

# *“The Florentine Codex: A Critical Analysis”*

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Bernardino de Sahagun's General History of the Things of New Spain, also known as the Florentine Codex, is a monumental work dealing with the history of the Native American Aztec people of Mexico. The Aztecs actually referred to themselves as the Mexica, thence the name of the modern nation of Mexico. Sahagun, a Franciscan monk, completed his work on the History in 1569, just forty-eight years after the conquest of the Mexica by the Spaniards.

Sahagun's work is of unquestioned historical value. This fact is recognized by all historians and anthropologists involved in the study of pre and post conquest Mexico. Many researchers, however, have missed the true significance of the work as an invaluable aid in the study of the origin of Mexica power. The failure of many observers to grasp this significance has led to the perpetuation of many myths regarding Mexica civilization.

Fray Francisco Toral, Provincial of the Franciscan Order, appointed Sahagun to write the History. He was ordered to prepare the manuscript in Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica, with a Spanish translation. It was considered important by the Franciscans in order to facilitate the religious conversion of the Native Americans.

Fray Toral could not have chosen a more qualified individual to compile the History. Sahagun was a far more perceptive individual than most of his contemporaries. He also had a genuine regard for the Native Americans of New Spain.

Sahagun utilized a large staff of assistants to examine manuscript sources from various areas in Central Mexico, including Texcoco and Tlatelolco, and cross checked them for accuracy. This was necessary as local histories often favored the particular cities in which they were written. This was particularly true of Tenochtitlan, modern Mexico City, the Mexica capital.

Interviewing learned Native Americans was of particular importance as the Native American manuscripts were written using pictographic and ideographic glyphs. The Mexica system of writing was far less sophisticated than the much earlier system of hieroglyphic writing developed by the ancient Maya. The Mexica glyphs were capable of telling only part of the story. The really important work was the interpretation of the glyphs by Native American Sabios, learned men trained from birth for this purpose.

In his research Sahagun utilized the last generation of Native American Sabios well. Due to the cultural displacement caused by the conquest in 1521 and the many terrible plagues that killed off vast numbers of Native Americans starting in 1520, few new Sabios were trained. There were few left by the end of the sixteenth century.

Sahagun therefore had access to sources which are simply no longer available. This fact

adds enormously to the importance of his History. The importance of the Native American Sabios as historical sources cannot be over emphasized.

Sahagun's History consists of twelve books: Book One-The Gods, Book II-The Calendar, Book III-Origin of the Gods, Book IV-Astrology, Book V-Divination, Book VI-Rhetoric, Book VII-The Sun, The Moon and The Stars, Book VIII-Pre-Conquest History, Book IX-Merchants, Arts and Crafts, Book X-The People, Book XI-Earthly Things, and Book XII-The Conquest of Mexico. These twelve books contain the most complete indigenous account of Native American history and culture in Central Mexico ever written.

When comparing Sahagun's work with others written on the same subject during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries some very interesting facts are apparent. Sahagun's work along with Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Obras Historicas and Geronimo de Mendieta's Historia Ecclesiastica Indiana are the only writings drawn from manuscripts that pre-date the Mexica empire.

This is of the utmost importance due to the fact that once the Mexica came to power they rewrote history in order to make themselves appear more important in relation to Native American history in general. The Mexica purposely destroyed as many of the earlier manuscripts as they could and replaced them with their own decidedly biased "Official History". The older histories, which Sahagun relied on, told of the humble beginnings from which the Mexica rose.

Sahagun comments on this calculated act in Book X, chapter twenty nine of his History. He, fortunately, had access to many of the pre-Mexica sources which escaped destruction by the Mexica. This allowed him to recognize the contrived nature of the Mexica "Official History" when he studied it. This is the difference between Sahagun's work and the work of other sixteenth century writers such as Diego Duran, who wrote his History of the Indies of New Spain, and the authors of the Codex Ramirez who relied almost entirely on the so-called Mexica "Official History" as their main source. Diego Duran and the authors of the Codex Ramirez were completely unaware of the true nature of the "Official History" as a product of Mexica propaganda writers.

It certainly would have made it difficult to recognize the Mexica "Official History" for what it is without the writings of Sahagun and his Native American assistants. Sahagun's description of Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica god of war, is particularly instructive. Book I decries Huitzilopochtli as a deceiver, a madman and an instigator of war. History as written by the Mexica in their "Official History" portrays Huitzilopochtli as an all powerful god who guided them to the promised land and led them to victory after victory on the high road to empire. It is interesting to note that Huitzilopochtli is not even mentioned by Sahagun, Ixtlilxochitl or Mendieta in their descriptions of the early wanderings of the Mexica before their settlement into the area that was to become their capital.

It is obvious that Huitzilopochtli was a tribal deity of little importance prior to the rise of

Mexica military power in Central Mexico. In the Mexica “Official History” Huitzilopochtli is exalted above all other gods. He is represented as an active force in early Mexica history. Sahagun’s sources prove this to be a myth created by the Mexica mainly for imperial purposes.

Sahagun’s detailed study of the Mexica gives us a realistic view of their culture. His descriptions of the Mexica ceremonies and their brutality during the heyday of the empire are too numerous to mention. The number of human sacrifices in Central Mexico increased to unheard of proportions under the aegis of the Mexica. Religious ceremonies in Central America and Central Mexico had included human sacrifice for hundreds of years before the Mexica arrived on the scene, however, the scale of these earlier human sacrifices never even remotely approached the number carried out by the Mexica.

The Mexica, and their great general Tlacaellal, invented the “Cosmic Mission Theory” and added it to their “Official History”. According to this myth the sun had to be nourished by the blood of human hearts in order to make its arduous journey across the sky each day. A failure to provide the needed human sacrifices would lead to the end of the world. The Mexica used this myth as a convenient justification for their reign of terror.

Sahagun’s list of ceremonial sacrifices actually had nothing to do with religion. The killings were a means by which the Mexica nobility and their armies could terrorize their opponents into subjugation. The Mexica nobility, known collectively as the Pipiltin, were an opportunistic group. They were motivated primarily by the desire to gain power and riches through the conquest and subjugation of the other Native American peoples of Central Mexico.

Territorial expansion was very important to the Mexica nobility. They were dependent on the tribute of their own peasants without it. Conquests had no advantages for the Mexica commoners, but they were of the utmost importance to the Pipiltin. The terror they inspired in their adversaries helped them create a huge tributary empire in Central Mexico. The culmination of these horrific ceremonies took place when Tlacaellal dedicated Huitzilopochtli’s new temple in 1487. This was the Mexica god of war which was in fact the creation of Tlacaellal and his Pipiltin compatriots. The ceremony lasted for four days and literally tens of thousands of victims were sacrificed.

Many modern historical works, particularly those that use the Mexica “Official History” as their main primary source, portray the Mexica as selfless warriors whose actions were always religiously motivated. The Mexica are seen in a far more realistic light through Sahagun’s more critical study of their history. Therein lies the true significance of Sahagun’s work. It reveals that the Mexica nobles were an opportunistic people motivated primarily by the desire to gain power and riches through the conquest and subjugation of the other Native American peoples of Central Mexico. Sahagun’s work also demonstrates that the Mexica used religious theory primarily as a means of justifying and perpetuating their harsh rule. The members of the Pipiltin became the wealthy controllers of vast estates as a result of their territorial conquests.

Many historians and archeologists have chosen to ignore or justify the hard facts of Mexica brutality so fully documented by Sahagun. The Mexica have been, and still are to a certain extent, one of the most romanticized of peoples. The rather dismal picture Sahagun paints of life under Mexica power has sometimes been ignored in favor of the distorted history we received from the manuscripts of the Mexica themselves. The overwhelming mass of historical evidence now points to the veracity of the Florentine Codex which was so painstakingly compiled by Bernardino de Sahagun in the sixteenth century.

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