
Book Review: *Portraying the Aztec Past*

Portraying the Aztec Past: The Codices Boturini, Azcatitlan, and Aubin, by Angela Herren Rajagopalan. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. 198 pages. Hardcover \$90.00, paperback \$31.37. Reviewed by Elizabeth Baquedano.

Painted books using a pictographic writing system were produced extensively in ancient Mexico. Some were histories, others were religious or calendric. Highly skilled artist-scribes (*tlacuiloque*; singular *tlacuilo*) painted the leaves of these books. Even though only a few are extant, they give us a very good idea of how they were made, their materials, and their formats. It is well known that a large number of codices were destroyed by the Spaniards following the Spanish conquest of 1519–21. In the same sixteenth century, new books were painted by the educated Native elite presenting their history for various purposes and from various points of view. Those manuscripts have provided us with a record of the past, of the rulers and conquests, and of the nature of their identity. The kinds of stories they depict and how they were structured is a fundamental aspect of *Portraying the Aztec Past*.

Angela Herren Rajagopalan has studied the codices Boturini, Azcatitlan, and Aubin. They date from the colonial period, but the way they present their information recorded Indigenous traditions in different ways. This is first and foremost a study of representation.

Portraying the Aztec Past examines the stories of the Mexica migration presented in all three codices. It explains both that they are pictographic annals relating Central Mexican history and how they differ. For example, Codex Boturini is one of the earliest pre-Hispanic books in its materials and style, but Codex Azcatitlan's iconography is very similar. The three books work in different ways.

Rajagopalan's close observation of how the Codex Boturini was made contributes visual and archival evidence to our understanding of the book. By means of comparison and contrast, she argues chapter by chapter that, although it was unfinished, it probably served as a direct model for both the Aubin and Azcatitlan, even though the Aubin manuscript includes an alphabetic Nahuatl text.

At the core of the chapters on the Codex Boturini is an analysis of the lines, erasures, and compositions, revealing

the subtle shifts that the *tlacuilo* made to enhance the accuracy and specificity of his record, among other details. For example, black year bearers and the glyphic format were painted first, explains Rajagopalan, and then the red lines that connect the forms and promote the quality of reading were added. Her analysis helps us to understand the production of not only the Boturini but other painted manuscripts as well.

The Boturini's religious importance is highlighted by an account of Huitzilopochtli as the divine guide and protector in the development of Aztecs' ethnic identity. The artist worked in black and red, *in tlilli in tlapalli* as the Aztecs said. Articulated together, these colors implied knowledge. Rajagopalan notes red draft lines and argues that the lack of additional colors suggests that the book was not finished. Or did the scribe leave out the chromatic expression of wisdom deliberately?

The date these books were painted has always been a matter of contention, and Codex Boturini is no exception. Scholars have agreed that the style, composition, and narrative qualities are colonial, but Rajagopalan does not discount the possibility that it was produced before the arrival of the Spaniards or during the conquest. The manuscript has not undergone chemical analysis.

Unlike Codex Boturini and Codex Aubin, the Azcatitlan is truly collaborative. At least two *tlacuiloque* worked together throughout the manuscript to record their history in a primarily pictographic endeavor. The degree of experimentation with new artistic techniques is unparalleled. The master artist also actively adopted European techniques that complement Indigenous ways of recording knowledge.

The composition of the Azcatitlan is based on the lineage of Tenochca rulers, but the content and information on these pages relates to rulers of neighboring territories as well. In chapter 3, Rajagopalan argues very convincingly that the Tlatelolca perspective on the events

of preconquest and postconquest Mexica life may reflect either the artist's Tlatelolca heritage or a Tlatelolcan patron. Artist A makes it clear from the start that his history will highlight the role of both Tlatelolco and the Tepanec lineage within the Aztec migration narrative. Elizabeth Boone has noted that the Azcatitlan's organization is similar to that of another annal's history, Codex Mendoza. Although the migration narrative relied on Codex Boturini, the author explains that the artists added visual elements to clarify and reinforce the idea that this was a Mexica account common to both the Tenochca and the Tlatelolca. She rightly insists that Codex Azcatitlan has an elite Mexica design for a Tlatelolca audience. She argues that the Azcatitlan presents a cosmic context in the four images of the Spanish conquest seen through the actions of the Tlatelolca hero Ecatl (or Ecatzin, his reverential name), sometimes referred to as Don Martin.

Another important aspect of Codex Azcatitlan is treated in chapter 5, where Rajagopalan shows that the *tlacuilo* changed the formatting on folios 24 verso and 25 recto, condensing the content and arranging it to read in vertical columns from left to right and from top to bottom. This layout makes greater use of ideograms and phonetic referents. The author argues that the images are more detailed than the Boturini's but still function as prompts to be elucidated in oral rendition.

Rajagopalan believes that Codex Aubin was derived directly from Codex Boturini, and in chapter 6 she links it to the important Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco as a center of learning and production of capital manuscripts. The Aubin manuscript refers to Huitzilopochtli and its religious rites in the Nahuatl text but not in the paintings.

In the Aubin, moreover, we encounter a new format, the bound book, the European vehicle *par excellence* for recording history and knowledge. Rajagopalan explains that the artist decided to demonstrate sixteenth-century educational practices. This book was written to withstand Spanish scrutiny.

The epilogue recounts the departure of these manuscripts from Mexico's Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, whereupon Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci acquired them and returned them to the museum and library where they still reside. The first time that Codex Boturini was exhibited was in William Bullock's Egyptian Hall on Piccadilly Circle in London in 1824.

Rajagopalan has written a work full of telling examples, helping the specialist or the student with abundant information that could easily escape even the trained eye.

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