Putting Cacao to Paper in Early Modern Europe

The following passage has been adapted from Christine Jones's essay *Pods, Pots, and Potions: Putting Cacao to Paper in Early Modern Europe.* It appears in *The Public Domain Review.*

1 Lauded as the "food of the gods" (*Theobroma*) by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus in 1753, the cacao plant (*Theobroma cacao*) has always elicited a certain amount of scientific curiosity and mystical reverence from Europeans. Tucked away under the canopy within the planet's narrow equatorial zone, the only environment in which it grows, and first cultivated in the lands that now constitute Guatemala and Belize, cacao had spent centuries well hidden from Continental eyes.

2 However, after Hernán Cortés and his army took Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire, for Spain in 1521, cacao was among the first marvels they wrote home about to describe the new world bounty they'd won for the Castilian crown. Conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote down in his record of conquest that frothed chocolate was "the best thing they have to drink." Others hailed it as the key to Moctezuma's famed virility. Cacao, the base ingredient in chocolate, was also used as currency in Mesoamerica. It was not long before colonists took a keen interest in this fortifying drink and the money that grew on trees.

3 Unlike that of a typical fruit, the sweet white flesh of the lumpy autumnal-colored pods that sprout from the cacao tree was considered by locals and European settlers alike to be "of little or no use" and as having a "phlegmatic" texture. Its seeds were the valuable prize. Local women followed ancient recipes to produce from these hard, dry seeds an oily, frothy drink that by all accounts could cure almost anything. That cold cacao beans could become a warming energy drink perplexed early-modern humoral science. Overall, the botanical source of chocolate proved biologically curious, even as the drink became irresistibly compelling. As early Spanish colonists learned, it was not for nothing that the cacao tree had an elevated status in the cosmology and agriculture of Mesoamerica. In the century following conquest, cacao, which had been sacred to the Aztec and to the Maya before them, ranked among crops like tobacco and sugar that proved addictive to the European consumer and crucial to the economic exploitation of the New World.

4 Spain imported beans regularly and Madrileño urbanites whipped up a vogue for the chocolate drink, whose popularity then spilled over into France, England, and beyond. Comparatively few Europeans had, however, seen the plant in its native ecosystem. Curious armchair explorers relied for their knowledge of chocolate's raw ingredient on illustrations done by clerics and scientists who had voyaged across the Atlantic and documented the landscape. The history of such illustrations of cacao dates back to the first generation after conquest, and it not only provides us with a bevy of wonderful botanical studies, but also chronicles cacao's European reception from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century.