CODEX MENDOZA

Daniela Bleichmar

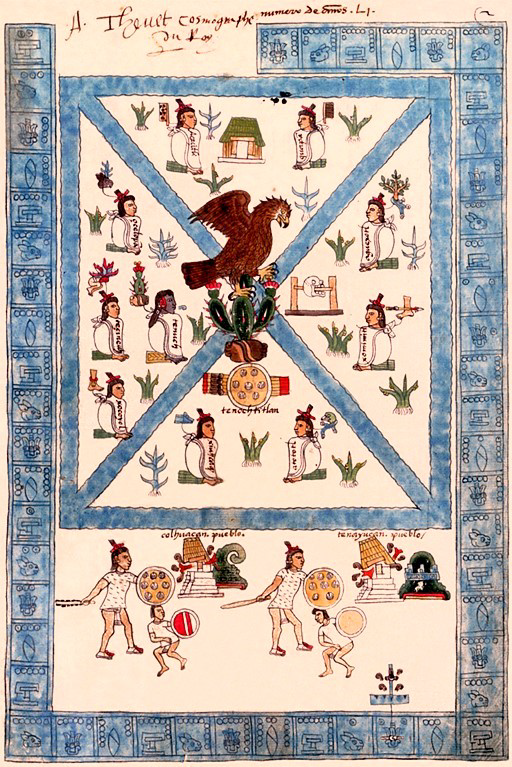


Figure 1. The Codex Mendoza

Many objects from the Americas that moved across distances and cultures in the early modern period left tenuous traces in the documentary record, making it difficult for scholars to reconstruct what was made of them in the past. An exception is the pictorial manuscript known as the *Codex Mendoza*, whichproduced a stunning wealth of documented responses. From the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century (and beyond), the codex provoked descriptions, comments, questions, and numerous reproductions that in their selective rendition of material created different versions of the document itself. Thus, the *Codex Mendoza* moved not only across space and time but also across languages, cultural categories, media, knowledge economies, and interpretive horizons. Mobility made the *Codex Mendoza* flexible, unstable, and prone to mutability—as was the case with other objects that moved across space and time. In various places and moments, readers turned the pages and poured over the images and the words, creating their own versions of the *Codex Mendoza*.

The *Codex Mendoza* is one of the earliest known post-conquest manuscripts created in New Spain. Produced in Mexico City likely in the 1540s, it consists of a collection of paintings crafted by Aztec or Nahua painter-scribes (Nahuatl *tlacuilo*,pl. *tlacuiloque*) that were then glossed in detail and supplemented by a lengthy text written in Spanish by a legal scribe. The manuscript crossed the Atlantic soon after, perhaps as early as the 1550s. Ever since, it has been admired, cherished, coveted, and pored over by scholars, collectors, and enthusiasts. It was perhaps the best known and most studied Mexican manuscript in early modern Europe and, until the 1830s, the only Mexican document widely available for study through printed versions. It has functioned since the seventeenth century as a sort of ‘Rosetta Stone’ for Mexican pictorial writing. Recent exhibitions have described it as one of the most important ‘treasures’ among the magnificent collections of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, where it has been held since 1659.

The manuscript is composed of seventy-one folios (leaves) of European paper and measures roughly 30 x 21 cm (12 x 8 ¼ in). It consists of seventy-two pages of images annotated with Spanish glosses and sixty-three pages of textual commentary in Spanish. It is organized into three distinct sections. The first, in sixteen folios, presents a political and military history of the Aztecs from the founding of the capital city of Tenochtitlan in 1325 to its fall in 1521. It is organized chronologically according to the reign of each emperor or *tlatoani*, providing the dates of his rule through turquoise-colored year glyphs and the names of the towns he brought into the imperial fold. The second and longest section, in thirty-nine folios, relates Aztec imperial geography to economics. It details the tax obligations of towns subjected to Aztec rule, organized by region and specifying the items they contributed, among them fine feathers, animal skins, precious stones, gold, mantles, liquidambar, and cacao beans. The third section, which occupies sixteen folios, describes life in the Aztec world: the upbringing of boys and girls from birth until age fifteen; various occupations and trades, including detailed depictions of military orders and their uniforms; and information about governance and customs. The manuscript provides a trove of details about pre-contact Aztec life.

The *Codex Mendoza* was produced through a complex process that involved multiple makers and a sequence of steps. First, Nahua painter-scribes created the pictorial content. They used for the most part pre-Hispanic pictorial conventions, though some of the images employ European elements. Then, following local custom, these figures provided the basis for a spoken account in Nahuatl that explained their meaning and augmented their content by providing details that went beyond the pictures. In a third step, Spaniards entered the process: a Spanish interpreter fluent in Nahuatl (*nahuatlato*) provided a Spanish-language oral interpretation of the indigenous speech. Then, a Spanish scribe took down the Spanish recitation to compose the lengthy textual passages. At some point, the scribe annotated every individual figure with a brief Spanish gloss that translated image into text and, often, Nahua concepts into Hispanic ones. Finally, the scribe composed a closing statement that reveals details about this process and highlights the complexities of translation. Thus, while the work is customarily described as an illustrated manuscript, it can more accurately be considered an extensively annotated collection of drawings.

As a result of the complex, multi-step process of manufacture, which engaged Nahua and Spanish participants, concepts, and elements, the *Codex Mendoza* is an inherently transcultural object. It combines elements from at least two distinct traditions of the writing and representation of history. Nahua aspects include the pictographic writing and oral account, the artists and narrator, the pigments used in the figures, and the information contained in the document. Old World aspects include the imported Spanish paper and ink; the book format and adherence to the page as the dominant structural unit (as opposed to the use of a pre-Hispanic format, such as the screenfold, scroll, or painted cloth); the alphabetic writing; the scribes; and the intended audience, as the document is believed to have been created for readers beyond the shores of New Spain . The *Codex Mendoza* can be understood as the product of a series of translations: rendering images into words, Nahuatl into Spanish, oral interpretation into alphabetic writing, and pre-conquest indigenous history into a version framed within the context of post-conquest viceregal society and produced expressly for European viewers and readers.

Once the codex was completed, translations in medium, language, and cultural framing gave way to physical transport. Apparently completed in haste, the codex travelled by land from Mexico City to the Gulf port of Veracruz, and there boarded a ship that carried it across the Atlantic. Once set in motion, it continued to circulate for the next hundred years to destinations its makers never imagined. During that time, it changed hands multiple times and was a prized possession of some of the most noted European collectors and writers about travel and the Americas. It is unclear whether the codex ever reached Spain, and also unclear how it ended up in the hands of its first recorded owner: André Thevet (1516–90), a French traveler, writer of books on the Americas, and royal cosmographer to the Valois court. By 1587, it appears, the codex had passed to Richard Hakluyt (1552?–1616), an active promoter of English settlement in North America and the author of two important compilations that approached geography and travel from the perspective of English political aspirations toward the New World. After Hakluyt’s death in 1616, the manuscript went to Samuel Purchas (1577?–1626), an English cleric and the author of an immensely popular travel compilation that would be of great importance to the codex’s early modern reception. After Purchas’ death ten years later, the English jurist, politician, scholar, and collector John Selden (1584–1654) acquired the manuscript. Finally, after Selden’s death in 1654, his extensive collection of over 8,000 books and manuscripts went to the Bodleian Library at Oxford—it took five years to complete the transaction, but by 1659 at the latest the *Mendoza* reached the institution that has held on to it ever since, marking the end of its physical travels. Remarkably, the *Mendoza* has the very first shelf mark and catalogue entry among the Bodleian’s collection of over 350 notable manuscripts from Selden: Manuscript Selden A.1.

Although the *Codex Mendoza* ended its physical travels when it entered the Bodleian Library in 1659, it continued to move—not physically but through publication. Its paper travels began with the publication of Samuel Purchas’ widely read *Hakluytus posthumus: or, Purchas his pilgrimes* (London, 1625), which includes a fifty-two-page chapter on the *Mendoza* with woodcuts reproducing almost its entire pictorial content as well as an English translation of the Spanish text, with additional commentary. Purchas explained that although his book introduced the letters of other modern and ancient nations, including Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Arabic, and Persian, as well as Egyptian and Ethiopian hieroglyphs, this precious Mexican manuscript was the only known full-fledged history of and by a foreign nation, addressing their rulers, economics, religion, and customs. For Purchas, the *Codex Mendoza* represented much more than a collectible example of exotic writing: it constituted a unique indigenous source about the Aztec world. Indeed, the *Mendoza* was extraordinary at that moment. A small number of pre- and post-conquest Mexican manuscripts were at that point held in various collections across Europe, but nobody knew how to make sense of the former and almost nobody saw the latter. The Spanish-language text made the *Mendoza* one of the very few Mexican manuscripts that Europeans found legible. The fact that it was a history—a highly regarded genre at the time—mattered greatly to Purchas’ assessment of the codex, helping to prove Aztec governance and civility and to establish the Aztecs as a sophisticated civilization. Purchas’ high esteem for the manuscript is evidenced by the decision to reproduce it almost in its entirety, which involved having the Spanish text translated into English and also commissioning a large number of woodcut reproductions of the figures, a laborious and costly choice. No other document in the four volumes of the text received comparable treatment, in length or illustrations. No other American manuscript was reproduced in its entirety before the nineteenth century.

Purchas’ version of the *Codex Mendoza* had enormous impact. Between 1625 and the publication of Lord Kingsborough’s nine-volume *Antiquities of Mexico* (1831–48), Purchas’ print translation provided the source material for no fewer than six other titles in nine different editions, many of them influential and widely read works (Table 1). For two centuries, the numerous authors who wrote about the *Mendoza* based their information and images on Purchas’ edition, and to a lesser degree on later versions based on it. This meant that they knew the pictographs as black-and-white woodcuts rather than as vividly colored drawings, and that they did not fully realize the Spanish textual presence. Thanks to Purchas, the *Mendoza* may well be the single most reproduced and studied New World manuscript.

|  |
| --- |
| **Table 1. Publications Presenting Material from the *Codex Mendoza,* 1625–1831** |
| 1. Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus posthumus, or Purchas his pilgrims*,London, 1625 |
| 1. Johannes de Laet, *Nieuwe Wereldt ofte Beschrijvinghe van West-Indien* [1625], 2nd edition, Leiden, 1630 |
| 1. Johannes de Laet, *Novus Orbis seu descriptionis Indiae Occidentalis*, Amsterdam, 1633 |
| 1. Johannes de Laet, *L’Histoire du Nouveau Monde ou description des Indes*,Leiden, 1640 |
| 1. Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*,Rome, 1652-54 |
| 1. Melchisédech Thévenot, *Relations des divers voyages curieux*,Paris, 1663-96 |
| 1. William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*,London, 1738-41 |
| 1. William Warburton, *Essai sur les hieroglyphs des Egyptiens*,Paris, 1744 |
| 1. Francisco Javier Clavijero, *Storia antica del Messico*,Cesena, 1780-81 |
| 1. Alexander von Humboldt, *Vues des Cordillères, et monumens des peuples indigenes de l’Amérique,* Paris, 1810–13 |
| 1. Edward King, viscount Kingsborough, *Antiquities of Mexico, comprising fac-similes of ancient Mexican paintings and hieroglyphics,* 9 vols. (London: Robert Havell and Colnaghi, Son, and Co., 1831), vol. 1 |

Print not only gave the *Codex Mendoza* legs, it also made it malleable. Authors provided various interpretations of the material and its significance, creating in effect multiple versions of the codex as they used it to pursue discussions about history, religion, pictographic writing, the civility of New World populations, the history of languages, and other topics. The first to draw on Purchas’s *Mendoza* for his own publication was Johannes de Laet (1581–1649), the Dutch geographer, author, and founding member of the Dutch West India Company, who included it in various editions of his popular *New World, or Description of the Indies*. De Laet reproduced a very limited number of the many images in Purchas’s publication*,* focusing instead on the information the document provided about Aztec history in order to compare this indigenous source to the writings of Spanish authors, pointing out inconsistencies. For his part, the French Orientalist Melchisédech Thévenot (*c*. 1620–92) included in his own publication forty-seven pages of printed images copied from Purchas’s woodcuts, followed by a French translation of Purchas’ English translation of the original Spanish, itself a translation from the Nahuatl. Thus, while Purchas had laboriously reproduced the pairing of image and text in his printed book, Thévenot dissociated the two elements and privileged the images as examples of non-European writing. Notably, Thévenot’s version opened not with the depiction of the foundation of the imperial Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan—as the Codex itself does and Purchas also did—but rather with a view of Moctezuma’s palace, which in the manuscript appears only towards the end. By focusing on the depiction of royal authority as a representation of Aztec imperial history rather than on the calendrical or numerical figures that so interested other interpreters as instances of hieroglyphic writing, Thévenot’s frontispiece suggested greater similitude between European and Aztec traditions. Another author to examine and reproduce Purchas’ version of the *Mendoza*, the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–80), used it in his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Rome, 1652–54) as evidence to support his belief that the Mexican pictographs were in fact hieroglyphs demonstrating the spread of Egyptian culture throughout the world in ancient times.

Detained in the library, the *Mendoza* continued to move in print. It was included in travel collections as a source on Amerindian civilization. It provided material for the comparative study of cultures, religions, languages, and writing systems. It was recruited into discussions surrounding European colonial and commercial expansion and competition. It served antiquarians and collectors. It allowed for evolutionary arguments about the relative civility or primitivism of various cultures. And on and on, multiplying with astonishing interpretive malleability. Between 1625 and 1830, the codex’s printed translations produced numerous distinct versions, multiplying the object through interpretations while the manuscript itself remained for the most part out of sight, detained in the library. These translations, reproductions, and reinterpretations continued over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the *Mendoza* (along other early colonial and pre-conquest objects) entered discussions concerning the role of the Aztec past in the making of modern Mexico. In recent years, the *Codex Mendoza* has been described as a ‘treasure.’ A jet-setting star of international exhibitions, it has been admired by audiences in London, New York, Los Angeles, and beyond. And reproductions continue to offer powerful interpretations about the meaning and importance of the original manuscript: the digital edition published in 2015 as a collaboration between the Bodleian Library and Mexico’s INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) was described as a ‘virtual repatriation.’

Further Reading

https://codicemendoza.inah.gob.mx/html/acerca.php?lang=english

Frances Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, eds., *The Codex Mendoza,* 4 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992)

Daniela Bleichmar, ‘History in Pictures: Translating the *Codex Mendoza*,’ *Art History*, 38.4 (Fall 2015): 682–701

Daniela Bleichmar and Meredith Martins, eds., *Objects in Motion in the Early Modern World,* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016)

Gordon Brotherston, *Painted Books from Mexico: Codices in UK Collections and the World They Represent* (London: British Museum Press, 1995)

Serge Gruzinski, *Painting the Conquest: The Mexican Indians and the European Renaissance* (Paris: Unesco / Flammarion, 1992)

Byron Ellsworth Hamann, ‘How Maya Hieroglyphs Got Their Name: Egypt, Mexico, and China in Western Grammatology Since the Fifteenth Century,’ *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 152:1 (March 2008), 1–68