

Prophecy, Patronage, and Purpose in the Ancient Religious Manuscripts

The Codex Borbonicus was used as a reference in the preceding chapters to understand divinatory practices, ceremonies, and calendrics in the ancient manuscripts. The importance of the document lies in the historical information that it provides on the xiuhmolpilli celebrations in the year 2 Reed in Tenochtitlan. Although it is likely that the manuscript was created to commemorate such an occasion, the Codex Borbonicus dates to the colonial period. Therefore, it is either an early post-conquest copy of a now-lost sixteenth-century pre-colonial manuscript or an original colonial document that was intended to commemorate an important event that had taken place before the conquest (Nowotny 1974, 11).

Robertson (1959, 89–90) first noted that the red outline of the cells in the tonalamatl section on pages 3–20 of the manuscript left room for explanatory glosses to be placed next to the days and corresponding deity representations. This is a clear indication not only that the Codex Borbonicus was drafted after the conquest but also that a Spanish audience that required specific explanations was intended and expected. Later, colonial religious manuscripts such as the Codices Telleriano-Remensis and Tudela were created to illustrate Indigenous religion to a faraway European audience who would never travel and know the New World firsthand, and contained lengthy written explanations. Pre-Hispanic manuscripts, such as the religious Codices Borgia, Vaticanus B, Cospi, and Laud, were also taken to Europe soon after the conquest as gifts to popes and other dignitaries throughout the continent (Domenici 2017).

The Codex Borbonicus may also have been created to bridge the geographical and cultural distance between the two sides of the Atlantic. However, it is unique and distinct, as it is neither an object intended for a cabinet of curiosities, like the pre-Hispanic codices, nor a document that claims to illustrate a vanquished and vanished Nahua religion, like colonial religious manuscripts produced under missionary guidance. The Codex Borbonicus was produced after the fall of Tenochtitlan (1521) but before the establishment of the Colegio de la Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco and other conventual schools that would become the intellectual sites of manuscript production in New Spain by the mid-1530s (Robertson 1959), a topic that is thoroughly discussed in the following chapters.

Unlike all colonial religious manuscripts, the Codex Borbonicus maintains the physical features of a *teomoxtili* (an ancient sacred book), such as the *amate* paper support and the accordion folding of its pages. However, in contrast

to them and the pre-Hispanic codices of the Borgia Group, human sacrifice and other rituals that involve bloodletting are conspicuously absent, which likely indicates that traits of Indigenous religion that were more easily misunderstood and condemnable by a non-Indigenous audience were purposefully obliterated. In other words, the Codex Borbonicus betrays a post-conquest production and a Spanish-intended audience, but it was conceived within an Indigenous intellectual circle that was not condemnatory but instead had a profound understanding of Mesoamerican religion.

6.1. The patronage of the Codex Borbonicus

Jansen (2002, 300) noted that the Codex Borbonicus was inventoried among the books in the possession of King Philip II of Spain at El Escorial in 1600. It was described as a “book in large folio format of the caciques of Mexico and the days that they sacrificed in the week, handmade and painted with retouched figures; cardboard binding covered with red velvet and colored banners” (*libro en folio mayor, de los caciques de México y de los días que sacrificaban en la semana, de mano, pintado en colores con figuras retocadas; encuadernado en papelón cubierto de terciopelo carmesí con cintas coloradas*; Zarco Cuevas 1924–1929, vol. 3, 553). The “caciques of Mexico” were likely the patrons of the Codex Borbonicus, which may have been commissioned as a gift to the King of Spain (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 398). I suggest that the document itself contains several clues about its patrons’ identity.

As extensively remarked in the scholarship (Couch 1985, ch. 2, Nicholson 1988, Anders et al. 1991, 51–58), the Codex Borbonicus likely hails from the southern shores of Lake Texcoco and the towns of Iztapalapa, Colhuacan, or Xochimilco (Map 2). Glosses throughout the *veintena* section repeatedly mention the chinampas, raised fields on the fertile fresh waters of the southern lake. The goddess Cihuacoatl, who plays a leading role in the yearly ceremonies in the second part of the manuscript, was worshiped as a town patron in Colhuacan and Xochimilco. The New Fire ceremony during Panquetzaliztli is said to have taken place in the Cerro de la Estrella near Iztapalapa.

The priest impersonator of Cihuacoatl appears on pages 23 and 37, along with another priest dedicated to Xiuhucoatl and identified by a gloss as the tlatoani Motecuhzoma II. This strongly suggests that the Cihuacoatl priest was the historical *cihuacoatl*, the main priest and chief administrator of the Mexica state. According to Chimalpahin (Schroeder 2016, 131–132) the office of *cihuacoatl* at the time of



Map 2. Tenochtitlan and the basin of Mexico. Abbott 1899.

Motecuhzoma II was held by Tlacaelel II, grandson of the first Tlacaelel and nephew of the *cihuacoatl* that immediately preceded him, Tlilpotonqui. Therefore, Motecuhzoma II and Tlacaelel II may have been the patrons of the original manuscript related to the last New Fire ceremony held in pre-conquest times, from which the Codex Borbonicus was painted (Jansen 2002, 301–302). The patrons of the colonial manuscript should be sought instead among the Indigenous inheritors and successors of the *tlaotoni* and *cihuacoatl* in the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in the early years after the conquest.

In the chaotic years immediately after the war, siege, and fall of Tenochtitlan, the Mexica royal family (i.e., Motecuhzoma and his oldest direct male descendants) nearly all died as a result of battle, disease, or executions that were meant to behead the lineage that ruled over the Triple Alliance. Cortés explained in his fourth letter to the king that he decided to appoint a *cihuacoatl* from the high ranks of the Mexica Empire as governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan after the assassination of Cuauhtemoc:

I charged a captain general whom I had known in the time of Mutezuma with the task of repopulating [the city]. And so that he should have more authority I gave back to him the title he held when his lord was in power, which was that of *Ciguacoatl*, which means lieutenant of the king. I likewise appointed chieftains whom I had known previously to the offices in the government of this city which they had once held. And to this *Ciguacoatl* and the others I gave such lands and people as were necessary for their sustenance, although not as much as they had owned before, nor enough to make them dangerous at any time. (Cortés 1986, 321)

While Cortés' decision may be seen as a strategy to keep any putative ruling noble from seizing power, it also

reflects the importance of the office of the *cihuacoatl* in the traditional structure and hierarchy of the Mexica Empire before the conquest. The *cihuacoatl* that Cortés appointed in 1524 was Tlacotzin, who died shortly thereafter. He was replaced by Motelchiutzin, baptized as Andrés de Tapia, who ruled between 1525 and 1530. In 1532, Pablo Xochiquentzin assumed the role before Diego de Alvarado Huanitzin, the grandson of the *tlaotoni* Axayacatl and nephew of Motecuhzoma II, restored the traditional line of descent in 1539.

In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, leading Indigenous historians such as Chimalpahin and Tezozomoc, who were both nobles of Mexica descent, disparaged what they considered to be the interim rule of the *cihuacoatl* (also referred to as *cuauhtlatoani*), as it deviated from their lineage (Castañeda de la Paz 2011). This institutionalized version of Indigenous colonial history has been challenged by scholars who delved into the complexity of Indigenous–Spanish interactions in the nascent colony (Kellogg 2005, Ruiz Medrano 2006). Elsewhere, I argued that two types of religious and political authority coexisted in the early post-conquest period in the Mixtec town of Santo Domingo Yanhuitlan (Frassani 2017, 80–94, Frassani and Snijders 2020, 85–92). As evinced from the transcripts of an Inquisition trial dated to the 1540s, the local ruling noble was Domingo de Guzmán, who is referred to as “cacique” in the documents. However, an equally important figure was Francisco de las Casas, who is consistently identified in the same source as *gobernador* and seemingly did not have any family relationship with the cacique's lineage. While both of these figures (and a third figure known only as Juan) were persecuted for following the religion of their ancestors, Francisco de las Casas stands out due to his position as a religious leader. After his death, the Guzmán ruling lineage unilaterally imposed their authority on the town despite opposition from the former governor's heirs, who sued the caciques in court but without success. However, based on a pre-Hispanic custom, it seems that, like the Mexica, hereditary rulers in Yanhuitlan and the Mixteca shared their duties and responsibilities with a larger group of councilors (Pohl 1994, 19–57).

Recently, Rovira Morgado (2013) reevaluated the figure of the second Indigenous governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan after the conquest: Motelchiutzin, also known as Andrés de Tapia. A man of humble Tlatelolca origins, he rose through the ranks of the Mexica state and administrative apparatus thanks to his demonstrated abilities. His career began under the reign of Motecuhzoma II or even his predecessor, Ahuizotl, when he had distinguished himself as a brave and successful warrior. Bernal Díaz del Castillo said the following about him:

I remember that at that time [Motecuhzoma's] steward was a great cacique to whom we gave the name of Tapia, and he kept the account of all the revenue that was brought to Montezuma, in his books which were made of paper which they call *amal*, and he had a great house full of these books. (Díaz del Castillo 2010, ch. 91, 64)

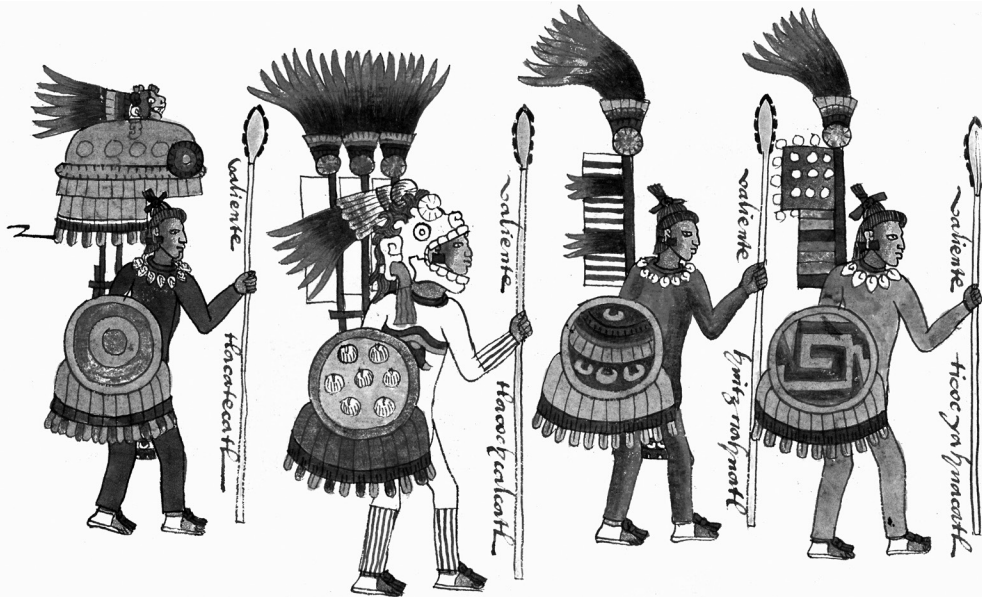


Figure 6.1. The Mexica military high command: Tlacatecatl, Tlacohtlactli, Huitznahuatl, Ticocyahuatl. Codex Mendoza, f. 67r. Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Motelchiutzin was part of a council that included only a handful of people whom the tlaotoni entrusted with tribute collection and record keeping, among other duties. The official titles of these royal administrators are variously mentioned in the sources as *tlacohtlactli*, *tlacatecatl*, *tlacoacoatl*, and *tlillanalcqui*, as seen in the Codex Mendoza (ff. 65r, 67r) and the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 8, ch. 14). Motelchiutzin also held the title of *huitznahuatl* (Fig. 6.1), the head of Huitznahuac, which was the southeastern quadrant of Mexico-Tenochtitlan and one of the four “great houses” or *calpulli* in the city (Rovira Morgado 2013, 176–180). Huitznahuac was connected through a causeway (modern-day Calzada Iztapalapa) to the southern shores of Lake Texcoco, the likely site of production of the Codex Borbonicus, as previously mentioned. More specifically, the Tlillan temple on page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus was probably located near Huixachtecatl, Cerro de la Estrella in Iztapalapa, where sources attest that the New Fire ceremony was conducted.

The coat of arms granted to the Tapia family, the descendants of Motelchiutzin, by Charles V in 1535 clearly symbolized both the titles and possessions of the lineage founder (Fig. 6.2). On it, an eagle-jaguar hybrid sports a few colorful feathers and sits on top of water. The animal is a reference to the Mexica warrior caste (known as eagle-jaguar), whose elaborate costumes included feathers, as seen among the huitznahuatl and others in the Codex Mendoza (f. 67r). The water may be a reference to the precious resource of Lake Texcoco. The coat of arms was granted to the family thanks to the efforts of Motelchiutzin’s son, Hernando de Tapia, who traveled twice to Spain. The first trip was between 1528 and 1529, when his father was governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and the second was in 1532 after his father’s death, after which he resided in Spain for five years (Martínez Garnica 2009, 96–102, Rovira Morgado 2019, 20–25).

The Codex Mexicanus, a manuscript compiled between 1570 and 1590, possibly depicts the two pivotal events of Motelchiutzin’s investiture as governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan and Hernando de Tapia’s travel to Spain. On page 78 (Fig. 6.3), a strip of turquoise squares identifies consecutive years in the Nahuatl calendar, which are also glossed with the corresponding Christian date. On top of the cartouche for the year 8 Rabbit (1529) are two mummy bundles, which are identifiable by their glyphic names as the tlaotoni Cuauhtemoc and the first cihuacoatl Tlacotzin, both of whom died within a short period of time from each other. The last Mexica emperor was executed by Cortés, while Tlacotzin died on his way back to Mexico-Tenochtitlan from Honduras, where he had been taken captive with Cuauhtemoc and other members of the Mexica army, including Motelchiutzin. A third person depicted below the two mummies was made ruler in Cuauhtemoc and Tlacotzin’s place, as indicated by his royal headdress. He can be identified as Motelchiutzin by his name glyph, a stone, which also appears to be associated with him in the Codex Aubin (f. 45v), the Humboldt Fragment II, and Primeros Memoriales (f. 51v). The following year, 9 Reed (1530), four male figures are associated with footprints leading to a semi-circular black spot. As argued by Diel Boornazian (2018, 143), this is probably the journey of a group of people, including Cortés and Indigenous dignitaries, to Spain. However, archival sources state that the conquistador left for Spain twice (first in 1528 and again in 1532), not only once in 1530, as indicated in the manuscript. The two people on the left can clearly be identified as Indigenous, given their haircuts and lack of a beard. An owl is attached to the figure at the top to indicate Nezahualtecoltzin (Venerable Fasting Owl), a son of Motecuhzoma, while the figure below is possibly Matlacoatzin, who was also in the Mexica entourage. The person leading the retinue in the top right corner is Cortés himself, while the male



Figure 6.2. Coat of arms of the Tapia family. Madrid, Archivo de la Fundación Casa de Alba, carpeta 238, legajo 2, documento 73.

head below sports a Spanish hat but no beard. The character's name glyph, a stone with water drops, should probably be read as Tapia (Diel Boornazian 2018, 143). This identifies the figure as Hernando de Tapia, son of Motelchiuhtzin. Thanks to his dual Spanish and Nahuatl upbringing, Hernando de Tapia became a *nahuatlato*,

an official Nahuatl interpreter for the Crown, after his return to New Spain (Rovira Morgado 2019). The Hispanicized headdress and speech volute attached to Tapia in the manuscript indicate the cultural and linguistic intermediary role that he successfully played until his death circa 1555 (Codex Mexicanus, p. 83).

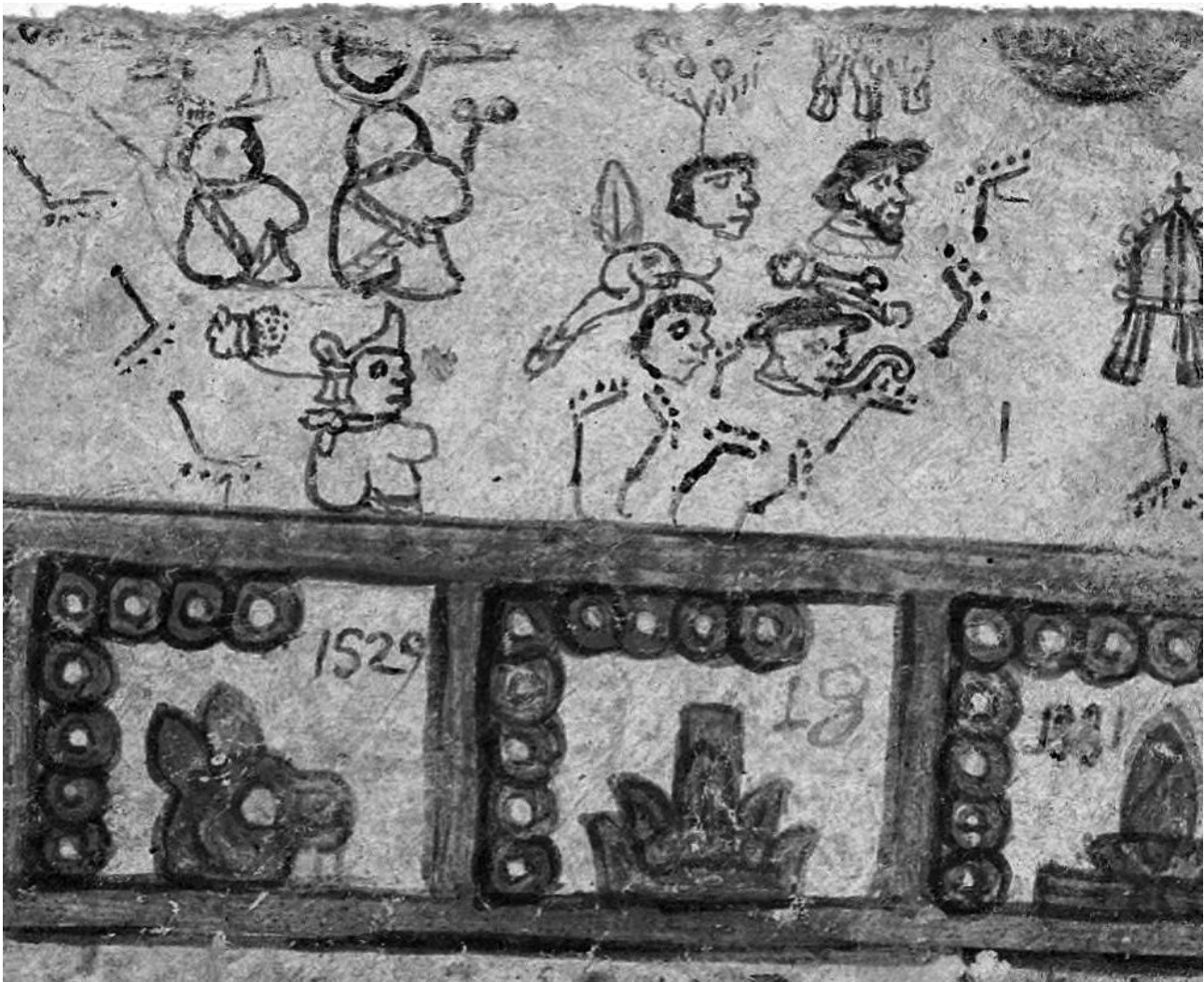


Figure 6.3 Events of the years 8 Rabbit (1529) and 9 Reed (1530). Codex Mexicanus, p. 78. Mexicain 23–24. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

In 1532, during his stay in Spain, Hernando de Tapia cosigned a petition to Charles V with other Indigenous nobles to restore the patrimonial rights of their families. In the letter, he declared himself to be the son of Andrés de Tapia, “old *tecuhltli*, governor of Mexico” (*antiguo tucotecle, gobernador de México*) under Cortés (Archivo General de Indias, México, 95, exp. 24, ff. 209r–210r, López de Meneses 1960, 193, Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 97–98). Hernando de Tapia referred to his father’s title and position using both Mexica and Spanish terminology. The governor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan at the time, Pablo Xochiquentzin, was also among the signatories and identified himself as *tucultecle y gobernador de México*. The first signatory was Martín Nezahualtecolotzin, son of the tlatoani Motecuhzoma.

When Hernando de Tapia finally succeeded in obtaining the coat of arms for his family in 1535, the king wrote,

In that you, Fernando de Tapia, of New Spain, son of Andrés de Tapia, told us that your father was of service to us in the conquest of New Spain in announcing to

our [*sic*] captains and governors that they had come to conquer it in our name and in doing all that he could as a loyal vassal, you asked that given these services rendered and in order of those not to be forgotten, we would grant you a coat of arms ... (*Por quanto vos Fernando de Tapia, natural de la Nueva España, hijo de Andrés de Tapia, nos habéis hecho relación que el dicho vuestro padre nos sirvió en la toma de la dicha Nueva España en dar aviso á nuestros [*sic*] capitanes é Gobernadores que en nuestro nombra la fueron a conquistar é en todo lo demás que él pudo, como bueno é fiel servidor nuestro nos suplicaste é pediste por merced que acatando los dichos servicios, é porque de ellos quedase memoria, vos mandásemos dar por armas un escudo fecho de dos partes, en esta manera ...*; Archivo de la Fundación Casa de Alba, carpeta 238, legajo 2, documento 73, f. 1r, Paz y Meliá 1892, 250, translation by author)

The paleography of the document is exceedingly difficult, but it is illogical that Andrés de Tapia Motelchiuhtzin would warn or announce (*dar aviso*) to the Spaniards that the

Spaniards had come to conquer New Spain. Moreover, the text refers to those who were told the news of the conquest as *capitanes e gobernadores*. The Spaniards usually reserved the latter term for Indigenous rulers and officials, not Spanish soldiers. It is more likely that *nuestros* (our) should have read *vuestros* (your), which would mean that Andrés de Tapia warned his own captains and governors that the Spaniards were coming to conquer them. Thus, according to the passage, Motelchiuhtzin's contribution to the Crown was that he warned the Mexica that the Spaniards would conquer their land in the name of the Spanish king. However, what does this announcement refer to?

It is possible that Motelchiuhtzin had a premonition (*tetzahuitl* in Nahuatl), which sources concurred played a major role in the events leading up to the Spanish conquest (e.g., Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 12, ch. 1, Tezozomoc 1997, ch. 104–111). In the *Cantares mexicanos*, a collection of Nahuatl poems from the mid-1500s, Motelchiuhtzin is mentioned a few times as one of the heroes of the last battle in the siege of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, which took place in his native Tlatelolco in 1521. One of the songs is given as follows:

In this picture place of yours,
Amid your paintings
The Only Spirit has caused you to see things
Oh Tapia, oh Motelchiuh
And he causes weeping, he causes sadness here.
The Mexican nation is passing away.

Yn ye mamox ipan
motlacuilol ye inepantla
mitzontlachialti Ycelteotl
yn Tapia ye Motelchiuh
techocti tetlaocolti
y nica ye yauh yn mexicayotl
(Bierhorst 1985, song 60, 281)

The song was written as a Renaissance *stanza* but based on a traditional Indigenous *cuicatl*. It states that God showed to Motelchiuhtzin through the painted books that the ancient Mexica culture and customs were coming to an end. This is very similar to what is stated on page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus during Izcalli at the very end of the *veintena* cycle, when the Cihuacoatl priest and Motecuhzoma close the ceremonies for the year 2 Reed. In a gloss, Cihuacoatl is described as “god of the omens who told them that the Spaniards would come and conquer them” (*dios de los agüeros que les dijo cómo habían de venir los españoles a ellos, y los habían de sujetar*). Motecuhzoma could only confirm this dire prediction. The gloss next to him reads, “god of corn kernels (used for divination) and magicians who confirmed to them what he said: that they would soon come and conquer them” (*dios de los maizes o hechiceros, que les confirmó lo que este dijo: que venían ya a los conquistar*).

It is plausible that Motelchiuhtzin's son, Hernando de Tapia, brought a manuscript commissioned by his father

during one of his trips to Spain, either in 1528, while Motelchiuhtzin was still the *tecuhtli-gobernador* of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, or in 1532, after his father's death, to prove the family's ancestry and obtain a noble title from the Crown. The Codex Borbonicus may have been used as the painting that proved the veracity of Motelchiuhtzin's vision and prophetic pronouncement, as stated in the official document transcribed above. One of the Codex Borbonicus' most striking characteristics is its style and execution. It is a seemingly perfect copy of a pre-conquest pictographic manuscript, as if to demonstrate visually that the fate of the Mexica had already been revealed before Cortés' arrival.

Motelchiuhtzin's fateful premonition is consistent with the powers of a priest and, more generally, the office of a person who was not of noble descent and had to prove his own abilities—military, administrative, or otherwise. As seen in Chapter 1 of this book, Indigenous healers or *curanderos* are granted their powers regardless of status. They are chosen; they do not choose. However, the social obligation associated with their calling is binding. Motelchiuhtzin proved his value among the Mexica and the Spaniards alike and was able to serve both overlords in the tumultuous years of the invasion and conquest. It seems that Motecuhzoma and, eventually, Cortés and Charles V recognized Motelchiuhtzin's visionary ability and the way that he used it to serve them.

6.2. The prophetic value of pictography

The identification of Motelchiuhtzin as the patron of the Codex Borbonicus rests on a few specific historical data points, namely his role and status in pre-conquest Mexico-Tenochtitlan during the enterprise of conquest and later in the city reconstruction that transformed the great Mexica metropolis into the capital of New Spain.

Motelchiuhtzin's various titles (e.g., *cuauhpilli*, *huitznahuatl*, *cuauhtlatoani*, and others) are not always easy to define in the sources. The council of trusted officials appointed by the *tlatoni* performed both administrative and religious duties, which involved responsibilities as well as privileges, especially in the form of tribute (Acosta Saignes 1946, Dehouve 2013). The somewhat nebulous information regarding these offices is also reflected in the reconstruction of the historical figure of the *cihuacoatl* *Tlacaoel*, as noted in the literature (Colston 1974, Peperstraete 2008). While Durán, Tezozomoc, and others who possibly relied on the same lost source, the so-called *Crónica X*, paint a larger-than-life picture of a man who was said to have lived over a hundred years, others, including Sahagún, do not even mention him. In the Codex Borbonicus, the Cihuacoatl priest on pages 23 and 37 is unidentified, unlike the accompanying *Xiuhcoatl* priest, who is said to be the *tlatoni* Motecuhzoma. The charged ritual and religious role played by the *cihuacoatl* may have deeply affected the way that he was portrayed in historical sources. In the Florentine Codex, for example, the *cihuacoatl* is often mentioned but never unequivocally