo-style paintings. The result is a bilingual text: a Nahuatl column and a Spanish column, with some two thousand five hundred illustrations that are, themselves, a codex within the codex.

The twelve books cover gods, ceremonies, omens, astronomy, moral rhetoric, natural history — plants, animals, minerals — lords and government, merchants, crafts, and the conquest's history narrated from the Mexica side. It is the richest existing source on Nahua culture, and without it our knowledge would be a fraction of what it is. But it must be read with judgment: Sahagun was a sixteenth-century friar seeking to extirpate idolatry, and his work is crossed by that intention. The informants, in turn, adapted answers to what the friar wanted to hear. The Florentino is a dialogue — sometimes a wrestling match — between two worlds, and historians must hear both voices.

The original manuscript, on European paper and bound in three volumes, ended up in Florence's Laurentian Library — hence its name — where it remains. Its modern reference edition, prepared by Charles Dibble and Arthur Anderson in the mid-twentieth century, put the Nahuatl text and its English translation within reach of researchers worldwide. In Mexico, the facsimile edition has let new generations of scholars work directly on the pages.

Beside the Florentino must be mentioned its younger siblings: the Codex Matritense, with preparatory materials from the same research, and the Primeros Memoriales, the project's initial draft. And in the same Franciscan tradition, though of more direct

Indigenous authorship, the Cruz-Badiano Codex: a medicinal herbal written in Latin by the Indigenous physician Martin de la Cruz and translated by Juan Badiano in 1552, with beautiful plant illustrations, proving Nahua botanical knowledge already circulated in Renaissance Europe's intellectual networks.

The Destruction: Bonfires over Memory

One cannot speak of codices without speaking of their destruction, for the way they were lost explains why the survivors are so valuable. The burning of Indigenous books was no accident or isolated excess: it was a policy, sustained for decades by conquistadors, friars, and officials who saw in codices living proof of idolatry.

The soldiers burned first. In the conquest years, books were destroyed as useless booty or suspicious objects: testimonies speak of palace libraries razed along with the palaces housing them. Then came the friars, with more systematic logic. For evangelizers, ritual codices were the devil's manuals: they held the gods' names, the feasts' dates, the rites to extirpate. Burning them was, in their eyes, a work of mercy — tearing out the old religion by the root to plant the new.

The most infamous episode happened outside central Mexico, but illustrates the era's mentality: in 1562, Fray Diego de Landa ordered at Mani, Yucatan, an auto-da-fe in which dozens of Maya codices were burned along with idols and ancestors' bones. Landa, paradoxically, later wrote one of the best descriptions of Maya culture: he destroyed the books and then tried to reconstruct in words what he had burned. In central Mexico, Archbishop Juan de Zumarraga — Mexico's first bishop — is pointed to by several

sources as responsible for great burnings of Indigenous manuscripts in the 1530s, though historians debate details. What is certain is that, between all of them, the Nahua world's libraries vanished almost entirely within a generation.

There were, however, nuances. Not all friars burned: some, like Sahagun, Motolinia, and Duran, kept and studied codices because they needed them for evangelizing work and because, in time, they developed genuine intellectual interest in the culture they documented. And not all books were equally persecuted: tribute records and land maps were preserved as administratively useful; ritual books, instead, were hunted for destruction. That skewed selection explains why surviving pre-Hispanic codices are almost all ritual and divinatory of the Borgia group — those that managed to hide — while of pre-Hispanic annals and state records practically nothing remains in the original.



The Rescue: Antiquarians, Museums, and Facsimiles

If codices survived, it was thanks to a long chain of rescuers. The first were Indigenous people themselves, who hid books in caves, private homes, and town archives; several Borgia-group codices reached Europe in the sixteenth century as curiosities or gifts, and that accidental export saved them from American bonfires. Then came Novohispanic chroniclers and antiquarians — like Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora in the seventeenth century — who gathered Indigenous manuscripts in private collections, aware of their historical value.

The eighteenth century brought Lorenzo Boturini, the Italian who toured New Spain gathering the greatest collection of Mexican antiquities of his time, and the Enlightenment scholars who began

studying codices with scientific criteria. The nineteenth, with American independences and archaeology's rise, saw the first great facsimiles published: Lord Kingsborough devoted his fortune to reproducing Mexican codices in monumental volumes, and though his interpretation was fanciful, his reproductions saved many manuscripts from oblivion.

The twentieth century professionalized rescue. The National Museum of Anthropology's founding, the Fondo de Cultura Económica's and the National University's facsimile editions, international digitization projects — today almost all great codices can be consulted online, page by page, in high resolution — have put the manuscripts within anyone's reach. And modern epigraphy, with researchers devoting lives to a single codex, has managed to read pages mute for four centuries.

There remains, however, a pending debt: repatriation. Most pre-Hispanic codices are kept in European libraries — Oxford, Florence, the Vatican, Paris, Berlin — far from the peoples who created them. Mexico has successfully claimed some and negotiated high-quality facsimiles for others, but the debate over where the originals belong remains open. It is a discussion transcending academia: it concerns who guards a people's memory.

The rescuers deserve names, for their stories are as novelistic as the manuscripts'. Lorenzo Boturini — the Milanese knight who gave his name to the Pilgrimage Strip — spent eight years traveling New Spain, gathering antiquities with a passion that alarmed the authorities: accused of entering the country without proper license, he was imprisoned and his collection confiscated, the fruit of years of work scattered among officials who barely understood its value. Boturini died in Madrid, poor and vindicated too late; but his

catalogue preserved the memory of dozens of manuscripts, some since lost, and his name remains attached to the most Mexican of codices.

In the nineteenth century, Joseph Marius Alexis Aubin — a Frenchman who lived in Mexico — assembled another great collection, buying manuscripts from impoverished descendants of the old nobility and from antiquarians' estates. His collection, later acquired by Eugène Goupil and now in Paris's National Library, includes some of the most important surviving codices. And in Mexico, figures like Alfredo Chavero and later Manuel Gamio fought to keep manuscripts in the country and to study them with scientific rigor, founding the tradition of Mexican codex scholarship.

Each rescue was a race against oblivion: manuscripts sold as curiosities, burned as trash, rotting in damp archives. That any survived is due less to institutions — which for centuries showed little interest — than to individuals who saw value where others saw old papers. The history of the codices is, in this sense, also a history of obsession: of men and women who devoted fortunes and lives to saving painted books. We are their heirs, and every page we can open today is their victory.

The Borgia Group: Pre-Hispanic Ritual Codices

A handful of codices predate the conquest and, for that very reason, carry a special aura: they are the only Nahuatl-world books that never passed through European hands. Scholars group them under the "Borgia group" name, after the Codex Borgia, the most famous, kept in the Vatican Library.

The group comprises the Borgia, Vaticanus B, Fejervary-Mayer,

Laud, and Cospi: five manuscripts painted on deerskin, of extraordinary beauty and complexity. Their content is ritual and divinatory: they are tonalamatl, books of the 260-day sacred calendar, with each trecena's patron gods, omens, rites, and offerings. Their pages rank among American art's densest and most enigmatic: impossibly colored gods, plumed serpents, dancing skeletons, day signs interlaced in compositions demanding hours of contemplation.

What fascinates about the Borgia group is that it is not central-Mexican Mexico but from the Mixteca-Puebla zone, the cultural region archaeologists call "Mixteca-Puebla style." That means the ritual-book tradition was shared by several peoples, with regional variants but a common grammar. And it also means that when we speak of "Nahua codices," we simplify: the painted-book world was multiethnic, and the Mixtecs — whose genealogical codices, like the Nuttall and the Vindobonensis, are masterpieces of pre-Hispanic historiography — were perhaps the most refined of all tlacuilome.

Deciphering the Borgia group has been one of Mexican research's great challenges. Eduard Seler, the early-twentieth-century German sage, devoted years to commenting the Borgia page by page, and his commentary remains a reference. Today, researchers combine epigraphy, astronomy, ethnography of living peoples, and even pigment chemistry to understand these books. And yet, whole pages remain enigmatic: the Borgia's gods guard their secrets with five centuries' obstinacy.



Land Codices and Lawsuits: Painting as Legal Proof

Not all colonial codices are histories or rituals: there is a whole genre of painted documents with a practical, urgent purpose — defending land. When colonization stripped towns of their territories, communities discovered Spanish courts accepted traditionally styled painted maps and titles as proof. And the tlacuilome, once more, put their art at their people's service.

Thus were born the "primordial titles": documents combining traditional painting with alphabetic Nahuatl texts, narrating the town's founding, boundaries, patron saints, and loyalty to the crown, all to prove land legitimacy before colonial justice. Hundreds were painted, many preserved in parish and communal archives. Their style is unmistakable: the old glyph coexists with Latin letters, the pre-Hispanic map with the colonial church, Indigenous memory with Spanish law.

Beside the titles stand land-grant maps, tributary censuses with personal glyphs, and genealogical lienzos proving a cacique's nobility to claim privileges. These documents are less beautiful than the Borgia or the Mendoza, but historically just as valuable: they show the painted-book tradition alive and functional two centuries after the conquest, adapted to a new world but faithful to its logic. And they show something more: that Indigenous peoples were not passive victims of dispossession but active litigants using every weapon at hand, including their ancestors' painting.

For modern researchers, these "lesser" codices are a blessing: they number in the thousands, teem with toponyms and anthroponyms, and let whole regions' historical geography and society be reconstructed. "Lawsuit painting," long disdained by art scholars, is today one of research's most dynamic fields.

These "minor" documents have, moreover, a human value the great codices do not always reach: they are full of common people. Censuses show the names — and sometimes personal glyphs — of hundreds of tributaries: peasants, artisans, widows, orphans. Land maps show concrete towns' plots, roads, and streams. It is history from below, painted by local scribes who knew their neighbors. Against kings' and conquests' official history, these codices offer the

daily history of those who lived it without entering the annals.

And they have a present: many of these documents remain relevant to communities. Primordial titles are displayed at patron feasts, consulted in agrarian disputes, copied for schools. They are no museum pieces: they are living papers, and communities treat them as such. That vitality is the best proof the painted-book tradition, though transformed, never entirely died in the towns.

To make these documents concrete, consider a typical primordial title's structure. It opens with the town's foundation: the founders' arrival, the first church's building, the patron saint's reception — events told with a mix of glyphs and alphabetic text, pre-Hispanic conventions side by side with Christian ones. Then come the boundaries: a painted circuit of the town's lands, with each boundary marker's glyph — the hill, the stream, the ancient tree — and the distances between them. Then the titles' core: the account of how the town received its lands — from the viceroy, from the encomendero, from time immemorial — with copies of decrees, testimonies of elders, and the community's seals.

The whole is certified in the traditional way: the town's authorities sign — or mark — and witnesses attest, and the document is kept in the community's chest, the *arca*, along with other titles and the staffs of office. Each year, at the patron feast, the titles may be displayed, read aloud, and shown to the young, in a ceremony renewing the community's link to its land and its past. The document is not filed and forgotten: it lives, it circulates, it is performed.

That living use is what distinguishes the primordial titles from museum codices: they are not heritage to be contemplated but

instruments to be wielded. When a community faces an agrarian dispute, the title is produced in court; when it celebrates its feast, the title presides. Five centuries after the conquest, the painted word still defends the land. The tlacuilome who invented these hybrid documents could not have imagined their longevity; but they designed them well.

The Maya Codices: A Distant Mirror

Although this volume is devoted to central Mexico's Nahua tradition, it would be unjust not to mention the distant relatives: the Maya codices. The Classic-period Maya developed a complete logo-syllabic writing system — Mesoamerica's only one recording spoken language as faithfully as an alphabet — using it on stone stelae, ceramics, and folded amate-paper books.

Of their books, destruction was even more complete than in the center: only three authentic Maya codices survive — Dresden, Paris, and Madrid — plus the Grolier fragment, its authenticity debated for decades and now accepted. All three are ritual and astronomical almanacs of astonishing sophistication: the Dresden Codex holds eclipse tables and Venus cycles calculated with a precision rivaling Europe's astronomy of the time.

Why mention them here? Because contrast illuminates both traditions. The Maya wrote more "like us" — with syllable signs chaining together — while the Nahuas painted more and wrote less, entrusting speech to the reader's memory. They are two different solutions to the same problem, and comparing them helps understand there is no single correct way to write: there are writing ecologies, adapted to each society, language, and use. And because their decipherment's history — the epic of epigraphers who in the

twentieth century managed to read Maya glyphs — proves no writing system is condemned to silence forever: if the more complex Maya glyphs could be read, Nahua ones can too, and indeed are being read ever better.

What is most surprising about the Maya-Nahua contrast is that, despite differences, both systems coexisted and influenced each other for centuries. On cultural frontiers — the Puebla-Tlaxcala zone, the Gulf coast — scribes, styles, and conventions circulated; some codices show mixed traits, and calendars were mutually legible. Mesoamerica was a writing ecosystem, not a monopoly: diversity was the norm, each people contributing its solution to the common stock.

And there is a methodological lesson: the Maya glyphs' decipherment — achieved in the twentieth century's second half by individual genius and collective work combined — showed no system is doomed to silence if rigor, patience, and imagination are applied. Maya epigraphers had to unlearn the prejudice that glyphs were "mystical ideograms" and accept they were phonetic writing; Nahuatl scholars are traveling a similar path, accepting Nahua glyphs are more phonetic than believed. Each decipherment illuminates the other, and Mesoamerican epigraphy's future is comparative.

The Nuttall Codex: Mixtec History

If the Borgia group shows painted religion, Mixtec codices show painted history, and the most famous is the Nuttall Codex — also called Tonindeye, "history of the lineage." It is a deerskin strip painted on both sides, dozens of pages, narrating the genealogies and feats of the Mixtec lordships of Tilantongo and Teozacualco, in

present-day Oaxaca.

Its protagonist is Lord 8 Deer, Jaguar Claw, the great eleventh-century Mixtec conqueror, whose biography takes up much of the manuscript: his birth, marriage alliances, conquests, rites, death. The genealogical precision amazes: each figure bears his calendrical and personal names, each marriage is recorded, each child placed. It is dynastic history with a civil registry's rigor, painted with a graphic refinement many consider the codex art's highest.

The Nuttall is kept in London's British Museum, and its history is another chapter of the manuscripts' diaspora: it left Mexico in the nineteenth century, passed through collectors, and ended in Bloomsbury. Its study — led in the twentieth century by researchers like Arthur Miller and continued by contemporary Mixtec specialists — has let pre-Hispanic Mixteca's political history be reconstructed with a detail unparalleled in Mesoamerica.

Why does it matter in a volume on the Nahua tradition? Because it shows the painted book was no Mexica invention but a technology shared across Mesoamerica, with regional variants. The Mixtecs, in fact, were probably the Nahuas' masters in genealogical art: when the Mexica wanted to legitimize their dynasties, they adopted conventions the Mixtecs had spent centuries perfecting. Codex history is a history of exchanges, not isolated inventions.

The Nuttall's refinement poses an interesting question: why did the Mixtecs develop the genealogical genre so far? The answer lies in their political organization: the Mixteca was a mosaic of small lordships competing with one another, and in that fragmented world dynastic legitimacy was the most valuable political capital. A lord

who could prove — painting in hand — his descent from the founders held a decisive advantage over rivals. Genealogical codices were, literally, legitimacy titles, and their obsessive precision answers that function: each marriage, child, and alliance counted.

That function also explains why Mixtec codices survived in relative numbers: they were power documents local elites jealously preserved, even under the colony, because they kept serving to claim privileges before the Spaniards. The Nuttall's story is, at bottom, the story of how painting can be a political instrument — and of how political instruments, when beautiful, become artworks.

Facsimiles and Digitization: The Codex in the 21st Century

For four centuries, studying a codex demanded traveling to its keeping library and obtaining special permissions. Today, almost all great manuscripts are available in facsimile or digital form, and that democratization has transformed research. This section briefly tells that revolution.

The first monumental facsimiles were Lord Kingsborough's, in the 1830s: nine gigantic volumes, printed in London at ruinous cost, reproducing the Mexican codices then known. Kingsborough died in debtors' prison, but his work put the manuscripts within European scholars' reach and saved images of codices that later deteriorated.

The twentieth century brought academic facsimiles: Graz's ADEVA publishing house issued luxury editions of the Borgia, Fejervary-Mayer, and others, with the best specialists' commentaries; Mexico's Fondo de Cultura Económica and UNAM

published accessible editions of the Mendoza, the Florentino, and the Boturini; and projects like the Nuttall Codex's produced museum-quality reproductions.

And the twenty-first brought digitization. The Bodleian, Laurentian, Vatican, France's National Library, and INAH have put high-resolution digital facsimiles online, freely consultable, with zoom, annotation, and comparison tools. A student in Oaxaca can today examine the Borgia pixel by pixel without leaving home; a researcher in Tokyo can collate the Mendoza with the Matrícula on parallel screens.

This accessibility has profound consequences. First, it multiplies eyes: where once a handful of specialists had access, now thousands can study the manuscripts, and discoveries accelerate. Second, it returns codices to their peoples: Indigenous communities can see their ancestors' books without asking a foreign museum's permission. And third, it poses new challenges: digital preservation, image rights, virtual repatriation. The twenty-first century's codex is no object in a case: it is a global archive, and its future is being written now.

The Duran Codex and the Painter-Chroniclers

Not all who painted codices in the sixteenth century were Indigenous tlacuilome: there were also friar chroniclers who used images as a history tool, the most important the Dominican Diego Durán. His *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de Tierra Firme*, written in the 1570s and 1580s, includes dozens of color illustrations that are, in effect, a colonial codex of mestizo authorship.

Duran arrived in New Spain as a child, learned Nahuatl perfectly, and devoted his life to documenting Mexica history and religion, with the declared intent of combating the idolatry he believed survived under Christianity. For this he gathered Indigenous informants, consulted old codices — some now lost — and commissioned illustrations to accompany his text. Those illustrations, painted by Indigenous hands under his direction, show gods, rites, costumes, and historical scenes in a style mixing glyph tradition with European naturalism.

The Duran Codex's value is double. As a historical source, it preserves information from lost manuscripts: several researchers believe Duran had access to a "cronica X," a now-vanished pictographic history other chroniclers also drew on. As a cultural document, it shows the moment Indigenous image was put at European alphabetic history's service: illustrations are no longer the main text but a Spanish narrative's accompaniment. It is the pre-Hispanic codex's world upside down, where painting ruled and speech followed.

Duran is also an uncomfortable figure: his work breathes the inquisitorial mentality, and his rite descriptions are loaded with theological horror. But that same obsession led him to document with a detail more tolerant chroniclers never reached. Reading Duran means peering into a mind divided between fascination and rejection, and his images — gods painted in vivid colors, sacrifices described without euphemism — are the visual testimony of that division.

Beside Duran must be mentioned other illustrated chroniclers: the Tovar Codex, with its Mexica king portraits; the Ramirez Codex, related to Duran; and the illustrations of Munoz Camargo's *Historia*

de Tlaxcala. All form a family of colonial "painted histories" which, though not codices in the strict sense, prolong the illustrated book's tradition in the new context.

Codices Abroad: The Manuscripts' Diaspora

Let us take the diaspora's inventory: where are the codices today? The list maps European collecting's history. The Mendoza, in Oxford's Bodleian Library. The Florentino, in Florence's Laurentian. The Borgia and Vaticanus B, in the Vatican Apostolic Library. The Fejervary-Mayer, in Liverpool. The Laud, also at Oxford. The Cospi, in Bologna. The Nuttall, in the British Museum. The Dresden — Maya — in Dresden's Library. Each location tells a story of travelers, antiquarians, wars, and bequests.

In Mexico remain those dearest to the national public: the Boturini — the Pilgrimage Strip —, the Matrícula de Tributos, and the Cruz-Badiano, guarded by INAH; the Azcatitlan and the Mexicanus, in the National Library; and hundreds of primordial titles and colonial maps in regional, parish, and communal archives. It is considerable heritage, but the pre-Hispanic "heavyweights" are abroad.

This distribution feeds a legitimate, passionate debate: should they return? Arguments for repatriation are moral and cultural: they are the heritage of the peoples who created them, and their natural place is Mexico. Arguments against — or for the status quo — are practical: European libraries have kept them well for centuries, digitized them, and made them globally available; a move entails risks. Between the extremes lie intermediate positions: virtual repatriation through high-quality digitization, temporary loans, shared custodies, museum facsimiles.

Mexico has had partial successes: some manuscripts have returned, others are shown on loan, and digital facsimiles have democratized access de facto. But the underlying debate — who is the legitimate owner of memory — remains open, transcending codices: it is the same debate as the Parthenon friezes, the Benin bronzes, Nefertiti. The codices are a Mexican chapter of a global discussion on cultural heritage in a postcolonial world.

Whatever the outcome, there is growing consensus: manuscripts must be accessible to their creators' descendants, in dignified conditions and without obstacles. Digitization has advanced far in that direction, but does not exhaust it: seeing a facsimile on screen is not the same as standing before the object a tlacuilo painted five hundred years ago. Memory, too, needs bodies.



Books, however, were never all that guarded memory. Behind each codex stood a living institution that produced, read, and transmitted

it: the sages. The last chapter is devoted to them.

Digitization is changing the repatriation debate's terms, though not resolving it. When a high-resolution facsimile is freely available online, the argument that the original must return so its people can see it loses some force: the people can see it — every stroke, every pigment grain — from a phone in Oaxaca. Some institutions speak of "virtual repatriation" as a solution: the original stays where it is preserved, the digital copy returns home. It is a pragmatic compromise, and it has enabled real access.

But the compromise satisfies no one entirely. For claimant communities, the screen is not the object: the codex is a sacred thing, an ancestor's presence, and its exile is felt as a wound no pixels heal. For holding institutions, even digitization does not settle the moral question: they know they are custodians of others' heritage, and the most enlightened seek formulas — long-term loans, shared stewardship, co-curation with source communities — that acknowledge it. The debate continues, and it should: it keeps alive the question of who memory belongs to.

Meanwhile, technology offers new possibilities: 3D scanning captures the amate's texture and the paint's relief; multispectral imaging reveals erased sketches and palimpsests; virtual reality lets a reader "unfold" a screenfold codex as its makers did. The twenty-first-century codex is becoming an object of study richer than the original scholars had — not a substitute for it, but a complement. And each technological advance returns us to the same question the tlacuilome asked: how to make memory last.

The books, however, were never all that guarded memory. Behind each codex stood a living institution: the sages.

Chapter 5 — The Tlamatinime, Guardians of Memory

Behind each codex stood a reader, and behind each reader a master who had taught him to read. The Nahua world called tlamatinime — "those who know things," the sages — the professional guardians of collective memory: philosophers, astronomers, historians, poets, and teachers who kept knowledge, interpreted it, and passed it to new generations. Without them, codices would have been mute painting; with them, they were a people's voice.

The tlamatini's figure reaches us above all through testimonies gathered by Sahagun and other chroniclers, and through the songs and discourses — the huehuetlatolli, "the elders' words" — informants dictated in the sixteenth century. Those texts draw the sage's ideal portrait, a portrait to be read carefully: it is a normative image, what society expected of its sages, and like every ideal image, it exaggerates virtues and hides defects. But even as an ideal, it reveals a conception of knowledge deserving respect: knowledge was not ornament or an instrument of personal power but a communal responsibility.

That responsibility had a practical correlate: the tlamatini ate from

the surplus others produced. Mexica society sustained its sages — with lands, tribute, exemptions — in exchange for their knowledge, in an implicit pact like the one sustaining modern universities. The pact worked while knowledge was useful: the sage's calendar said when to sow, his annals legitimized the ruler, his discourses formed the young. When the conquest broke the pact — what use a ritual calendar under Christianity? what use annals under a viceroy? — sages lost livelihood and function, and tradition lost its material base. Ideas, too, need economy.

This chapter is devoted to those men — and the women who accompanied them in shadow — to their schools, methods, and thought. It is the book's most human chapter, for behind each glyph we have studied stood a person who learned it from another person. Memory's chain was, ultimately, a chain of masters and disciples, and this chapter tells how each link was forged.

The Sages of the Flowery Word

The ideal tlamatini, according to the texts, was "a light, a torch, a mirror." His craft was described with a beautiful metaphor: he was the one who "holds a mirror before others," making people know themselves. He taught "the good discourse," the flowery word — in *xochitl* in *cuicatl*, "the flower and the song," poetry — and with it formed his disciples' face and heart: "he gives wisdom to others' faces," say the texts, for in the Nahuatl conception education was literally the formation of the face, of identity.

The tlamatinime specialized. There were calendar sages, commanding day and year computations and predicting eclipses and Venus cycles with a precision astonishing modern astronomers; history sages, keeping annals and genealogies; religion sages,

knowing rites, myths, and sacred songs; medicine sages, inheriting plant knowledge; and word sages, poets and orators composing the songs sung at feasts. This division of knowledge was not rigid — a great sage commanded several fields — but it existed, and each specialty had its books, masters, and disciples.

Their authority was moral before political. The tlamatini did not govern: he advised. He stood near power — in palace, temple, schools — but his legitimacy came from knowledge, not command. The texts insist on his exemplary conduct: the good sage was sober, truthful, prudent, generous with his knowledge; the bad sage — for there was also an image of the corrupt sage — used knowledge to deceive, "making people take one thing for another." That ethical concern over knowledge's use is one of the tradition's most admirable traits: knowledge obliged.

The ideal tlamatini's portrait significantly includes his potential vices: the texts also describe the bad sage — who deceives with his knowledge, who uses words to confuse, who sells his knowledge to the highest bidder. That counterfigure is no moral ornament: it recognizes knowledge is power, and power corrupts. A society worrying about knowledge's misuse is a society taking it seriously.

And there is a final trait humanizing the sage: the texts insist the tlamatini also doubts, also errs, also learns from others. He is no infallible oracle but a seeker: "one who makes himself wise," some formulas say. That epistemological humility — knowing one does not know all — is perhaps the tradition's most philosophical mark, and the one bringing us closest to these men and women of five hundred years ago.

The tlamatini also had their transmission rituals: ceremonies in

which the master symbolically handed knowledge to the disciple — the staff, the book, the word. Those ceremonies, described in some texts, show transmission was not only technical but spiritual: receiving knowledge meant receiving a responsibility, and disciples swore to use it for the common good. It was a professional ethics with sacred foundation.

And sages had their rivalries: the texts hint at debates between schools, disputes over calendar or myth interpretations, poetic competitions at feasts. That intellectual agon — discussion as knowledge's engine — marks a living tradition, not fossilized dogma. The *tlamatinime* did not repeat mechanically: they thought, debated, innovated. They were intellectuals in the word's full sense.

The Schools: Calmecac and Telpochcalli

Knowledge was not improvised: it was taught in schools, and the Mexica educational system ranked among the ancient world's most organized. There were two main school types for youths. The *calmecac*, "the house of the row" or "the house of discipline," was the elite's school: future priests, judges, administrators, and sages trained there. Discipline was severe — fasts, vigils, corporal punishments, hard labor — because character was believed forged in austerity. The *telpochcalli*, "the house of youths," was the people's school: warriors and workers trained there, with discipline more oriented to physical endurance and communal labor.

In both schools, education combined the practical and the moral. Children learned their future craft — arms, farming, trades — but also the songs, the elders' discourses, their people's history, and conduct norms. Memorization was the central technique: students repeated the sacred texts again and again until knowing them by

heart, masters correcting each error. It was a demanding system, but effective: it produced youths able to recite whole corpora of songs and discourses from memory.

Girls also received education, though differentiated: at home they learned from mothers spinning, weaving, cooking, and domestic morals, and there were schools for noble youths destined for temple service. Testimonies on female education are scarcer, but enough to know "face" formation was no exclusively masculine privilege.

This educational system is the link joining codices to tlamatinime: the schools produced the readers. A youth leaving the calmecac could decipher glyphs, knew the stories images evoked, and could, in time, read a codex before his community. When the conquest destroyed schools and banned traditional teaching, not only an institution was lost: the readers' factory was lost, and with it, the ability to read the remaining books.

The two schools' difference reflected — and reproduced — social stratification, but with an escape valve: talent could cross borders. A telpochcalli youth excelling in war or knowledge could rise to offices reserved for nobility, and a noble failing at the calmecac lost position. It was a hierarchical system, but not hermetic: merit counted, and schools were merit's mechanism.

And schools were also intense socialization spaces: youths lived together, suffered together, learned together, and those shared experiences forged lifelong loyalties. Calmecac schoolmates would be future rulers, priests, and generals; telpochcalli's, future captains and artisans. The networks woven at school sustained elite and people cohesion. Educating, in the Nahua world, also meant weaving the social fabric.

The Transmission of Knowledge

How was knowledge transmitted in a society without printing and with a writing that did not record every word? The answer is a multi-channel redundant system, designed — consciously or not — so knowledge would survive any single channel's loss.

The first channel was school memorization, already described: fundamental texts were learned by heart, word by word, with a fidelity masters jealously watched. The second channel was the codices themselves: the painted structure serving as guide and verification for memory. The third channel was public recitation: at calendar feasts, songs and discourses were intoned before the whole community, so knowledge renewed collectively several times a year; a youth attending feasts learned, unintentionally, his people's ritual corpus. The fourth channel was domestic teaching: parents passed to children the *huehuetlatolli*, counsel discourses for each life stage — birth, youth, marriage, old age — at once a morals manual and a practical wisdom archive.

This system had extraordinary strength against individual forgetting: for a story to be lost, sages' memory, painted books, public feasts, and family teaching had to fail at once. And it had a structural weakness against conquest: all channels depended on institutions — schools, temples, feasts, extended families — that colonization deliberately dismantled. The friars understood clearly: to extirpate the old religion, burning books was not enough; songs had to be banned, schools closed, feasts replaced. And they did it.

Yet transmission did not wholly break. In towns, families kept telling stories; songs adapted to Christian feasts and survived disguised; medicine, farming, and astronomy knowledge passed in daily

practice, needing no schools. And when, in the twentieth century, researchers began working with contemporary Nahua communities, they found many tradition threads still alive: words, stories, techniques, ways of telling time. The chain had thinned almost to breaking, but did not break.

The system's redundancy had, moreover, a social function: it made knowledge a common good. Since knowledge circulated through several channels — school, book, feast, family — nobody could wholly monopolize it. Not even the state, the great producer of official books, controlled feast songs or grandparents' counsels. That distribution guaranteed intellectual freedom: if the palace imposed an official version, towns kept their own in lienzos and songs.

And transmission had its rites of passage: the child finishing formation, the youth becoming master, the sage naming his successor. Those rites marked the chain's continuity and gave it solemnity: transmitting knowledge was no formality but a ceremony. When we imagine "knowledge transmission" abstractly, remember that for the Nahuas it was a succession of concrete acts — a hand delivering a book, a voice teaching a song, an elder naming his heir — repeated for generations.

The system's effectiveness rested on techniques modern pedagogy is rediscovering. Memorization was not rote repetition but structured encoding: texts were composed with rhythmic patterns, parallelisms, and formulaic phrases that served as retrieval cues — the same principles behind the "memory palace" and spaced repetition. A student who forgot a verse could recover it from the rhythm, the parallel structure, or the accompanying image: the text was designed to be memorable, with redundancy built into its very

form.

Music was the most powerful mnemonic. The songs' melodies — of which we know little, but whose rhythms survive in the verses' meter — organized long texts into singable units; dance steps marked the strophes; instrumental refrains signaled transitions. To learn a song was to learn it with the body, not just the mind: the feet remembered what the tongue forgot. That embodied memory was far more durable than silent reading, and it explains how youths could master corpora that would daunt a modern student.

The codex-image completed the system as a visual index: each scene was a "chapter heading" the reader's memory expanded. Modern experiments with similar techniques — the "method of loci," visual mnemonics — confirm what the tlamatime knew by practice: the mind remembers images better than words, and images linked in sequences better still. The Nahua educational system was, without knowing the term, an applied cognitive science, refined over centuries of practice.

And it was joyful — or could be. The sources describe feasts where learning happened amid music, food, flowers, and dance; where children learned songs by singing them with the crowd, not by drilling in silence. The stern calmecac was only half the story: the other half was the fiesta, where knowledge circulated as pleasure. That combination — discipline and celebration, rigor and joy — may be the deepest lesson of the Nahua pedagogical tradition.

Nahua Philosophy: The Sages' Thought

The tlamatime did not only keep data: they thought. And what they thought deserves the name of philosophy. The researcher who

did most to prove it was Miguel Leon-Portilla, who in his classic work gathered the texts revealing systematic reflection on world, man, and the divine. His conclusions, debated but influential, draw the portrait of an intellectual tradition comparable to other ancient peoples'.

That philosophy's central question was meaning's: what is true in a world where all "ends like the flower"? Nahua songs return again and again to life's fleetingness — "is one truly alive on earth?" — and sages answered with the "flower and song" doctrine: only the beautiful and true, poetry and knowledge, give permanence to the ephemeral. It was an aesthetic and ethical answer to existential anguish, and the poems expressing it rank among universal literature's profoundest.

The tlamatinime also thought about gods. Far from the naive polytheism friars attributed, texts suggest sophisticated reflection: behind the multitude of gods, some sages intuited a unity, a dual principle — Ometeotl, "the two god" — from which all proceeded. And they thought about knowledge itself: distinguishing hearsay from proven knowledge, opinion from truth, with their own epistemological vocabulary.

Prudence is needed: these texts reach us filtered through sixteenth-century informants and friars with their own agendas, and some scholars warn against idealizing tlamatinime as "Greek philosophers with feathers." But even with those cautions, the corpus impresses: no other American culture left us such an articulate testimony of its thought. Nahua sages asked about the same things as Greece's, China's, or India's sages, and reached their own answers, rooted in their language and world.

The Songs: Poetry and Memory

If codices were painted memory, songs — cuicatl — were sung memory, and the tlamatinime were their composers and guardians. Nahuatl poetry, preserved in colonial manuscripts like the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances de los Senores de la Nueva España*, is one of the pre-Hispanic world's most beautiful legacies, and it worked as a living archive: poems preserved history, genealogy, philosophy, and morals in verses meant to be sung at feasts.

Nahuatl poetics has its own devices. The most characteristic is *difrasismo*: saying one thing with two words, like in *xochitl* in *cuicatl*, "the flower and the song," meaning "poetry." *Difrasismos* are high-semantic-density formulas — *atl-tlachinolli*, "water-fire," means "war"; in *mitl* in *chimalli*, "the arrow and the shield," too — and commanding them marked sage and poet. Another device is parallelism: repeating an idea with variations, like biblical psalms, creating a hypnotic rhythm. And another is flowery imagery: poems teem with flowers, precious birds, jades, and quetzal feathers, a vocabulary of beauty that is also a moral code.

Songs were performed with music and dance at calendar feasts, before the assembled people. That public performance was at once art and archive: each feast renewed collective memory, and youths learned their people's history by singing it. When friars banned the old songs, they cut one of cultural transmission's main arteries; but many poems survived, copied in Latin letters by Indigenous scribes, and today we can read them — and even sing them, since some keep musical notation.

Reading a *cuicatl* today is a strange, moving experience: a poet dead five centuries speaks to us of withering flowers, departed

friends, life's brevity, with a melancholy needing no translation. The tlamatinime knew the flower withers; hence they sang it, so at least the song would remain.

The songs' performance context deserves imagining in detail, for it was spectacular. The great feasts gathered thousands in the temple precincts: choirs of trained singers, orchestras of drums — the deep huehuetl and the high teponaztli — flutes, rattles, and conch trumpets; dancers in elaborate costumes moving in precise formations; and above it all, the soloists intoning the cuicatli, their voices carrying the words the crowd answered in chorus. It was opera before opera, and the codex-painters who depicted such scenes captured something of their splendor.

The instruments themselves were sophisticated: the teponaztli, a hollowed log with two tongues producing different pitches, could play melodic patterns; the huehuetl, an upright drum, marked the fundamental rhythm; clay flutes produced pentatonic melodies; and the musicians — professionals trained like the singers — commanded a repertoire of rhythms and modes. Music was not accompaniment but structure: it organized the ceremony's time, signaled its phases, and carried the words' emotional weight.

Dance, too, was a language: each step, each formation, each costume had meaning, and the dancers' movements told stories parallel to the songs. A feast was thus a total work of art — music, poetry, dance, costume, architecture — in which the community saw itself reflected and renewed. When the friars banned the old songs, they silenced not just words but an entire multimedia system of memory. What survives in the manuscripts — the bare verses without their music, the descriptions without the dance — is the libretto of a lost opera. Reading it, we should hear, however faintly,

the drums.

The Heirs: Tradition Today

The tlamatime's chain broke, but not entirely. In contemporary Nahua communities — Puebla's Sierra, the Huasteca, Guerrero, Veracruz — live that tradition's heirs: elders keeping stories, healers knowing plants, musicians playing old sones, bilingual teachers teaching children the language. They do not call themselves tlamatime, but they serve the same function: they are their peoples' living memory.

Modern academia has learned to work with them, not only about them. The best current codex studies combine epigraphy with ethnography: researchers wanting to understand a maize glyph talk with peasants sowing maize; those studying a ritual consult those still practicing it. That dialogue has enormously enriched codex reading and returned to communities a protagonism nineteenth-century science denied them.

And there is a renaissance: young Nahuas, Mixtecs, Mayas, and other peoples are learning to read their ancestors' glyphs, painting new codices, teaching old writing in workshops and schools. It is no folkloric reconstruction: it is reappropriation. After five centuries in which their grandparents' books sat in foreign museums and academic editions, the tlacuilome's descendants are recovering their heritage. The circle closes: pictographic memory returns to the hands that created it.

That renaissance has concrete faces: the young Mixtec learning to read the Nuttall and discovering his people's history; the Nahua teacher showing pupils to paint glyphs with cochineal and amate;

the Zapotec programmer designing a glyph typeface for cell phones. They are not nostalgic reconstructions: they are creative appropriations, using heritage to build future. Tradition is not repeated: it is continued.

And it has a political dimension too: reclaiming codices — physically or virtually — means reclaiming the right to one's own history. For centuries, others told Indigenous peoples' history; now, the peoples tell it themselves, with their books as proof. The tlamatinime believed forming the face was the supreme task; their heirs are forming their peoples' face for the twenty-first century, and the old painted books are their mirror.

The Huehuetlatolli: The Elders' Word

Among the treasures sixteenth-century informants left us is a genre condensing the tlamatinime's practical wisdom: the huehuetlatolli, "the elders' words," counsel discourses for each life moment. Sahagun and other chroniclers collected dozens, and reading them is one of the most direct experiences of Nahua thought: it is like hearing a five-hundred-year-old grandfather.

There are ones for birth: the father speaks to the newborn — who does not understand, but the community does — about the hard life awaiting and the dignity with which to face it. Ones for youth: exhortations to temperance, work, and respect for elders, with a moderation rhetoric recalling Stoic philosophers. Ones for marriage: counsel to newlyweds on fidelity, patience, and household government, of moving good sense. Ones for rulers: enthronement discourses reminding the new lord of his duties — justice, the weak's protection, humility before gods — with a moral demand that would shame many modern politicians. And ones for death:

consoling words speaking of the afterlife journey with admirable serenity.

The huehuetlatolli's style is unmistakable: parallel phrases, difrasismos, flowery images, a solemn rhythm. They are no improvisations: they are memorized, transmitted literary pieces, part of schools' curriculum and family education. Their existence proves something important: Nahuatl "philosophy" was not only sages' speculation but wisdom applied to daily life, systematically taught to each generation.

Reading them today produces a curious effect: five centuries' distance dissolves, and one finds oneself nodding at counsels a present-day grandfather might give. That human continuity is perhaps the tlamatinime's most living legacy: reminding us that, beneath feathers and glyphs, there were people worrying about the same things we do — how to raise children, how to govern justly, how to die with dignity.

Inside the Calmecac: A School Day

What was a day at the calmecac, the elite's school, like? The sources — Sahagun, Duran, Tlatelolco's informants — let us reconstruct it in fair detail, and the emerging picture is of a demandingness we would today call extreme.

The day began before dawn: pupils rose in darkness, bathed in cold water, and swept the temple and patios — sweeping was a ritual act, not just cleaning. Then came morning offerings and songs, then study: memorizing sacred songs, the elders' discourses, the people's stories; instruction in calendar and writing; lessons in morals and rhetoric. At noon, a frugal meal; in the afternoon,

physical exercises, weapons handling for future warriors, manual work. At nightfall, more songs, more study, and sleep on hard mats, with frequent fasts and periodic vigils.

Discipline was severe: punishments included beatings, maguey-thorn prickings, exposure to chile smoke, and other penalties we would today call abuse. But their logic must be understood: the calmecac formed the ruling and priestly elite, believing only body mastery prepared for command. Pupils accepted it as part of a pact: in exchange for suffering, they received their society's most valuable knowledge and access to highest offices.

Not all finished: many dropped out or were expelled, and only the ablest became tlamatinime, priests, or officials. But even those not completing formation left with a baggage — memorized songs, learned history, internalized discipline — marking them for life. The calmecac was a memory-producing machine: each graduating generation was a living archive, and the whole society rested on those archives.

When we picture a tlamatini reading a codex before his audience, picture also the child he was: rising before dawn, sweeping the patio in darkness, repeating verses until knowing them by heart. The sage's wisdom was forged in the schoolboy's discipline.

Ometeotl and Duality: The Sages' Theology

Behind the Nahua pantheon's multitude of gods — Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, and dozens more — the tlamatinime intuited, according to several texts, a single, dual principle: Ometeotl, "the two god," lord and lady of duality, origin of

all that exists. This doctrine, if the texts faithfully reflect it, would make Nahua religion far more sophisticated than the naive polytheism friars described.

The idea is of notable philosophical elegance: reality is born of duality — masculine and feminine, light and darkness, life and death — and that primordial duality is at once one and double, like a coin's two faces. The pantheon's gods would be manifestations or aspects of that principle, not independent entities. Some texts speak of Ometeotl as "mother and father of the gods," dwelling at the cosmos's highest place, from whom all proceeds and to whom all returns.

This doctrine must be handled prudently. The texts mentioning it are scarce and late, gathered in the sixteenth century, and some scholars suspect informants — or friars — projected Christian categories onto the old religion: a single supreme god sounds suspiciously convenient for dialogue with evangelizers. Others defend the doctrine as genuine, reflecting an intellectual elite's theology, distinct from the popular religion of multiple gods.

Whatever the truth — and probably there is something of both — the debate itself is revealing: it shows Nahua religion had levels, like all great religions: a popular religion of gods, feasts, and offerings, and a sages' theological reflection seeking unity behind multiplicity. That leveled structure marks a mature religious tradition, not primitive superstition. And it reminds us, once more, that behind the codices stood thinkers, not only painters.

The Ometeotl doctrine has, moreover, a plastic expression the codices record: several Borgia-group images show dual figures — half masculine, half feminine; half living, half skeletal — researchers

interpret as the dual principle's representations. Those images are of astonishing conceptual daring: painting duality not as two things but as one double thing. Art, here, thinks what words can barely say.

And duality was not only theology: it was a principle organizing the entire cosmos. The Nahua world divided into complementary pairs — sky and earth, day and night, man and woman, life and death — each pair referring to the dual principle. Understanding Ometeotl means understanding the cosmovision's deep grammar: all that exists is two and is one, and wisdom keeps balance between opposites. It is a philosophy of equilibrium, not of one principle's victory over another, and perhaps that is why it feels so contemporary.

Nezahualcoyotl: The Sage King

If any tlamatini embodied the sage ideal, it was Nezahualcoyotl, lord of Texcoco from 1431 to 1472: king, poet, engineer, lawgiver, and philosopher, pre-Hispanic history's most admired figure after the great Mexica tlatoque. His life — novelistic, tragic, triumphal — and his poetic work make him the emblem of Nahuatl wisdom.

Nezahualcoyotl — "fasting coyote" — reached the throne after his father's murder at Tepanec hands and a peril-filled exile worthy of epic. As Texcoco's lord and the Mexica's ally in the Triple Alliance, he transformed his city into a cultural center: he built the Chapultepec aqueduct carrying water to Tenochtitlan, designed the Texcotzingo gardens and palace — a marvel of hydraulic engineering and landscaping — promulgated a law code famous for severity, and gathered poets, sages, and artists at his court.

But his songs immortalized him. Some twenty poems attributed to Nezahualcoyotl survive in colonial manuscripts, of extraordinary philosophical depth: they meditate on life's fleetingness, power's vanity, the divine's mystery. "I, Nezahualcoyotl, ask it: is one truly alive with roots on earth?" — that verse, quoted again and again, condenses a whole culture's existential anguish. His poems doubt, ask, give no easy answers: they are a crowned skeptic's voice.

Honesty demands saying: Nezahualcoyotl's figure reaches us idealized by his descendants' chronicles — notably Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's, his mestizo great-grandson's — presenting him almost as a Platonic philosopher-king and Christianity's forerunner. Modern historians qualify: he was also an implacable ruler, Mexico imperialism's ally, a man of his time. But even stripped of legend, a solid core remains: a ruler who wrote philosophical poetry, built admirable engineering works, and gathered his era's intellectual flower at court.

Nezahualcoyotl is living proof the tlamatini ideal was no abstraction: some embodied it. And he is also a bridge to the present: each year, Mexico's national literature prize bears his name, and his verses are taught in schools. The fasting coyote keeps speaking, five centuries later.

Nezahualcoyotl's Texcotzingo — the hilltop palace and gardens east of Texcoco — deserves a closer look, for it embodies the sage-king ideal in stone and water. The complex combined a royal residence with botanical gardens, baths, temples, and hydraulic works of remarkable sophistication: aqueducts brought water from distant springs, channels distributed it through terraces, and reservoirs stored it — all carved in rock with a precision that still impresses engineers. It was at once a pleasure retreat, a ritual center, and a

demonstration of the ruler's command over nature.

The gardens were also a statement: collecting plants from across the empire, the king displayed his dominion's breadth and his knowledge's depth — for the gardens included medicinal plants, and tradition holds the king studied their properties. Texcotzingo was, in this reading, a living library: a place where nature was ordered, named, and known, like a codex written in plants and water. The sage-king's palace was his book.

And the laws: Nezahualcoyotl's code was famous — and feared — for its severity. Adultery, corruption, drunkenness in officials, and other offenses carried the death penalty, applied without distinction of rank: the chronicles tell of the king executing his own son for violating the law. Whether the code was as draconian as described or idealized by later chroniclers, its image served a purpose: it portrayed the sage-king as justice incarnate, the ruler whose wisdom expressed itself in order. The poet of fleeting flowers was also the lawgiver of iron — and the tradition saw no contradiction: both were forms of giving shape to the ephemeral.

The Tlamatini and the Priest: Two Paths of Knowledge

Two figures sometimes confused should be distinguished: the tlamatini, the sage, and the priest — the tlenamacac, "he who offers fire." Both were men of knowledge, both worked with books and calendars, but their functions and loyalties differed, and understanding the difference illuminates the Nahua world's intellectual organization.

The priest was, above all, an officiant: his task was maintaining

dealings with gods through offerings, sacrifices, songs, and ceremonies. His knowledge was ritual and practical: he knew the calendar to fix feasts, myths to ground rites, formulas to make ceremony effective. His authority came from his mediating function: without priests, gods received no sustenance and the cosmos unbalanced. He was an indispensable, fearsome figure, surrounded by taboos and privileges.

The tlamatini, instead, was a thinker and teacher: his task was to know, interpret, and teach. He might also be a priest — many were — but his identity depended not on ritual office but on knowledge. The tlamatini questioned, compared, composed poetry, debated; the priest executed. In modern terms: the priest was the cult's engineer, the tlamatini its researcher and philosopher.

The distinction was not rigid: in practice, careers crossed, and a great priest was usually a great sage. But the tlamatini category's very existence — the knower, regardless of office — reveals something important: Nahua society recognized knowledge as an autonomous value, not only as cult's or power's instrument. That is philosophy's, science's, and art's condition of possibility: that there be people whose craft is thinking, and that society sustain them for it.

After the conquest, priests were persecuted as idolaters, but sages — disguised as informants, scribes, schoolteachers — survived better, transmitting knowledge through discreet channels. Perhaps that is why more songs than rituals reached us, more huehuetlatolli than ceremonies: wisdom travels lighter than cult. And perhaps, too, that is why the tlamatini feels closer than the priest: in the doubting, questioning sage we recognize ourselves; in the sacrificing priest, we peer into an unrecoverable world.

The Living Legacy

We reach this volume's end, and it is time to ask: what use is all this today? What does a conquered people's writing system, five hundred years gone, say to a twenty-first-century reader?

It says, first, that writing has no single form. For centuries, writing's history was told as a triumphal march toward the alphabet, and non-alphabetic systems were described as primitive stages or dead ends. The codices belie that story: they show a complete, effective, beautiful system solving the same problems as the alphabet — recording language, fixing memory, transmitting knowledge — by other paths. That lesson is more relevant today than ever, when human communication grows ever more visual: the codices' ideograms are the conceptual ancestors of the icons we use daily on our screens.

It says, second, that memory is a collective construction. The Nahuas did not entrust their past to a single book or person: they distributed it among images, voices, schools, feasts, and families. That redundancy was their insurance against forgetting, and although the insurance failed before conquest's violence, the idea remains valid: a society wanting to remember needs more than one medium for its memory.

And it says, third, something more intimate: that books can die and rise again. The codices lay mute for centuries, and today they speak anew because there were people — Indigenous people who hid them, antiquarians who collected them, researchers who learned to read them — who refused to let them die. Each deciphered page is a small victory against forgetting, and each new reader peering into a codex prolongs that victory.

And it says, fourth, something about ourselves: that the human mind's diversity is greater than we believed. Every time we accept there were — and are — other ways of writing, thinking, and remembering, our own way grows less absolute and more human. The codices are no curiosities of a remote past: they are proof human intelligence finds different paths to the same ends, and all those paths deserve respect. Studying them is not only doing history: it is learning to think otherwise.

The tlamatinime believed education was shaping others' faces. If this book makes the ancient book-painters' faces a little sharper in our memory, it will have done its job. Mexico's pictographic memory is no dead archive: it is an invitation to look — to truly look — at the books a people painted so as not to forget who they were.

Glossary of Nahuatl Terms

Aztlán — "Place of herons" or "place of whiteness." Mythical homeland of the Mexica.

Calmécac — School of the nobility, where priests, rulers, and judges were trained.

Calpixque — Official in charge of tribute collection in the provinces.

Calpulli — Clan or ward; the basic unit of social and territorial organization.

Chinampa — Agricultural platform built on the lake; "floating garden."

Cihuacóatl — "Serpent Woman." Second-in-command of the empire, in charge of internal administration.

Codex (plural: codices) — Pictographic manuscript on amate paper or deerskin.

Cuauhtli — Eagle; the military order of the eagle warriors.

Huehuetlatolli — "Discourses of the elders." Moral maxims and philosophical reflections.

Huitzilopochtli — Patron god of the Mexica; the sun in its warrior aspect.

Macehualtin — The common people; the agricultural and artisan base of society.

Mexica — The name the so-called "Aztecs" gave themselves.

Mictlan — The underworld, place of the dead.

Nahuatl — Language of the Mexica, still spoken by over a million people.

Ocelotl — Jaguar; the military order of the jaguar warriors.

Ometeotl — "Dual God." The supreme creator principle, abstract in nature.

Pipiltin — The hereditary nobility.

Pochteca — Professional long-distance merchant; also spy and ambassador.

Quetzalcóatl — "Feathered Serpent." God of wisdom, wind, and life.

Telpochcalli — School of the common people, where warriors were trained.

Tezcatlipoca — "Smoking Mirror." God of night, magic, and destiny.

Tianguis — Marketplace.

Tlacotin — Slave; a status neither hereditary nor necessarily permanent.

Tlaloc — God of rain and water.

Tlamatinime — "Those who know." Sages guarding memory and knowledge.

Tlatoani — "He who speaks." The supreme ruler.

Tonalamatl — Ritual calendar of 260 days.

Triple Alliance — Pact of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan (1428), the empire's foundation.

Xiuhpohualli — Solar calendar of 365 days.

Timeline

1110 (tradition) — Departure from Aztlán; the Mexica pilgrimage begins.

1325 — Founding of Mexico-Tenochtitlan on the islet in Lake Texcoco.

1376 — Acamapichtli, first tlatoani of Tenochtitlan.

1428 — Defeat of Azcapotzalco and formation of the Triple Alliance (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tlacopan).

1440–1469 — Reign of Moctezuma Ilhuicamina; expansion of the empire.

1450–1454 — The great famine; the Flower Wars become institutionalized.

1486–1502 — Reign of Ahuitzotl; the empire reaches its greatest extent.

1502–1520 — Reign of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin.

1519 — Hernán Cortés lands at Veracruz; alliance with Tlaxcala.

1519 — The Spaniards enter Tenochtitlan (November 8).

1520 — La Noche Triste, the Night of Sorrows (June 30); death of Moctezuma.

1521 — Fall of Tenochtitlan (August 13); end of the Mexica empire.

1521-1821 — The viceregal era; Nahuatl becomes the lingua franca of New Spain.

1821 — Independence of Mexico; the eagle of the founding myth inspires the national coat of arms.

1910-1920 — The Mexican Revolution; the Indigenous past is revalued.

1978 — A chance discovery launches the Templo Mayor Project.

1978-2026 — Excavations of the Templo Mayor in the heart of Mexico City.

Today — Over 1.5 million Nahuatl speakers; the chinampas of Xochimilco still in production.

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The Codices: Pictographic Memory

The most sophisticated writing system of ancient America was not alphabetic: it was painted. The Mesoamerican codices are books of amate paper and deerskin on which history, tribute, and calendars were fixed in pictographic glyphs, to be read aloud by sages who carried the oral tradition.

This volume enters the Nahua scriptorium: the tlacuilo who made paper and ground his pigments, the great Codex Mendoza, the Pilgrimage Strip, the Florentine Codex, the bonfires that devoured libraries, and the tlamatime — the sages who guarded memory. A journey through books that refuse to die.