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NATIVE PAINTERS OF A EUROPEAN BOOK

COMPLEX ORIGINS OF THE PICTORIAL CONTENT OF THE *PRIMEROS MEMORIALES*¹

ABSTRACT

The analysis of the pictorial content of the veintena section of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* may lead to new conclusions about the artists and the process of creating these illustrations. Comparing the illustrations with the description of the festivals in the *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Florentine Codex*, identification of scenes and persons and their attributes depicted in the illustrations may also shed interesting light on the affiliation of the manuscript, whose provenance is still under discussion.

Keywords: Aztecs, Nahuas, New Spain, Bernardino de Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, pictographic manuscripts, veintena, festivals, rituals

Palabras clave: Azteca, nahuas, Nueva España, Bernardino de Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, manuscritos pictográficos, veintena, festivales, rituales

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The aim of my work was to analyze the illustrations of festivals described in the *veintena* section of the *Primeros Memoriales*, a manuscript compiled by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and to see if it is possible to learn more about the way these illustrations were made and about their authors (or the authors of the original drawings that served as models for the copyists).

Although there are many analyses of the content of the *Primeros Memoriales*, still the complex origin of the illustrations remained unclear. Actually all the information that we have, is this given to us by Sahagún himself. We know that for his research for *Primeros Memoriales* Sahagún chose Tepepolco, where he interviewed the elders about their beliefs and rituals. We also know that they answered his questions “in pictures”, which was explained by the gramáticos who wrote down the explanations “at the foot of the picture”.² Those pictures were later redrawn by Sahagún’s assistants and explained in the manuscript.

There was more than one analysis of style of the drawings in the manuscript – both Ellen T. Baird³ and Eloise Quiñones Keber⁴ (1998) studied the distribution of styles in the manuscript – to see how many people were involved in the creation of the illustrations. Their style was also analyzed and it seems that these illustrations are drawn in a rather naive style, still deeply rooted in the pre-conquest tradition, however, with few influences of the European style. But what the origin of the pictures provided to Sahagún was and who and where created those originals – that was still unclear.

My first task was to compare the style of the *Primeros Memoriales* illustrations with the illustrations from the *Codex Borbonicus*, which is believed to be a pre-conquest manuscript.⁵ This comparison revealed how in fact the way of representing the festivals changed under the European influence. The most important point is that the artists of the *Primeros Memoriales* began to include more than one scene within one illustration. In some cases there is no doubt that some scenes take place at different times, they are not happening simultaneously. The great example here is the illustration for the festival called Miccailhuitontli, when a pole (or a tree) was brought to the city, then placed vertically in the city center. It is clear that on this illustration we have two scenes that take place one after the other – the first scene shows the pole being brought to the city, the second – the pole already erected (fig. 1).

This is the most obvious example, but there are many more. For example it seems that within the illustration for the Etzalcualiztli festival (fig. 2) there are three scenes depicting the sacrifice of the impersonator of Tlaloc. The sacrifice is depicted in the middle of the picture, where there are people painted in black in front of the temple,

² E.T. Baird, *The Drawings of Sahagún's Primeros Memoriales. Structure and Style*, Norman 1993, p. 32.

³ Ibid.

⁴ E.Q. Keber, ‘Reading Images: The Making and Meaning of the Sahagúntine Illustrations’ in J.J. Klor de Alva, H.B. Nicholson, E.Q. Keber (eds.), *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún. Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, Albany 1998 (*Studies on Culture and Society*, 2).

⁵ J.J. Batalla Rosado, ‘Datación del Códice Borbónico a partir del análisis iconográfico de la representación de la sangre’, *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* (UCM, Madrid), Vol. 24 (1994).

probably the priests. The figure in the middle is the impersonator of Tlaloc, wearing a paper stole (*yamaneapanalli*) and a headdress, similar to the headdress worn by the Tlaloc on folio 261v of the *Primeros Memoriales*. Priests are holding his arms; this pose appears also in other depictions of the *veintenas* in the codex (for example in the illustration of the *Tlacaxipehualiztli*) and is typical of the scenes of sacrifices.

The second scene depicting sacrifice of Tlaloc's impersonator is in the right corner, at the bottom. The bleeding man is wearing the same headdress (probably made of heron feathers) as the headdress of Tlaloc depicted on folio 261v of the *Primeros Memoriales*. The man is also wearing a paper stole, *yamaneapanalli*. He is bleeding from his chest and blood, painted in a European style as in the previous illustrations, runs down the stairs of the temple.

According to the description in the *Primeros Memoriales* the impersonator was placed in a cave after his death.⁶ In the illustration there is a depiction of a man in a cave. Although he does not have any divine attributes (instead he is wearing a simple cape), it seems that this representation may illustrate this particular element of the sacrifice.

This way of representing more than one scene within one picture is something new, something that was not present in the *Codex Borbonicus*. There each drawing consists of only one scene: yes, sometimes complicated and multipersonal, but there are no "planes". It is possible to compare for example illustrations representing the festival Huey Miccailhuitl (which in other sources is also called Xocotl Huetzi) in both manuscripts.

The illustration in the *Primeros Memoriales* in its middle part shows the men climbing the xocotl tree. At the top of it there is a figure of the god Otonteuctli, wearing his characteristic crown with "notched plates" attached to it. The same crown is worn by Otonteuctli drawn in the deities' section of the *Primeros Memoriales* (folio 262r). Below the xocotl there is a procession or a dance of men in netted capes around the tree. They are led by a priest, who is wearing the same headdress and holding a figure, which may be the figure of Otonteuctli thrown off the xocotl or the figure of Painal brought to the temple before the fire sacrifice of the captives. A very similar scene is depicted in the *Codex Borbonicus* – there are also men in cuechintl capes dancing around the xocotl tree. However, while we can assume that on the illustration from *Primeros Memoriales* there are few scenes, which do not take place simultaneously, it is clear that on the illustration from the *Codex Borbonicus* we can see only one scene – the ritual dancing around the pole.

Employing Europeanized postures made the illustrations of the *Primeros Memoriales* much more dynamic and therefore more realistic and sometimes more clear than the illustrations in the *Codex Borbonicus*. It is also possible to notice that many persons in the imagery of the *Codex Borbonicus* wear very complicated, colorful costumes and carry many attributes in their hands. In the *Primeros Memoriales* we can also identify a particular impersonator or deity figure by specific attributes, but these are more modest, usually limited to one most important item or a headdress. It should also be emphasized that the *Codex Borbonicus* and the *Primeros Memoriales* were created for different view-

⁶ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, paleography of Nahuatl text and English transl. by T.D. Sullivan, Norman 1997, p. 59 (*Civilization of the American Indian Series*, v. 200, pt. 2).

ers. The first one was made for the native readers, whereas the Sahaguntine manuscript was, at least officially, made for the Spaniards for the didactic purposes. Introducing too many attributes that would be clear only for the Aztecs was not necessary in that case and could have made the understanding of pictures more difficult for European eyes.

Another issue is that not all the illustrations in the *Primeros Memoriales* are complex, multipersonal scenes (for example the illustrations of Tlacaxipehualiztli, Toxcatl, Ochpaniztli, Panquetzaliztli). Some are very schematic and simplified, for example the illustration of the Tepeilhuitl festival. During this festival the impersonator of the goddesses were sacrificed. Also people prepared the figures of the mountain deities of paper and dough. However the illustration is very static, does not tell the viewer much about the celebrations, it refers only to the paper images of the deities. Even more simplified is the illustration for Tozozontli, when the snakes and flowers were offered. There are no people depicted there, no important elements of the celebration; it's actually a very symbolic illustration for this festival. It is interesting to ask what caused such a difference between the complex, multipersonal and the schematic illustrations. It is possible that the ceremonies that seemed more important for the informants, more complex, were illustrated in more detail. However it is not always clear why the elements or scenes pictured in the illustrations were chosen by the authors of the manuscript as the most important or characteristic for the celebrations. The answer may be found with the comparison of two illustrations from the *Primeros Memoriales* – one referring to the Atemoztli festival, the time of waiting for the descent of the Tlalocs, the rains; and the second referring to the Izcalli, the festival dedicated to the god of fire. Both these illustrations show the food offerings that were performed during these festivals – but the food offerings probably were not the most important part of the celebrations, were not crucial in the ritual.

Also in case of the Tēteo Tleco festival it seems that what was depicted was not the most important part of the ceremony. During this festival the priests waited for the footstep to appear in the dough, and then they announced the arrival of the gods and the celebration began. Clearly, the moment depicted on the illustration is the celebration after the announcement. Although the waiting for the god's footstep was the crucial part of this day – the illustration does not show that. My general impression after the careful analysis of the illustrations is that the persons who drew them (and possibly those who provided the original sketches for the copyists) did not have access to more restricted rituals but were rather the lower-level participants, who could only see those elements of the feasts that were performed in public, in front of people. Those elements, that seem to be missing in the illustrations, are those that were performed by priests only, at restricted sanctuaries, at night or in the distance from the city centre. And this hypothesis does not refer only to those more static or schematic illustrations. The illustration for the Ochpaniztli may also serve as a great example – the most important element of this festival was the sacrifice of the goddess Toci, after which a priest put her skin on and in front of the temple of Huitzilopochtli performed a symbolic ritual of a sexual act and giving birth to the impersonator of Cinteotl. All of those elements are not depicted on the illustration. Instead there is a depiction of the goddess being brought to the temple (in the upper left corner) and the Cinteotl

already “born” (he is depicted in the bottom right corner, wearing in the headdress of the god of coldness Itztlacoliuhqui, a manifestation of Tlahuizcalpanteuctli, the god of dawn and Venus as the Morning Star).⁷ There is also scaffold on the left side of the picture. The men with shields and clubs depicted around it are probably performing mock fights, mentioned in the descriptions of the festival. A noteworthy element, the head with Toci’s insignia, is visible at the top of the scaffold. Although this kind of headdress is not present in the image of Toci in the deities’ section, it can be seen in other pictorial sources (for example on folio 3r of the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*). This depiction highlights the fact that mock fights were performed especially for the goddess Toci and in her honor. Beneath the scaffold are three men, two of them wearing blue tunics called *chuatl* recognized by their typical feathered borders resembling short skirts. This particular kind of garment signifies the exceptionally high status of those who wear it for it was a prestigious war costume of rulers and noblemen.⁸ The third man is wearing the *tzitzimilt* costume, the “stellar demon” outfit with a helmet in the form of a stellar demon. It is a war costume connected with frightening *tzitzimime* threatening in the times of the sun Eclipse.⁹ The appearance of this costume may refer to the ritual battle or reflect events of historical importance that occurred after the ritual marriage of *Huitzilopochtli* and *Toci* in *Colhuacan*.¹⁰ This depiction seems to correspond to the description of *Ochpaniztli*, which mentions lords and rulers arraying themselves (in their *xicolli* and *papalotilmatl*) and participating in the celebrations. These prestigious garments secure the identification of high-rank noble participants of the feast.

The elements omitted on the illustration – the moment of sacrifice of the goddess *Toci*, the priest in the *Toci*’s skin performing a symbolic sexual act and “the birth” of the *Cinteotl* are elements which were performed at night. The people could only wait for *Toci* and *Cinteotl* to appear in the morning, after the ritual was completed. And it seems that the illustration is drawn from the point of view of an observer who could see the goddess as she was brought to the temple and later the impersonator of *Cinteotl* appearing before the crowd as well as mocked fights that were organized in their honor and alluded to certain historical events. The same perspective can be seen in other images: for example the illustration for *Toxcatl* does not include the sacrifice of *Tezcatlipoca*, that took place in the *Tlapitzahuayan*, a place distant from the central ritual precinct. Consequently – in case of the *Teteo Tleco*: ordinary people did not see priests waiting for the footstep to appear in the flour and consequently this scene is omitted in the picture. The general impression after the careful analysis of the illustrations is that the persons who drew them (and possibly those who provided the original sketches for the copyists) did not have access to more restricted rituals but were rather the lower-level participants, who could only

⁷ M. Miller, K. Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya. An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion*, London 1993; T. Sullivan, ‘The Mask of Itztlacoliuhqui’ in *Actas del XLI Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, México, 2 a 7 septiembre de 1974*, Vol. 2 México City 1976.

⁸ J. Olko, *Turquoise Diadems and the Staffs of Office. Elite Costume and Insignia of Power in Aztec and Early Colonial Mexico*, Warsaw 2005.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Eadem, *Meksyk przed konkwistą*, Warsaw 2010 (*Rodowody Cywilizacji*).

see those elements of the feasts that were performed in public, in front of people. Those elements, that seem to be missing in the illustrations, are those that were performed by priests only, at restricted sanctuaries, at night or in the distance from the city centre. The material provided by the people of Tepepolco was copied by the Sahagún's assistants. Few mistakes indicate that they did not always understand what they were drawing.

Also, it seems that sometimes pictures carry more information than the descriptions written on their left side. It is then necessary to refer to other written primary sources (the *Florentine Codex* or Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España*) to identify elements depicted in the illustrations. It is possible that the originals given to Sahagún included those elements but were not explained enough by the elders of Tepepolco. So they were copied without being described or even understood by the makers of the manuscript. It seems that Sahagún and his assistants were given a very rich material, very deeply rooted in the pre-conquest tradition (maybe even drawn in the pre-conquest times) and tried to learn from it as much as they could (and explain it for the future reader), but they did not have the knowledge necessary to understand all the elements, they were not fully aware of what they are dealing with. But it is by no means certain whether the originals provided to Sahagún came from Tepepolco, which was a rather small town. It would seem surprising if the feasts were indeed celebrated in provincial Tepepolco on such a big scale as is suggested by the pictures and specific details they contain. For example, it is well worth recalling that in the illustration of Toxcatl several different temples are depicted and one of them is most probably the Huey Teocalli, decorated with seashells. This kind of image was probably not made by someone who lived in a small town away from the Tenochtitlan, unfamiliar with Mexica celebrations. The fact that the images carry much more information than their textual descriptions may indicate that those who provided the commentary to the pictures did not understand or know all of the elements that were drawn. This, in turn, means that they probably never witnessed celebrations in the versions illustrated in the manuscript. They may have participated in some other celebrations, perhaps more modest, perhaps performed in a smaller town and on a smaller scale. It is also important to emphasize that the *Florentine Codex* refer to the celebrations in Tenochtitlan. Yet the illustrations in the *Primeros Memoriales* seem to illustrate very closely this account, they do not lack many details which would have been the case if the pictures were made by persons not acquainted with the Mexica tradition. This also implies that the sources for the pictorial part and the textual content were likely different. The probable explanation that some important elements of the celebrations are omitted in the pictures is that the painters of this section (or its prototype) were not involved in the most restricted rituals, especially those that were exclusive for priests and the highest nobility. It is therefore possible that they did not see some parts of the feast, that were nevertheless described in written accounts, or for some other reason chose to focus on those elements that were visible for a wider audience. Later studies allowed Sahagún to gather more data about the festivals and made it possible to produce another work, containing longer and much more comprehensive descriptions that often focus on different aspects of celebrations. However, as has already been pointed out, only the text of the later work contains many more facts. The illustrations in the *Florentine Codex* dif-

fer considerably from those in the *Primeros Memoriales*: they are more Europeanized, do not illustrate complex scenes and bring little information about the celebrations themselves. This accuracy of the illustrations in the *Primeros Memoriales* provides an important argument in favour of the hypothesis that the drawings and text of this manuscript had been derived from distinct sources. It also implies that the role of the provincial Tepopolco in the creation of this primary source for pre-conquest Nahua culture has been much overemphasized in previous studies.

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Figure 1. Miccailhuitontli,
Primeros Memoriales, folio 251r



Figure 2. Etzalqualiztli,
Primeros Memoriales, folio 250v



Figure 3. Huey Miccailhuitl,
Primeros Memoriales, folio 251v

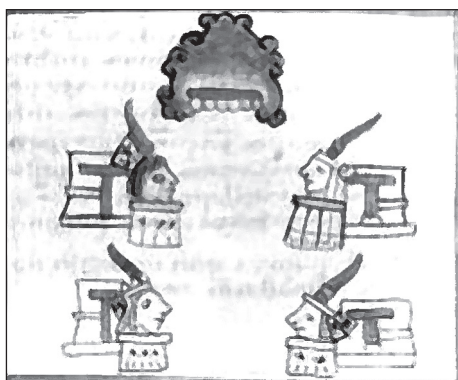


Figure 5. Tepeilhuitl,
Primeros Memoriales, folio 252r



Figure 6. Tozoztontli,
Primeros Memoriales, folio 250r



Figure 4. Xocotl Huetzi,
Codex Borbónico

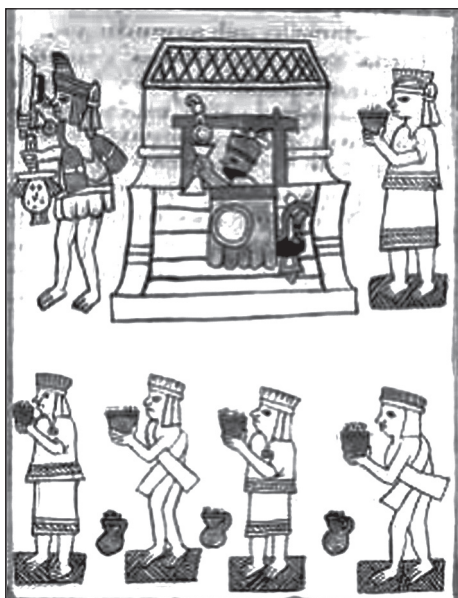


Figure 7. Izcalli,
Primeros Memoriales, folio 253r



Figure 8. Teteo Tleco,
Primeros Memoriales, folio 252r

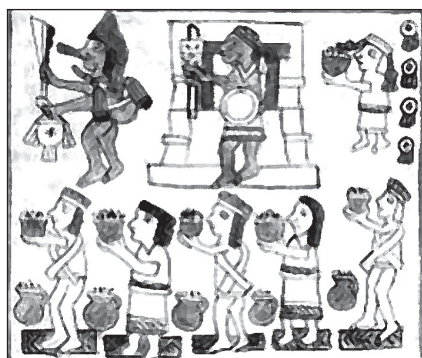


Figure 9. Atemoztli,
Primeros Memoriales, folio 252v



Figure 10. Ochpaniztli,
Primeros Memoriales, folio 251v

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