

Codex Aubin: History in Reprint

Arjun Sai Krishnan

I. Introduction

The Codex Aubin, a post-conquest Nahuatl-language pictorial codex, is a valuable record of indigenous perspectives on historiography in the period immediately succeeding the Spanish conquest of the Valley of Mexico. A fascinating handwritten account of Mexica (Aztec) history and legend, it begins with a departure from *Áztlan*, the mythical homeland of the Mexica, and ending in the early seventeenth century with a depiction of indigenous life in early colonial Mexico. Clearly drawing from the Aztec cartographic and pictorial tradition, the codex contains primarily Nahuatl text transcribed in Roman script and printed on colonial *octavo* paper (Paxton & Cicero, 2017). The text represents a complex intersection of cultures, languages, and representational systems: an indigenous annal swathed in European conventions, unravelling the many competing traditions encompassed in the codex grants a unique window into the status of language and history in the nascent *mestizo* society of Mexico.

A number of scholars have commented on the codex's historiography (Rajagopalan, 2019), (Navarrete, 2000), most focusing on a subset of the original text's narratorial and pictorial choices. An exploration of the *tlacuilo's* intentions and audience becomes key; we see the creative re-telling of an ancient myth, illustrated with traditional imagery but written in Roman script and glossed in Spanish. What emerges is a clear picture of a cultural encounter; the Aubin codex is a demonstrative example of the post-Conquest European reformulation of indigenous conventions.

This work will attempt to review some of the scholarship surrounding the Aubin codex, but most interestingly, we will also focus on the Princeton University manuscript copy of the codex. Produced sometime in the early 19th century, the Princeton copy raises interesting questions surrounding provenance and the reproduction of historical manuscripts, particularly by hand. The temporal break between the production of this later copy and the original also adds a novel dimension to evaluating historicity and authenticity, allowing us to compare it with the original in context - we are thus presented with a historiographical palimpsest of sorts, the history of a history through the ages. Apart from teasing out those contrasts, we will also seek to explore some novel angles in looking at the Aubin's content, particularly with the glyphic representation of Nahuatl text in the context of royal and noble titles.

II. Provenance

First, in considering the diverse historical influences shaping present versions of the text, a consideration of provenance poses much potential to enrich any analysis. There is a considerable scarcity of information on the provenance of the original codex, though there is significant evidence within the text from linguistic cues (such as first-person scribal accounts) and the consistency of layout through much of the text that the original was the work of a single *tlacuilo*,

or traditional Nahuatl scribe, over a period of time (Rajagopalan, 2019). The object currently resides in the British Museum, having been exhibited twice in London and Berlin - it was also acquired in 1890 from a French book dealer named Jules Des Portes (British Museum). Gaining its name from the French historian J.M.A Aubin, who owned it in the early 19th century, a lithographic reprint of the codex was also produced in the 1800s. The trail for the original ends here; however, in considering the Princeton copy, we can derive some more historical context.

The Princeton text appears to be an early 19th century copy of the original (Princeton University Library) - a contemporary source, a certain Rémi Simeón, describes a version of the Aubin codex with “an unnumbered leaf between fols. 32 and 33” in the possession of “an Italian named Chialiva.” This individual was likely the influential Italian journalist and politician Abbondio Chialiva (1800-1870), who sought refuge in Mexico in 1828, escaping political strife at home (Tiloca, Gillio, & Bovio, 2016) (Wikipedia 2019) - the presence of the above mentioned unmarked page in this copy, as well as Italian glosses in some margins, leads one to believe that the Princeton manuscript is indeed the copy that Simeón references. Following this, we know the copy is purchased by Robert M. Garrett, well known collector and donor, in a Sotheby’s auction in 1936, and donated to Princeton University in 1949 (Princeton University Library).

Prefacing with the provenance of objects is key when working with historical objects such as those discussed in this paper to root them in context. However, what one can also parse from the above discussion is a consistent interest, particularly on the part of some European elites, to capture ethnographic information about the people of New Spain, and perhaps the non-European world in general. The act of documentation itself implies an audience: how the imagined audience may have shaped the choices of the indigenous authors of this codex will certainly form part of the discussion to follow.

III. Text and Language

In this section, we will seek to explore the linguistic affinities of Codex Aubin’s author(s), as well as establish the textual/literary traditions in which they are placed. We will also seek to examine how post-Conquest language contact shaped the creation of indigenous texts, for which this proves a very interesting case study. To begin with, we are faced with a primarily Nahuatl text with sparse but notable Spanish-language notes; the script, orthography, and typeface also represent European sensibilities. We begin the text with a colophon-like title page (Fig 3.1), which Rajagopalan (2019) comments on extensively - she considers the similarities with the European conventions of the printed book, with the individual *tlacuilo*’s stylistic choices showing. He (presumably male, given that the position of *tlacuilo* in Aztec society was largely reserved for men) employs a gothic font for the title head, but then switches to a more italic hand for the

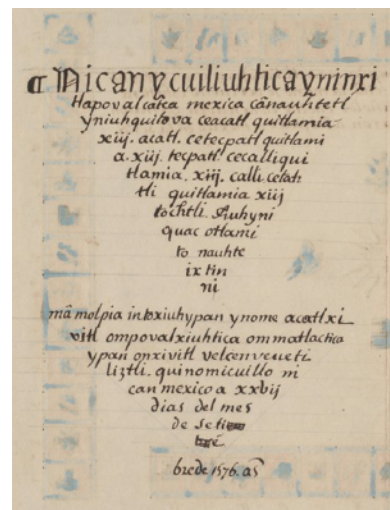


Fig 3.1: The title page as seen in the Princeton copy of the Codex Aubin.

remainder of the colophon. The original codex is bound with remnant sheets from Caesar's *In Bello Gallico*, which to Rajagopalan suggests that the scribe modeled his text format from a European written book, perhaps that copy itself - given the education of scribes and nobles in schools established by friars in the post-conquest era (Rajagopalan, 2019), (Horn, 1997), we get a sense that the Nahuatl scribes would have been exposed to large amounts of European printed content.

This intersection of European and indigenous traditions makes one of its most explicit appearances in one of the early pages of the codex, folio 2, where we have a representation of the Aztec calendar round, which represents the intersection of the Aztec solar year and the 260-day ritual calendar, creating a cycle of 52 years (Bowles 2018). We have a comparison of both the original codex's version of this calendar, and the Princeton copy on the next page (Fig 3.2, Fig 3.3): the text, in an approximate transliteration, reads:

¶ Indicion segunda de la casa llamada ceacatl tiene treze años y tres oli-
piades en la primera casa donde esta la mano se descubrio esta tierra
en la segunda entraron los españoles en ella en la tercera gana-
ron a mexico en la cuarta comenzaron a edificar a mexico en la sesta
vinieron los doze frayles.

Firstly, some damage is clearly visible to the central gutter of the original - whether this existed at the time when the copy was made is unclear. Furthermore, the scribe of the copy seems to have chosen to retain the archaic Spanish orthography of the original, perhaps interpolating damaged sections (both of text and art). Most interestingly, however, is that we have a text here that functions as a Mexica continuous year annal (Diel 2019), which is numbered in terms of dates in the Aztec calendar as represented by year glyphs. What we see here is essentially a contextualization of the Aztec calendar for an unaccustomed reader, albeit one somewhat familiar with the events of the conquest. The message, somewhat comprehensible to a speaker of modern Spanish, summarizes the structure of the Aztec calendar round: there are four periods of thirteen years ("*trecenas*") in each 52-year cycle, each divided into four-year olympiads containing the alternation of four glyphs. We are then contextualized to the events of the context - the year 1519, corresponding to the calendar round year 1-Acatl (numbered 1 in the *trecena* above the text), is the year when "this land was discovered" - the year 1520, the "second house" corresponding to the year 2-Tecpatl, was when "the Spanish entered it", the year 1521, corresponding to the year 3-Calli, is when the Spanish "won Mexico". In the "fourth house", corresponding to the year 1522 (4-Tochtli), is when they began "building over Mexico" and the sixth house was when the "twelve friars arrived", a historical event corresponding to the arrival of the "twelve apostles of Mexico" who were Franciscan friars sent to evangelize in New Spain (Ricard, 1974).

Most fascinatingly, this gloss appears to be a primer for the non-Nahuatl on the *xihuitl* year count, clearly a preface produced with the intent of providing background to a reader; a sort of legend



f o r
t h e
t e x t .
W e
t h u s

Fig 3.2: Folio 3 of the original Codex Aubin



Fig 3.2: Folio 3 of the Princeton copy of the Codex Aubin.

come into considerations of audience: for whom was this Nahuatl text being produced, and does it indicate a decline in the usage of the traditional calendar following conquest? The indigenous *tlacuilo* author of the text also describes the “discovery” of Mexico, a somewhat Eurocentric conception, perhaps a product of their instruction in friar-run schools. Considering further questions of audience, we can also consider Spanish loanwords, and a prominent, and perhaps telling loanword that appears early in the text is the Spanish word *diablo*, meaning devil. An example, occurring on folio 5 of the codex, is the following phrase in Nahuatl:

oceppe oncan oquinnotz indiablo inhuitzillo
pochtli quimilhui

Which, very similar to phrases from some other codices (Campbell 1997) (Anderson, Schroeder, & Chimalpahin, 2016), says something like:

“And then, at the prophesied place, the devil Huitzilopochtli spoke to them.”

It is clear from this that the author is speaking, at least with respect to audience, from a post-conquest Christian perspective - he refers to the Aztec tutelary deity *Huitzilopochtli* as a devil/demon, suggesting either a shift in beliefs, or a need to re-render traditional Nahuatl narratives to make them palatable to the religious/governmental authorities. There is very little in the way of explicitly religious pre-Conquest material depicted in the Codex Aubin, particularly pictorially - one wonders as a result about authorial intent. One can also thus fathom linguistic changes in post-Conquest Nahuatl, which probably was significantly reformulated in religious and ritual semantic domains. One can also wonder thus how the poetic and artistic conventions of colonial Nahuatl literature were conserved/alterd from the *huehuetlatolli* of the pre-Conquest elite; some of the changes in the Aubin suggest that there may have been a potent reshaping of language and language ideologies in general.

We can now also consider the manuscript nature of the original and later copy to consider how language use may reflect in both. Firstly, it is very easy to see that the copy contain numerous errors and edits in copying; folios 4 and 5, for example, compared across both versions, show significant corrections in the more recent version. We know with certainty that the original scribe of the codex was a fluent speaker of Classical Nahuatl - however, it is unclear whether the individual producing the copy knew Nahuatl, or if they were simply approximating a direct transcription of the script in the original. Nahuatl remained the majority language of the Valley of Mexico throughout the colonial period (which lasted from 1521 to 1821) (Terraciano, 2017), which suggests that the copier of the text may have been familiar with the language; however, it is unclear how spoken varieties may have mapped on to the stylized high-register writing of the codices. Interestingly, we also find inconsistencies in the internal chronology across the original and the copy - on folio 4, we see the date 1168 glossed in the original to correspond to the year 1-Tecpatl; in the copy, this is referenced as the year 1070. Referencing the correspondence of Aztec years with the present Gregorian calendar through the use of a reference table (Voorburg, 2019), we find that the year 1168 is the only one of the two that corresponds to the year 1-

Tecaptl. However, the error in the copy may reflect oral tradition at the time of copying, or inconsistencies in the transmission of the indigenous calendar post-Conquest; regardless, we find that there are some very interesting questions raised not only by the original, but also by the process of copying that occurred to produce the Chialiva (Princeton) version of the text.

IV. Artistic Traditions and Imagery

The pre-Hispanic codex was a largely pictorial tool - it complemented the oral exposition of a narrative, serving as a base from which speakers could expand ideas (Diel, 2019). The post-Conquest codex represents a significant continuation of this pictorial tradition, with the correlations between language and pictures as a symbolic system remaining remarkably consistent. The Nahuatl system of writing, while subject to some scholarly debate as to its nature as a bonafide script (Lacadena, 2008) (Whittaker 2009), has been shown to definitely encode phonetic values in pictorial glyphs; apart from this, we also have more pictographic forms of writing, as well as purely visual drawings of events.



Fig 4.1: Traditional glyphs for Tollan, warfare, and travel (going clockwise)

Mentioned earlier was the idea that this work is a continuous year annal - in this form, the pictorial convention is to include individual years to mark time, which in the pre-Hispanic era would have all encompassed one sheet (Diel 2019). These years are marked within rectangular cartouches with blue glyphs and red outlines, a convention shared by the Codex Mexicanus and other codices. The *tlacuilo* author of the Codex Aubin clearly marks himself pictorially within the Nahuatl artistic tradition, using footprints to indicate travel (Folio 4, for example), a shield with an obsidian blade indicating war (see Folio 32), and using place glyphs (for instance, the cattail reed glyph on Folio 8 representing the location Tollan) (Fordham University).

We however also see some interesting traces of European influence throughout the Codex even pictorially - for instance, we can begin with the visual of the sun god *Tonantíuh* at the center of the calendar round in Folio 3. While the status of the god at the center of the calendar is



Fig 4.2: Solar depiction at centre of Calendar round in the Princeton copy, original Codex Aubin, and Aztec Calendar Stone at National Anthropology Museum, Mexico City (Fonseca, 2019).

somewhat disputed, (Klein, 1976) we can assume it is the sun god here given the clear depiction in the Aubin codex. Conventionally, the Aztec sun god was represented in stone carvings/codices in a more iconographic sense; however, in this case, the *tlacuilo* has portrayed the sun as the European solar symbol (as seen in medieval manuscripts) - see Fig. 4.2, which compares a number of solar depictions. Perhaps a way of establishing affinity to European histories, this may also be due to the prior considerations of audience discussed with regards to the calendar - to familiarize a reader with the calendar, it would make sense to use a solar symbol they would recognize.

Furthermore, we see a very interesting representation of speech in Folio 19 - we see an early indigenous adaptation of the European speech scroll, or the *banderole* (Syme 2007), filling it with Nahuatl dialogue - however, this also bears strong parallels to the *tlatolli* glyph so often seen in front of speaking figures in Mesoamerican pictorial traditions, even visible later in the Codex Aubin. Both forms of representing speech are originally framed in a curling, volute-like shape, framing a fascinating synthesis of ideas about speech and writing within this codex.



Figure 4.3: European-style speech scrolls with Nahuatl Text, Folio 19 (Princeton edition)



Finally, we can also consider the painting on Folio 26, which depicts the Mexica founding myth of Tenochtitlan (famously immortalized on the Mexican flag). Most interestingly, what we see here is a big shift in pictorial technique - while most of the drawings in the Codex Aubin remain in the two-dimensional traditional style, this particular painting evokes a sense of perspective and three-dimensionality implemented in a particularly European way (see Fig 4.4).

We also see shading for light and dark, rough, non-linear, non-outlined brush strokes, and a general

Fig 4.4: An image of the Aztec founding of Tenochtitlan in the original Codex Aubin

tendency towards a European watercolor-like texture. Overall, the Codex Aubin, while remaining faithful to the narrative and pictorial traditions of the Nahua people, displays some significant adoption of European narrative and artistic techniques. Now, we will consider an intersection of language and visual representation in the colonial cultural encounter through a case study: that of ruler glyphs in the Codex Aubin.

V. A Case Study: Ruler Glyphs



Figure 5.1: Chimalpopocatzin with name glyph



Figure 5.2: Axayacatzin with name glyph

Now, we will consider the case of ruler glyphs, a particular case of Nahuatl writing, where the names of every ruler (*tlatoani*) is depicted as a floating glyph above their head (connected by a line). This is very visible in the genealogy/dynastic list section of Codex Aubin (beginning on Folio 69). We see reign lengths indicated with Aztec vigesimal numeral glyphs and blue orbs/shields, similarly to the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Mendocino (Closs, 2016). The ruler's glyph is a complex conjunct of multiple signs, both phonetic and pictographic - we will now look at a few examples to elucidate this convention. First, we look at the third *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan, Chimalpopoca:

Chimal- is a “noun root referring to a shield”, and “popoca” is a verb indicated the emission of smoke (Bowles 2018). Thus, Chimalpopoca’s name is something along the lines of “his shield emits smoke” - Bowles states that while this could refer to the Nahuatl poetic image of “chimalteutli” or “shield-smoke” in a battlefield, it is more likely to refer to the sun at its peak in the sky amidst dust. The name glyph represents this compound quite literally, with the glyphs for shield and smoke overlaid on each other.

Now, we look at another ruler or *tlatoni* of *Tenochtitlan*, Axayacatzin (See Fig. 5.2). Here we can see the roots *a-*(water) and *xayacatl*(mask, face). (Bowles 2018) While the exact implication here is unclear, the glyph clearly shows the water glyph covering the face glyph, creating the overall name glyph. The *-tzin* suffix implies dearness/respect, and so is an honorific applied to all *tlatoni* titles.

However, these are all pre-colonial examples: what is really interesting is that the post-colonial depiction of powerful individuals continues to use much of the iconography and techniques used to formerly depict all-powerful god-kings. The state-appointed governors in the years immediately following the Conquest were often descendants of the Mexica royal family, appointed in a manner similar to how pre-Conquest *tlatoque* were appointed (Anderson, Schroeder, & Chimalpahin, 2016) (Lockhart, 1994) - one such example is Diego Huanitzin, also known as Panitzin:

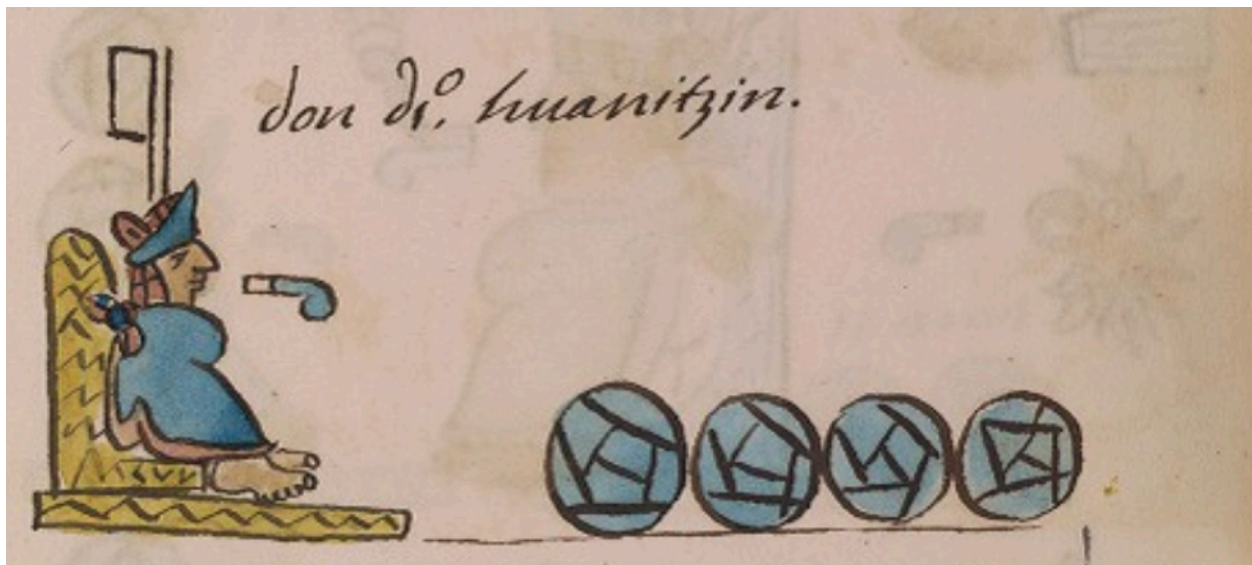


Fig 5.3: Diego Huanitzin (Panitzin)

Note that iconographically, Panitzin, despite having been baptized into the Christian faith, and also ruling as Spanish governor, is depicted still as *tlatoni* - it appears his descent from the noble house allows him the right of such depiction (in the scribe's eyes). We notice the ruler's glyph now: without the *-tzin*, we have only *pan-*, which is the Nahuatl word for flag, and the corresponding glyph is located in the position of the ruler's glyph. Even more interestingly, however, non-Nahua, non-ruling figures were occasionally given name glyphs as well - for instance, let us look at Don Luis de Velasco.

Hypothesizing based off other known transcribing of European names into name-glyphs, we can presume that grey, oblong shape at the rear of the glyph is a dry corn stalk, or *olotl*, giving us a **LO-**; we have the eyeball glyph in front, which is an **-IX**, the water glyph **A-**, and the footstep glyph **-icxilt -ICXI** (unclear whether this is included) This gives us overall **LO-IX(Luis) A-CXI**

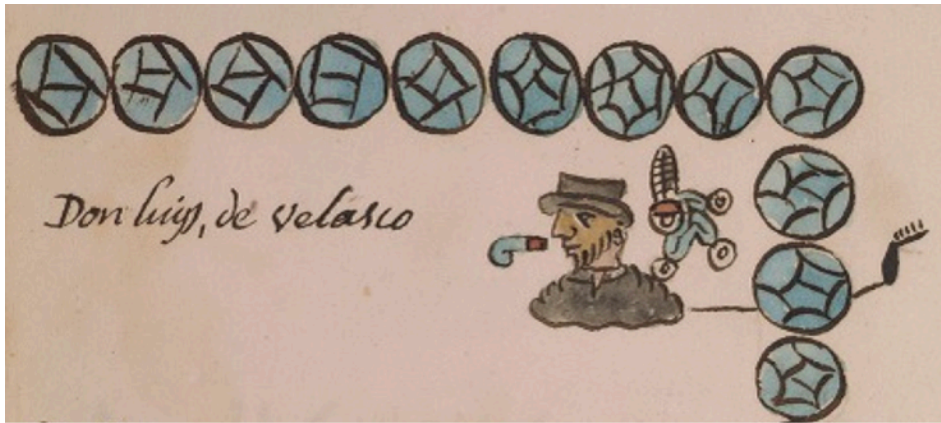


Figure 5.4: Don Luiz de Velasco

(Vel-A-SCO), which is a phonetic approximation in Nahuatl of the name Luis Velasco. This is a documented phenomenon (Hansen 2016), but the Codex Aubin presents a number of other yet undocumented examples of European names transcribed as glyphs, demonstrating the phonetic possibility within the Nahua writing system. However, the Princeton manuscript copy of the text also presents some complications, as it appears the copier was not necessarily well acquainted with the Nahuatl pictorial/heraldic tradition. As a result, we see something like the following when transcribing the name of Don Antonio de Mendoza:



Figure 5.5: Right to left: Don Antonio de Mendoza in the copy, Don Antonio in the original codex, and close up of the *ahuitzotl* glyph.

The animal glyph in the original does not appear to be the *ahuitzotl*, an Aztec water monster - it is perhaps a monkey, corresponding to the *Ozomatli* glyph (corresponding to **-OZA**). However, the scribe copying the codex in the 19th century draws a glyph very close to the *ahuitzotl*, which holds very little phonetic correspondence to the individual's name in question. The glyph above appears to be the *-acatl* symbol, for reed, though it may be similar to the *Tollan* place glyph seen earlier, and thus symbolize **TO-** (from An-TO-nio). Thus, we see a clear case where the ossification/loss of the Nahua writing system over the centuries affects the meaning that can be derived from copies made, and the temporal detachment of the work in copy from the original lowers its credibility and contextual depth.

Note: All glyph database lookup was done on the online database Amoxcalli; (Amoxcalli, 2019).

VI. Conclusions

To conclude, the Codex Aubin is not a blind work of tradition, nor an act of submission to colonial masters - it represents the complex interplay of cultural and social factors across one individual *tlacuilo*'s endeavor. We find a fascinating range of topics to explore, from the text itself to the pictorial depictions that accompany it; it gives us an entirely new symbolic

framework and worldview within which we can orient ourselves. We can enter the historical conversation around the text, exploring the tensions inherent in the reproducing a scribe-written manuscript, and the violent, disruptive nature of the colonial encounter. Most interestingly, in our single *tlacuilo*'s work, we have an interplay between the traditions of classical Europe and classical *Tenochtitlan*, producing an entirely new class of work. Rajagopalan (2019) evokes the image of the scribe carefully “couching his histories” in the esteemed Latin of Caesar’s *Bello Gallico*, framing his own pre-Christian narrative in the Pagan annals of Europe; the symbolic parallels are clear, with ancient, classical wisdom informing the writer’s present day. The act of codex-writing thus is essentially a task in canonizing a history; in preserving the stories of the *Mexicas* from *Aztlán* for posterity.

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