

COMMENTARY

"Comments on the Historicity of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, Tollan, and the Toltecs"

by

Michael E. Smith

University at Albany, State University of New York

Can we believe Aztec historical accounts about Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, Tollan, and other Toltec phenomena? The fascinating and important recent exchange in the Nahua Newsletter between H. B. Nicholson and Michel Graulich focused on this question. Stimulated partly by this debate and partly by a recent invitation to contribute an essay to an edited volume on Tula and Chichén Itzá (Smith n.d.), I have taken a new look at Aztec and Maya native historical traditions within the context of comparative oral histories from around the world. This exercise suggests that conquest-period native historical accounts are unlikely to preserve reliable information about events from the Early Postclassic period. Surviving accounts of the Toltecs, the Itzas (prior to Mayapan), Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, Tula, and Chichén Itzá all belong more to the realm of myth than history. In the spirit of encouraging discussion and debate, I offer a summary here of my views on early Aztec native history; a more complete version of which, including discussion of the Maya Chilam Balam accounts, will be published in Smith (n.d.).

I have long thought that Mesoamericanists have been far too credulous in their acceptance of native historical sources; this is an example of what historian David Fischer (1970:58-61) calls "the fallacy of misplaced literalism." Aztec native history was an oral genre that employed painted books as mnemonic devices to aid the historian or scribe in their recitation (Calnek 1978; Nicholson 1971). Although few of the painted history books that survive predate the Spanish conquest, we know that pre-conquest polities kept some form of written historical records to verify the legitimacy of their kings (Boone 2000; Hassig 2001; Nicholson 1971).

During the early colonial period, local communities produced painted historical codices (Boone 2000) in order to prove their antiquity and legitimacy in Spanish courts (Leibsohn 1994; Wood 1998). The need for painted histories was so great that at least one "codex-on-demand" workshop was set up to provide ancient titles for central Mexican communities; many of these survive today as the so-called "Techialoyan codices" (Noguez 1999a, b; Wood 1989). In conjunction with the production of painted histories, oral accounts and painted chronicles were transcribed into Spanish and Nahuatl prose. As Susan Gillespie's (1989) research has shown, many of these "historical" accounts mixed up historical and mythical events and persons in order to make sense out of the colonial context of New Spain.

Most scholars agree that the historical reliability of Aztec native historical accounts declines as one moves farther back into the past (Boone 2000; Davies 1977, 1980; Nicholson 1971). Aztec historical traditions tend to begin with the Toltecs and Tollan, then move on to migrations from Aztlan, which are in turn followed by specific dynastic histories of individual polities (most abundantly, the Mexica of Tenochtitlan). There are two opinions on the historicity of the early episodes among scholars who take a serious, historiographic approach to the topic. One group of scholars assumes that useful historical information can be gleaned for events that presumably occurred many centuries (sometimes even a millennium) prior to the Spanish conquest; these scholars are willing to produce "historical" accounts of Tula, Tollan, and Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Davies 1977; Nicholson 2001, 2002; Prem 1999). The other group takes a more critical attitude toward the earlier portions of native history, and concludes that events of the Early Postclassic period are so far removed from the time of production of the surviving

accounts that they are outside of the realm of credible historical reconstruction (Gillespie 1989; Graulich 1988, 2002; Smith 1984, 1992; 2003:30-31).

How can we decide which of these two perspectives is most appropriate and valid? Comparative data from other parts of the world can help here; this material suggests that the Toltecs are simply too far back in time to be valid historical figures. A large number of African states had oral historical traditions virtually identical in outline to the Aztec histories. As reviewed by Joseph Miller (1980), these traditions typically begin with creation myths, followed by origin myths, and then "transferral myths" (accounts of migrations to a group's homeland). These events are recorded as occurring unrealistically far back in the past. In the Aztec histories, the Toltec stories are the creation or origin myths and the Aztlan stories are the transferral myths. In the African cases, the migration legends are followed by more recent dynastic and ethnic history, just as the Aztlan stories are followed by similar events in central Mexico.

David Henige (1974) compares accounts — particularly king lists — from around the Old World to derive historiographic principles of interpretation. In some traditions, there is a "telescoping" of events such that long sequences are compressed into a short time frame. Far more common than this, however, is the "lengthening" of traditions by a variety of processes. A number of these processes clearly occurred in the Aztec native traditions, including euhemerism (interpreting myths as historical accounts, as in the Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl account), outright fabrication (likely in the aftermath of Itzcoatl's infamous burning of the history books), and genealogical parasitism, the attachment of recent dynasties to ancient dynasties in order to increase their prestige (the alleged Toltec origins of Aztec and other Postclassic Mesoamerica dynasties). Throughout Africa, and in many other areas, the arrival of colonial rule with the accompanying loss of local sovereignty resulted in the rapid creation of lengthy historical records to help establish local legitimacy — for benefit of the conquerors — through reference to great antiquity. The Aztec native histories fit right into the patterns identified by Henige (1974; 1982), Miller (1980), and others (e.g., Hemmingsen 1995; Vansina 1985).¹

Henige (1974:190-191) concludes that in most cases, oral political history does not preserve reliable chronological information for more than a century prior to the transcription of the oral tradition. The political nature of dynastic oral histories is the force most responsible for this situation. Oral traditions "are primarily seen and used as political symbols, and like the whole array of political symbolism, they serve specific purposes at particular times — primarily purposes of legitimation. In these circumstances the content of oral traditions continually underwent modification as necessity required" (Henige 1974:6). An interesting comparative case is the Sumerian King List. Thorkild Jacobsen (1939) conducted a detailed historiographic analysis to reconstruct early political history from this fragmentary and contradictory source, but later scholars have shown the document to be full of ideological and propagandistic elements deriving from its specific context of production long after the time of the kings listed (Finkelstein 1979:59-63; Kuhrt 1995:30-31; Michalowski 1983). In Michalowski's words, "Since the King List is not a reflection of real events but is, rather, a depiction of an idea of reality, the text should forever be banished from reconstruction of early Mesopotamian history" (Michalowski 1983:243). I offer a similar recommendation for the pre-Aztlan episodes in Aztec native history (and perhaps for the Aztlan story too; see note 1). On the other hand, more recent native history (from the thirteenth or fourteenth century forward) is much more credible and can be used to reconstruct aspects of political history with some confidence (Boone 2000; Davies 1973, 1980; Nicholson 1971; Noguez 1996[1978]).²

Given what we know about the context and production of native histories in Central Mexico, and the results of comparative research by Henige and others, it simply not tenable to maintain that these traditions can provide historical information on Tula and the Toltecs. Yet many Mesoamericanists continue to apply historical sequences from the Aztec native histories to Tula (Coe and Koontz 2002:154-55; Mastache, et al. 2002:74-75,104,303; Nicholson 2002; Prem 1999). The creation of an objective record of actual historical events with precise chronological accuracy was not a goal of the indigenous historical traditions nor of their colonial inscription. Rather, pre-Hispanic native historical traditions served to legitimize peoples and dynasties, and to glorify the accomplishments of kings and ancestors (Boone 2000; Hassig 2001; Marcus 1992; Nicholson 1971). After the Spanish conquest, the target of these ideological efforts changed from the native nobility to the Spanish administration, and a new ideological purpose was added to historical accounts— making sense of a colonial world turned upside down by the Spanish conquest (Gillespie 1989; Hassig 2001; Wood 1998).

Notes

1. In another work, Henige (1982:90-96) focuses more attention on migration stories. He points out that immigration from elsewhere is a nearly universal component of origin myths throughout the world (the Aztlan story is one of his examples). Although I have argued for the historicity of the Aztlan migrations in several works (Smith 1984, 1992; 2003:30-31), I now admit to much greater uncertainty. Two recent developments are responsible for this change of heart: the comparative material discussed here, and the results of recent linguistic research that pushes the initial arrival of Nahuatl in the Valley of Mexico back to ca A.D. 500 (Kaufman 2001) in place of the Postclassic arrival date that I rely upon in the works cited above. These new linguistic data furnish one of the bases for Beekman and Christensen's (2003) new model for the migration of Nahuatl speakers into central Mexico. Jane Hill's (2001) iconoclastic model (that Nahuatl originated in central Mexico) is not widely accepted, however (John Justeson, personal communication). See also Christensen (1997).

2. Chronological distance and political context were not the only two factors that produced mythologized accounts of the Aztec past. Recent revisionist scholarship has shattered another old chestnut of Aztec history— the notion that Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin hesitated to attack Cortés because he interpreted the Spaniard as the god Quetzalcoatl whose return had been foretold by a series of omens and auguries (Fernández-Armesto 1992; Gillespie 1989:173-207; Restall 2003:112-16; Townsend 2003). In this case the faulty interpretation was deliberately constructed by collaborating native elites and Franciscan friars in the early colonial period in order to provide the former with an explanation for the cataclysm of the Spanish conquest and the latter with support for the notion that the conquest was preordained by God in order to bring Christianity to the New World.

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THE NAHUA NEWSLETTER

A PUBLICATION OF THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STUDIES

ALAN R. SANDSTROM, EDITOR

WITH SUPPORT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, INDIANA UNIVERSITY-PURDUE UNIVERSITY FORT WAYNE



NOVEMBER 2003

NUMBER 36

ISSN 1066-0089

NAHUA NEWSLETTER NEWS

Welcome to issue 36 of the Nahua Newsletter, now completing 18 years of publication in the service of researchers and students interested in the history, language, and culture of the Nahua and other indigenous groups in Middle America. In the pages that follow you will find news items, book reviews, announcements, a commentary on myth and history by Michael Smith, and a directory update. The purpose of the NN is to create a sense of community and common purpose among people with an interest in the peoples of this fascinating region of the world. We are open to any and all suggestions, so please do not hesitate to contact us if there is more that we can do to further these goals.

We now have over 400 subscribers in 15 countries and we continue to be able to publish without significant financial support from institutions. Costs of printing and mailing are covered by donations from readers, a formula that has succeeded for nearly two decades. We should all be proud that the NN is able to sustain itself solely by support from readers.

We are pleased to announce that all back issues of the NN are now available online. The project to archive back issues was begun several years ago and has involved the diligent work of a number of people. First, the oldest back issues had to be digitized by scanning. Then the scanned pages had to be carefully compared to the original text to eliminate errors that were inevitably introduced. Anthropology student Leslie Anderson scanned the pages and Mary Schwartz, a former anthropology student and now a staff member of the university's Writing Center, did the final editing. Issues posted on the NN Web site provide only the written text and do not include the illustrations found in the printed edition. The NN Webmaster, Richard Sutter of the Department of Anthropology of Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, has written an announcement about the completion of the project that appears below under "News Items." We will continue to publish the NN in hard copy and to mail it to subscribers. The Web edition will be our primary means of disseminating the information contained in past issues.

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