The Codex Azcapotzalco

To support the research and instructional needs of the Department of Anthropology and the Peabody Museum, Tozzer Library since its cofounding with the museum in 1867 has focused on collecting comprehensively in Mesoamerican studies. Thus the collection today contains a rich array of Pre-Columbian and Colonial-era codices, usually in facsimile, along with translations of and commentaries about them. One recent addition to the collection is a facsimile entitled Códice Azcapotzalco, which was purchased for Tozzer Library by the Friends of the Harvard College Library in December, 1998. Previously unpublished and with little accompanying commentary, the Códice Azcapotzalco appears to be part of a group of closely related manuscripts known as the Techaloyan Codices. The original is in the library at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City.

The classification of Mesoamerican codices was greatly advanced in 1933 when Federico Gomez de Orozco published the Codex of San Antonio Techaloyan (modern San Antonio de la Isla, state of Mexico) and drew comparisons to five other similar manuscripts. Then in 1948 he proceeded to list twenty-one related works and speculated on origin. Also in the 1940s, Robert H. Barlow set up a system of identifying all known manuscripts similar to the Codex San Antonio Techaloyan, giving each a letter and attaching the name “Techaloyan” to the group. In the mid-1960s, Donald Robertson embarked on a comprehensive survey of Mesoamerican codices, and in 1975 along with Martha Barton Robertson he published a catalog of forty-eight manuscripts he identified as belonging to the Techaloyan group. Needing an identification system more flexible than the twenty-six-letter alphabet, he abandoned Barlow’s lettering and assigned them numbers from Tozzer Library’s collection is not included in this inventory.

Surviving codices come from three areas of Mesoamerica: the southern Mexican homeland of the Mixtecs, the Mayan areas of Yucatan and northern Central America, and the Nahua-speaking regions of central Mexico. Most pre-contact manuscripts that were not lost or destroyed found their way to repositories in Europe, their precise New World provenances unknown. The Techaloyan Codices, however, dating from the Colonial period, do not fall within this category. Their places of origin are intrinsically connected to their content because their primary purpose was to support land claims. In fact, it would seem that this new manuscript form appeared in the early- or mid-Colonial period specifically in response to Spanish encroachment on Indian lands.

The similarities in form, style and content between the Codex Azcapotzalco facsimile now in the Tozzer Library collection and other published Techaloyan codices are recognizable by anyone. Each pertains to an individual town and illustrates its boundaries, the amount of land held and its measurements. Land under cultivation is pueblo and key buildings, including the church. The text is in Nahua and is written in a large and bold handwriting. The paper on which the pictures and text have been painted subdivided into two, three or four panels, with each containing text or pictures or both. [image or images]

Today the suburb of Azcapotzalco (“Place of the Ant Hill”) is a part of Greater Mexico City, but for a brief time in the Pre-Columbian era it was a powerful
city-state and the capital of the Tepanec Empire. In fact, from about 1350 to 1425 it was the dominant military and political power in the Basin of Mexico. But upon the death of its greatest ruler, Tezozomoc, in 1426, a general revolt rose up against one of his sons and the city fell. In the next one hundred years an alliance of city-states, including the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City) consolidated its power over the region, only to fall to Hernán Cortés in 1521. But the many surrounding towns and pueblos, including Azcapotzalco, survived. Their historians and artists documented this survival in works such as the Techialoyan codices, and today we can rediscover those histories by studying these works.

Many questions - for instance concerning authorship, purpose, and about the relationship between various complete and incomplete Techialoyan manuscripts - are being addressed by scholars today. How did the Colonial legal system respond to these pronouncements? Were some of these works created to make unjustified claims of land ownership? More specifically, how does the Codex Azcapotzalco recently added to Tozzer's collection relate to three other ms fragments, each in different repository in a identical dimensions and tear patterns, whereas the work in question, while extremely produced? There is healthy debate on this question, with late 17th to early 18th centuries Are there unknown works that could be categorized as Techialoyan in style yet to be discovered in libraries or archives. and is Tozzer's recent acquisition up to now unknown? The nature and scope of Tozzer Library's collection, which focuses on the peoples,
cultures and languages, the history and prehistory, the art and architecture, of Mesoamerica in more depth than perhaps it does on any other people or place, allows the researcher to begin answering these and other questions.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


