

after Motelchiutzin's eyewitness account, which was eventually corroborated by an older painted manuscript in the possession of Quilaztli in Xochimilco. Yet, the Codex Borbonicus is, or at least purports to be, an early colonial copy of a lost pre-Hispanic original, thus mimicking the same exegetical dynamic narrated in Tezozomoc and Durán's accounts in its production. The *raison d'être* of pictography lies in its future currency and is always contingent on interpretation. Quilaztli's corroboration of Motelchiutzin's account based on ancient texts, in turn, imbues the event of the encounter with a deeper historical dimension and significance.

The Codex Borbonicus is not concerned with historical events but rather their religious underpinnings and ritual processes. As argued in the preceding chapter, the tonalamatl section of the manuscript includes clues that tie the trecenas of the tonalpohualli to the specific historical period presented in the second part of the manuscript, the New Fire ceremony in the year 2 Reed under Motecuhzoma II. Nowotny (1974, 11) also noted traces of feathers in the tonalamatl of the Codex Borbonicus, which may indicate that the manuscript was used at some point. On the one hand, Codex Borbonicus is tied to a specific moment as a testament to a ceremonial occasion that legitimized a prophecy; on the other hand, divination and ritual use were still essential components of the manuscript's life. In other words, we tend to think of written or painted documents as immutable and durable receptacles of information for future memory and generations, while Mesoamerican pictographic manuscripts self-consciously present partial information that must be constantly and retroactively reinterpreted and adjusted.

If my hypothesis that Codex Borbonicus was commissioned by Motelchiutzin and his son Hernando de Tapia to aid their petition for the family's patrimonial and legal rights is correct, then the unadulterated pre-Hispanic style employed by the tlacuilo was meant to reinscribe the Spanish conquest into an imaginable Mexica future unbent by the defeat and humiliation of colonization. In the Codex Borbonicus, the cihuacoatl's prophecy is given at the end of the veintena cycle during the xiuhmolpilli of the year 2 Reed (1507). The prophecy of conquest, while in itself frequently found in colonial alphabetical sources, is never cast within such a clear Mesoamerican religious and eschatological framework.

6.3. Provenience and dating of the Codex Borgia

The pivotal roles, both historical and religious, played by the Cihuacoatl priest and the New Fire ceremony in the commission, production, and final form of the Codex Borbonicus suggest that patronage and provenience can also be reconstructed for the Codex Borgia. This manuscript shares an emphasis on the yearly ceremonies and its protagonists with the Mexica counterpart, as detailed in Chapter 4. What prompted the Codex Borgia's creation? What specific occasions determined its iconography and outlook? What internal clues may be found within

the manuscript that implicitly indicate a certain locale, historical period, or ritual event?

Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 438–442) articulated a specific argument for the identification of two paired temples that appear in the Codex Borgia's central pages (pp. 29–46) alongside the main religious structures of the sacred precinct of Cholula. Based on information provided by the *Relación geográfica de Cholula* (Acuña 1985, *Relación de Cholula*, § 14), two main priests ruled over the town: the Aquiach (Ruler of Above), who was associated with the sky and whose nahual was an eagle, and the Tlalquiac (Ruler of Below), who was associated with the earthly realm and whose animal companion was a jaguar. On the Codex Borgia's central pages, two temples with complementary earth and sky imagery are frequently juxtaposed. It should be noted that, according to the *Relación*, the two priests resided in the same temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, while the Codex Borgia clearly represents two separate structures. In the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (ff. 26v–27r), the main precinct of Cholula had one main temple that featured two separate conical roofs. It is possible that the Quetzalcoatl temple in Cholula was similar to the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan: a single structure topped with two separate temples dedicated to two different gods.

Finally, according to the same source (Acuña 1985, *Relación de Cholula*, § 14), Cholula was where rulers throughout the region would receive the investiture of their royal titles, specifically through the nose-piercing ceremony, as seen on the previously discussed page 44 of the Codex Borgia and the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (f. 21r). Archaeological data show a remarkable stylistic unity between the Codex Borgia's pictorials and polychrome ceramics in Cholula (Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994). Both historical and archaeological data, therefore, seem to indicate that this important Nahuatl city was the place of origin of the Codex Borgia. In turn, the murals in Tizatlán and Ocotelulco, Tlaxcala, may be “inspired” by pictorials such as the Codex Borgia (Peperstraete 2006).

A key element for establishing chronology in the Codex Borbonicus was the identification of specific features in the tonalamatl section of the manuscript, which relates to events in the solar year. In the Codex Borgia, the twenty trecenas found on pages 61–70 are arranged in rows (see Fig. 6.12). The section is followed on page 71 (Fig. 6.5) by a separate plate that depicts the thirteen birds of the trecenas, which are repeated on each trecena panel in the Codex Borbonicus. On page 71 of the Codex Borgia, the central image is dominated by a solar god seated on a throne and receiving the blood of a decapitated quail. The sacrifice is performed at night, as indicated by the dark sky and moon (a rabbit in a crescent) above. Right next to the night sky, there is a Mixtec year sign associated with the date 1 Reed. The year sign, which can be identified as an interlaced A-O symbol, has the sign Reed inserted into it. As suggested by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 437), the leaves in the year sign are a linguistic pun, as the words for



Figure 6.5. The sun god and the thirteen birds of the trecenas. Codex Borgia, p. 91. Kingsborough 1831.

“leaf” and “year” are homophonous in Nahuatl. Therefore, the symbol combines Mixtec calendrical conventions with Nahuatl terminology—another indication that the Codex Borgia hails from the southern Puebla region, where the two ethnic and linguistic groups closely interacted.

The animal performing the sacrifice of the quail is difficult to identify. Anders et al. (1993, 347) tentatively considered it a skunk. Previously, Seler (1904, vol. 2, 290) noted that the animal’s muzzle is skeletonized: the lower jaw is fleshless, and the nose is replaced by a sacrificial knife. The German scholar also noted that the animal was green (now faded into light brown), which led him to interpret the spikes on its body as leaves of grass (or perhaps

another plant). The animal could be a coyote, which is associated with Tezcatlipoca along with other feline or canine wild animals (Anders et al. 1993, 347, Olivier 2003, 32–33). As in the glyph for Coyoacan, the coyote has circles (*coyoctic*) on its body, where they may function as a phonetic complement for *coyo-*.

The red deity on the left has clear solar associations. He is seated on a throne or altar and inside a rayed disk that represents the sun. The 4 Movement day sign at the base of the throne or altar indicates the fifth and present era at the time for the Nahuas and Mexica of central Mexico. Two colored streams fall from the sides of the sun, forming the known couplet *atitlachinolli* (water-conflagration), a

metaphor for war and conflict that aligns with the sun god's weapons and attack position. Warfare, solar imagery, and epochal dates are characteristic elements of another well-known throne or altar, the Teocalli of the Sacred Warfare (Fig. 6.6), a Mexica monument that was commissioned by Motecuhzoma II around the celebration of the *xiuhmolpilli* for the year 2 Reed. This date is carved in the front along with the date of the previous year of 1 Rabbit. Thus, the year sign 1 Reed that appears on page 71 of the Codex Borgia could also indicate the completion of a fifty-two-year cycle. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mixtecs and Nahuas counted years in a slightly different manner (Jiménez Moreno and Mateos Higuera 1940, 69–76). While the two systems shared yearbearers, their numerals are one unit off from each other. Year 1 Reed in the Mixtec

calendar corresponds to year 2 Reed in the Nahuatl-Mexica calendar. It is also well known that 1 Reed was a year of cyclical completion among the Mixtecs (Furst 1978b, Anders et al. 1993, 347n1).

Finally, another important feature in the sun god altar on page 71 of the Codex Borgia indicates not only the completion of a calendar cycle but also a more specific ceremonial event. I believe that the colorful banners raised behind the god should be taken as a reference to *Panquetzaliztli*, a ceremony dedicated to the sun. As discussed at length in the preceding chapters, *Panquetzaliztli* was the most appropriate time to perform the ritual of the New Fire, as it fell between the time of the sun's nadir and winter solstice.



Figure 6.6. Teocalli of the Sacred Warfare. Spinden 1928.

Nowotny (1960, § 7a) suggested that page 71 refers not only to the preceding tonalamatl section, given the depiction of the thirteen birds, but also, more specifically, to the sixth trecena, 1 Death, whose regent is the sun god. On page 66 of the Codex Borgia, Tonatiuh (the sun god)

is on the right. He kneels in a dynamic posture towards an enthroned elderly man holding a carved staff (Fig. 6.7). In the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 13v and 19r; Fig. 6.8), the trecena 1 Death depicts the sun god, who is identified in the gloss by his calendrical name, Nahui Ollin

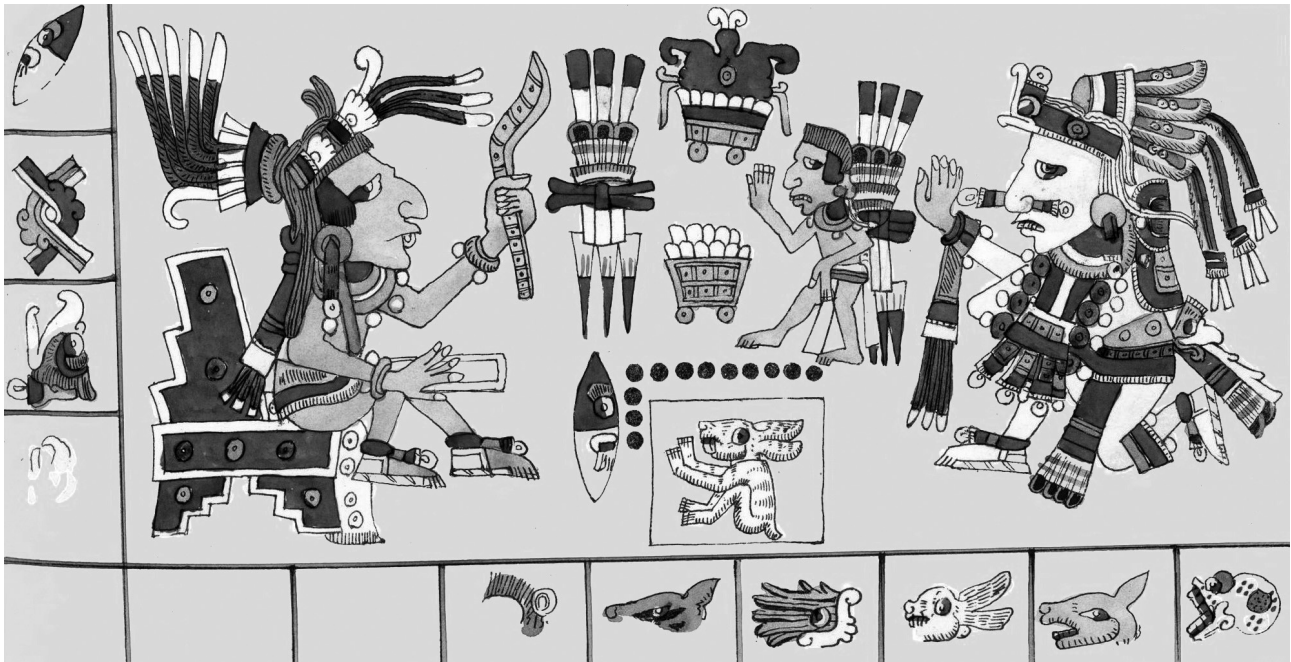


Figure 6.7. The trecena 1 Death. Codex Borgia, p. 66. Kingsborough 1831.

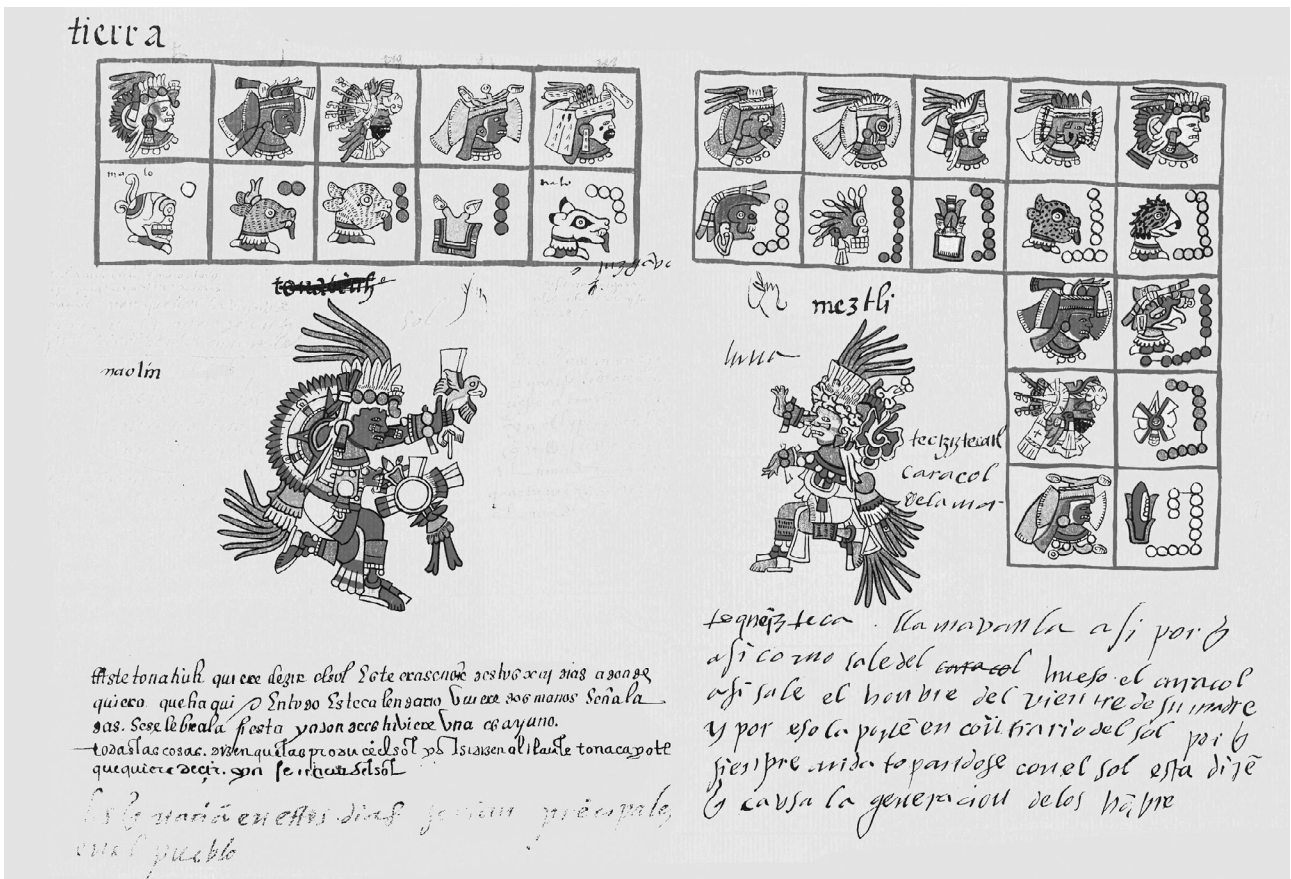


Figure 6.8. Reconstruction of the two main gods of the trecena 1 Death, Tonatiuh Nahui Ollin and Meztli. Codex Telleriano-Remensis, ff. 12v and 19r. Kingsborough 1831.

(4 Movement), opposite Meztli, the moon god. The sun god holds a bird in one hand, along with a white banner that signifies sacrifice. In the Codex Borgia, a quail is sacrificed to the sun god by the coyote-like animal in front of him. In the Mexica teocalli (Fig. 6.6), the sacrifice to the sun is performed by Motecuhzoma II and a god with the attributes of Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli. Finally, in the Codex Borbonicus (p. 6), the trecena 1 Death depicts the sun god opposite a god-priest of Tezcatlipoca, who embodies darkness and night. The conflation and exchange of iconographic elements and ritual behavior between the sun god and his counterpart, the moon god/Tezcatlipoca/elderly character, bespeak their symbiotic relationship. This interpretation was seemingly also expressed by an annotator of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 19r), who stated, “And thus they put [Tecciztecatl, the Moon god] opposite of the sun because it is always countering the sun, which they say causes the generation of men” (Quiñones Keber 1995, 261). The victory of the sun over darkness, albeit temporary and cyclical, is a major theme in the Panquetzaliztli ceremony in general and its representation in the Codex Borgia (p. 71).

If Nowotny’s suggestion is correct and the scene on page 71 of the Codex Borgia, which depicts a sacrifice to the sun god during Panquetzaliztli to celebrate the completion of a calendrical cycle on the year 1 Reed, is directly related to the trecena 1 Death, this would also indicate that a specific solar and historical year is highlighted in the tonalamatl of the Codex Borgia, in a manner akin to that of the Codex Borbonicus discussed in the preceding chapter (Ochpaniztli was highlighted during the days 7 Serpent and 2 Reed, beginning in the trecena 1 Rain). According to Caso’s chronology, day 1 Death fell on November 6 in 1505, close to the nadir of the sun, and December 26 in 1507, close to the winter solstice. The latter was year 1 Reed for the Mixtecs, a date highlighted on page 71. Could the Codex Borgia have been produced to commemorate the New Fire celebrated in Cholula for the binding of the fifty-two years during 1 Reed (1507) in the Mixtec calendar?

One last detail in the Codex Borgia’s trecena 1 Death is worth mentioning: a rabbit is enclosed in a square surrounded by twelve dots. Anders et al. (1993, 330) interpreted the sign as 12 Rabbit. However, the square around the animal could also indicate that Rabbit should be understood as a separate day—that is, day sign Rabbit plus twelve more days. In other words, the date could be read as trecena 1 Rabbit. This trecena falls eighty days before 1 Death and recurs 180 days after it.

According to Motolinía (1971, ch. 11), the priests of Cholula, whom he called *tlamacazque*, began a gruesome fast eighty days before the main celebration in their town, which was held every four years. The feast honored the god Camaxtli, who can be seen in the Codex Borgia (p. 45; Fig. 4.15), standing on an altar during a celebration tentatively identified as Panquetzaliztli. The *tlamacazque*’s ritual quest began with a four-day fast, during which they only ate a small tortilla and drunk a little bit of water.

Then, they spent sixty days inside the temple enclosures, constantly tending to the altars and sleeping only a few hours every night. Although they bathed every night, they covered their bodies with black charcoal paint. After sixty days of “insufferable hardship,” they were allowed to sleep and rest a little more for the remaining twenty days before the feast day. Finally, on the day of the celebration the priests could return to their homes, where they were given colorful cloaks to parade in the temple. In Section 4.3.1 the quest of the priests during the days preceding Panquetzaliztli was similarly related to the hunt god Camaxtli-Mixcoatl and the tlatoques dedicated to his cult in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (ff. 20r, 21r) and the Codex Borgia (p. 44).

The quest began on page 42 with the sacrifice of Itzcolihuiqui (Fig. 4.14). At the top of the page Itzcolihuiqui is seen stretched out on an altar, an occasion marked by a day Rabbit encircled by a yellow ring. This day follows from the previous section, where the thirteen preceding days of the trecena 1 Eagle are depicted in full; this indicates that Rabbit does not stand for the day alone on this page but the entire trecena beginning on 1 Rabbit (Boone 2007, 200, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 506). This detail seems to corroborate the interpretation that the veintena sequence represented in the Codex Borgia (pp. 29–46) coincides with the year 1 Reed in the Mixtec calendar, when the Panquetzaliztli ceremony was held during 1 Death and Ochpaniztli occurred eighty days prior during 1 Rabbit.

Given the 260-day periodicity of the tonalpohualli, day 1 Rabbit recurs 180 days (roughly six months) after 1 Death. Paul van den Akker suggested to me in a personal communication (2021) that, if 1 Death coincides with the winter solstice, six months later 1 Rabbit would coincide with the summer solstice in the third week of June. Alternatively, if 1 Death corresponded to the nadir of the sun, it would correspond six months later to the first zenith passage of the sun at the beginning of May. In this respect, it is quite intriguing that the deities’ iconography of the trecena 1 Death and its reprise on page 71 in the Codex Borgia suggest the contrast between the opposing forces of darkness and light, the sun and the moon, and their perpetual struggle, which leads them to shift positions at established intervals.

It may be recalled from the previous chapter that both 1 Death and 1 Reed are carved on Mexica xiuhmolpilli sculptures and framed by square cartouches (Fig. 5.5 and 5.6). The fact that celebrations of the ending of a cycle were held in both years 1 and 2 Reed (according to the Mixtec and Mexica calendars) indicates not only that there were different time-keeping traditions in Mesoamerica but also that they were not viewed as mutually exclusive. There was no impulse or interest in imposing a single homologous time; instead, different “calendrical schools” coexisted, and their relative merits, meaning, and uses were perhaps even discussed and compared among calendar specialists.

6.4. New Fire and new codices

Previous considerations of the possible historical dating of the Codex Borgia undermine a basic assumption in Nowotny's divinatory paradigm (i.e., the perpetual use of the tonalpohualli and its calendrical tables). According to this view, the ancient books of wisdom were manuals that could be used over and over again regardless of the year.

By contrast, the approach that I propose stresses that the specific geographical and historical circumstances of production are not mere accidents to be placed within a larger a priori cosmological scenario but rather constitutive elements of the way that religious knowledge was conceived and constructed. I posit that the specific reasons for and circumstances of a manuscript's commission largely dictated the final outlook of its pictorials, iconography, and calendrics. Therefore, images and the calendar did not conform to an immutable logic of divination but instead underpinned a dynamic reinvention of tradition, a constant reckoning with the inexorable passing of time, the accidents of history, and human actions.

Mexican scholar Ana Díaz Álvarez (2016, 2019) also espoused this view and suggested examining the codices not as books or inactive repositories of abstract knowledge but as objects to be manipulated. My suggestions follow up on those of Díaz by seeking clues about the localities, time, and circumstances of production. With regard to pre-Hispanic manuscripts that were salvaged from an unknown location at an undetermined time, establishing their patronage, provenience, and exact dating is bound to remain a somewhat speculative endeavor. Nonetheless, I believe that it is necessary to change our perspective and question our conceptions of history, fate, and religion. Even if divinatory books such as the Codices Borgia and Borbonicus were painted to bear traces of the specific historical and geographical circumstances of their production, this did not necessarily preclude future use. However, it meant that any subsequent divinatory reading would need to consider clues derived from the moment and place of creation and incorporate them into the understanding of and guidance on future actions and outcomes.

A passage from the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 10, ch. 29) offers glimpses of how cosmology, religion, history, and the ancient books were part of a relational web and mutually depended on one another. According to the origin story of the Mexica, the books of knowledge were destroyed twice. First, the wandering Mexitin (as the Mexica were once called) arrived in Tamoanchan; they were led by wise people called *amoxoaque*, which means “those who have the books.” However, the *amoxoaque* soon abandoned their people, heading east and taking the books and all knowledge contained therein on calendrics and crafts, among other things, with them. Only four old wise people remained, who had to invent knowledge anew: Oxomoco, Cipactonal, Tlaltetecuin, and Xuchicahuaca. They created the tonalpohualli (the count or calendar of destiny), the *xiuhamatl* (the historical annals), the *xiuhpohualli* (the

count or calendar of the years), and the *temicamatl* (the book of dreams). These books were preserved until the time of the Mexica tlatoani Itzcoatl (1427–1440), when a group of rulers convened and decided to burn them all.

Itzcoatl's book burning has traditionally been interpreted as a strategic move that was intended to erase dissenting historical accounts during the crucial period of the Mexica's hegemonic rise in the basin of Mexico (Battcock 2012, 97–105). However, as Battcock (2012, 105) indicated, it is also noteworthy that the episode is only mentioned in the Sahaguntine passage and not in any other source. Therefore, Itzcoatl's book burning is part of a mythological account rather than a historical one, which suggests that the tlatoani's decision had religious and ceremonial underpinnings that extended beyond shrewd political calculations. In particular, Battcock suggested that destruction by fire was a highly charged ritual of renewal and rebirth, a rite of passage by which the present realm was transcended to move towards a new era. Navarrete (1998) had previously interpreted the act of replacing old books and rewriting history, a process that implies destruction, as integral to knowledge production among Mesoamerican peoples. In the abovementioned passage by Sahagún, the disappearance of the old books enabled the creation of new books and new knowledge.

In the case of Itzcoatl, it is tempting to imagine that the first *cihuacoatl*, Tlacaoel, was among the tlatoques who decided to undertake the radical destruction and reconstruction of religious and historical knowledge in the early fourteenth century (León Portilla 1956, 244–245, Battcock 2012, 97–98). It was during the reigns of Itzcoatl and Motecuhzoma I, and the tenure of Tlacaoel I as *cihuacoatl*, that the Mexica expanded into the southern fresh waters of Lake Texcoco. As argued by Klein (1988), the incorporation of the cult of *Cihuacoatl* into the Mexica pantheon was the result of this war of conquest in a region where, as we have seen, the goddess was worshiped. The Mexica appropriated local land and resources by symbolically co-opting the local patron *Cihuacoatl*, turning this powerful but defeated goddess into one of the most important offices in the land. When the Codex Borbonicus was painted in the early post-conquest period, Motelchiuhtzin invoked the power of both the goddess *Cihuacoatl* and his *cihuacoatl* predecessors to rewrite and re-envision history once again, this time casting the Mexica defeat at the hands of the Spaniards as a meaningful new beginning for colonial Indigenous governorship.

The Codex Borgia shows clear traces of having survived a fire that burnt the first two pages (pp. 1–2, 74–76), albeit only partially. Although it is not possible to firmly establish when the manuscript was damaged, the earliest information provided by the Jesuit José Lino Fábrega in the eighteenth century alludes to the fact that the fire damage had occurred long before the manuscript arrived in Italy. According to others, including the Baron von Humboldt, the fire occurred later, when the manuscript was already in the possession of Italian collectors. Anders et al. (1993, 36–37) suggested that the Codex Borgia may have survived