

Codex Evaluation 101: Analysis & Opinion

By: Nancy Ireze Patterson Troike
<http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1349285/1/DX211395.pdf>

In this report Ms. Troike, a Mixtec authority who lived in Texas, reviews a similar codex: The Colombino-Becker. It illustrates how to make the most of the scientific and historical value from the sample. Her relevant point is that both differences and similarities should be studied. - ED.

Long before the arrival of the Spanish in the New World, the Mixtec Indians of Mexico evolved a pictorial system for recording the events they wished to remember. This system reached a high degree of interrelated artistic, linguistic, and representational complexity, and enabled them to paint lengthy documents on folded strips of animal hide. Most of these manuscripts are now lost, destroyed by time, accidents, and the zeal of the conquering Spanish, but a few have survived.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' scholars held conflicting opinions regarding the nature of these Mixtec texts, but by the beginning of the present century a body of reliable information began to be built up. The manuscripts were found to contain two different types of data: the lines of genealogical descent of the ruling families in various areas of the Mixteca, and the outstanding activities of a few of the most important individuals of that ruling class. Both types of information often occur in the same text.



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Colombino

Interpretations of these manuscripts may therefore contribute significantly to the reconstruction of the pre-Hispanic history and culture of the Mixtecs. The detailed analysis of a single document can be of particular value, for each separate text presents a coherent view of a segment of that total history. The present study is to be an interpretation of the pictorial contents of one such Mixtec manuscript, the Codex Colombino-Becker.

Since a codex will reflect the knowledge -- that is, the traditions -- of its painters at the time and place in which it is created, the history recorded in one manuscript may differ either slightly or significantly from that given in another. Such differences between texts are not necessarily errors in need of correction but rather may be evidence of divergent traditions, and as such are potentially sources of important information. These variations may not only supply complementary or additional data that clarify the events concerned, but more importantly, they may reveal social and political factors affecting the different areas of the Mixteca by showing changes in the emphasis accorded to different persons or occurrences.

It is therefore very undesirable to attempt to force the data of one manuscript into the framework of another text, since this would mask the very differences that might be the most informative. Rather, each codex needs to be studied separately to determine its individual statement of Mixtec history. Not only is this the best way to comprehend the full amount of information an artist may put into his work, but also it is the only way in which all the particular individual nuances of each artist's style and usage may be discovered. Not until this has been done for all the surviving Mixtec documents will there actually be a secure basis upon which to distinguish differing traditions, those individual selections that are a matter of personal artistic choice, and information that may simply be erroneous.

If there is no single uniform history of the Mixtecs that may be imposed upon all these manuscripts, there are still a series of localised histories which may be in general accord although varying individually in both information and emphases. For persons or events to be depicted in a codex is clearly an indication of their importance in at least the tradition recorded in that particular text, and, the appearance of these same data in several manuscripts should signify that this importance was wide-spread and not merely local. Direct conflicts in facts, and the omission from one text of information found in another, may both reflect different local tradition. In addition, however, omissions may also reveal the existence of other social and political factors, for Mixtec painters did not normally depict unfavourable information concerning the area or person whose history they were recording.

It is the data upon which all the texts agree that should ultimately become the basis of a general history of the Mixteca, while the remaining information may apply only to a particular region or even to a single town.

The text of the Codex Colombino-Becker is entirely historical, and primarily concerns the political events of the rise to power of the great Mixtec ruler named 8 Deer, ending with scenes from the life of his young murderer, 4 Wind. The manuscript is now scattered in seven fragments, four of these being in Mexico where they are called the Codex Colombino, while the other three are in Vienna and are named the Codex Becker 1. The extant text is incomplete, parts of the original still being lost.