AZTEC CIVILIZATION, PICTOGRAPHS, AND LACK OF AN ACCEPTED WRITING SYSTEM

Renee Coppola
OUTLINE

- Aztec society and civilization
- Why Aztec did not have “accepted” writing system by some scholar’s standards
- Language and pictographs of the Aztec Empire
  - Function and logistics of these things
- Why Aztec writing system may not have been fully developed
My View/Thesis

- A writing system was in the making in the Aztec Empire, but was not needed or practical because of the way the Aztec saw history and excluded regular Mexica people from it.
ORIGIN OF THE AZTEC EMPIRE

- Came from the North (opposite direction of Mayans)
- Brought own culture
- Fought with local tribes
- Settled Tenochtitlan in 1325
Tenochtitlan
**Tenochtitlan**

- Described as greater than European cities by Cortés
  - Larger population
  - Extensive road and aqueduct system
  - Exquisite causeways
  - Beautiful garden plots
  - Two story homes
  - Giant pyramids and temples
POLITICAL/SOCIETAL STRUCTURE

- Monarchy, most famous king - Moctezuma
- Tenochtitlan - center of everything
- Warrior Society
  - Greatly feared
  - Conquered many lands to expand empire
- Tribute system
- Foreigners cannot be Aztec
- Aztec better than all Mexica peoples
- Very strict caste/gender system
  - Everyone has their place in Aztec society
LANGUAGE

- Spoke Nahuatl
- Part of the Uto-Aztecan branch of languages
  - Roots in northwestern Mexico, spread from American West (Idaho, California), to lower Central America
WHY AZTECS NOT CONSIDERED TO HAVE A WRITING SYSTEM

- Under Stephen H. Houston’s definition of writing, writing represents speech
- Aztec writing does to an extent, but not fully formed, most up for interpretation
“Writing” in Aztec Society

- Most pictographic or ideographic, considered proto-writing
- Also sometimes called emblematic script
- Much interpretation allowed
- Used some syllabic signs and phonetic spelling in place names and personal names only and under pictographs, never alone
- Rebus principle- one sign can stand for two morphemes (phonetic)
- Going toward a monosyllabic system, like Sumerian, or Egyptian
Focused heavily on time like Mayans
All used to recount the past
- The elite’s past not the Mexica people
- Local histories, no such thing as Aztec history

Different kinds of samples:
- Codices- large books of pictographs
- Annals- pictographic and numeral elements in chronological, time like form
- Cartographic- maps used to tell a story (usually migration)
CODICES

- Most famous Aztec Codex- Codex Borgia
- Read as a story, with relative order because of separation and meaning
- Time and place said first, then story
- Represents dialogue, but is not speech
**ANNALS**

- Marks everything due to time it occurred
- Written on paper
- Usually long narrow script, like a time line
- Used to illustrate birth and death of rulers, succession, the beginning and end of their 52 year cycles, conquest, and natural disaster
- Usually year may have codified symbol
CARTOGRAPHIC HISTORIES

- Due to the Aztecs focus on migration, they often wrote on a map to show movement or conquest.
- Usually marks the origin story, migration of Aztec to Tenochtitlan (namely the Map Sigüenza).
- Also record journeys of important people.
- Mountains, rivers, and people are represented.
- Also marks chorological order.
REASONS WHY AZTECS DID NOT ADOPT MAYAN WRITING

- Did not speak same language
- Lived in different areas, Aztecs from north, Mayans from southeast
REASONS WHY AZTECS MAY NOT HAVE WANTED TRADITIONAL WRITING SYSTEM

- Would make classes and groups more equal
  - Would equate all Nahuatl speakers
- Too much transparency in system - may limit fear
- Too many languages and cultures to transcend - not practical
- Pictographs were a piece of the story as a whole, hard to separate, Aztec “visual thinkers,” could read without words
  - “Oh Giver of Life!... Later you will destroy eagles and tigers, we live only in your painting, here, on earth.”
  - Painting represents their existence in a way
WHY AZTEC WRITING WAS NOT FULLY DEVELOPED

- Aztec civilization only 200 years old at the time to adopt/“invent” writing while Classic Mayan civilization had 1000 years to develop writing
GENERAL CONCLUSION

- The Aztecs Empire was extremely advanced but relatively new at the time of its takeover by the Spanish. They were unique from other surrounding tribes because of their heritage and used this difference to mark them as the best people in Mexico, at the time. The Aztec were an elite group and it was practically impossible to become a part of it. Writing was not centralized, and many scholars agree, not present, while others think that they had proto-writing. Codices, annals, and cartographic histories were their form of “writing,” which exhibits that they are visual thinkers who interpret their works differently. But the rebus principle and phonetic complements were present, marking that the Aztecs were on their way towards a writing system.
WORKS CONSULTED


