

Manuscript Aubin No. 20: a Forgotten Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican Divinatory Board in the Collection of the National Library of France

In pre-Hispanic Mexico, or ancient Mesoamerica, its inhabitants created beautiful, colorful books—today called codices—written in a still not fully deciphered script or graphic communication system. They were one of the most important cultural products of the Mesoamerican world, and they still created during the colonial era. However, almost all the codices from pre-Hispanic times have been lost or destroyed, and only about a dozen of them, including *Manuscript Aubin No. 20*, remain until today. Although the books from precolonial times are our best sources to learn about the world vision, religion, and philosophical thought of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica, since—unlike the alphabetic sources—they have not been burdened by the European filter, the high degree of destruction of this particular manuscript has discouraged scholars from examining it diligently to the point that it is virtually forgotten.

The themes of Mesoamerican codices varied, but the most important were two types of books: divinatory and historical. The divinatory codices served as a kind of portal to the world of the gods and helped the indigenous specialist to predict what divine forces would act on particular days and larger periods of time. This knowledge helped people to make the right decisions on all matters of life, such as travel, marriage, and agricultural work, and helped avoid dangerous moments or actions. Historical books, on the other hand, recorded the genealogy of royal families, who derived it from the gods themselves; as well as the history of these families, including alliances, wars, and the assumption of power over new regions. The codex known as *Ms. Aubin No. 20* is a manuscript that looks like a large divinatory board, and that was precisely its function. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that although it is a divinatory book, it contains elements characteristic of historical codices, such as the seizure of power or the names of mountains, rivers, caves, or cities that can be found in the real world, in areas inhabited by the Mixtec people. A key question is how such a book, containing information from the human world, but being a portal to the world of the gods, worked. Given that the codex is in fact a large diagram showing the directions of the world, perhaps it was a kind of cosmographic map. The purpose of this project is to answer these and similar questions about the contents of this unique book.

However, it is impossible to know the full contents of the codex *Ms. Aubin 20* at the present time, as almost the entire central part of the diagram is destroyed. The few scholars who have dealt with the book so far have largely relied on one copy of it, made at the end of the 18th century in Mexico, whose author was the astronomer and historian Antonio de León y Gama. Until recently, there was a widespread belief that he had reproduced the central part of the codex, as supposedly it had not been so badly damaged in his time. However, a meticulous comparison of the traces of the painting in this part of the original and of the copy has shown that León y Gama largely recreated the central scene to some extent by feeling, so he made quite a few mistakes in the process. Nonetheless, it was his copy or copies of his copy that mostly have been published, and as a result, they contributed to creating of so-called academic myths: in the 19th century, the copy was redrawn as if it depicted a three-dimensional object, and as a result, a search began for a lost huge monument in Mexico... It also happened that some researchers were not aware of the existence of the original pre-Hispanic codex at all, even though it is today kept in the National Library of France cataloged as *Mexicain 20*, while the copy by León y Gamais cataloged as *Mexicain 21*.

The project also aims to reconstruct the damaged central part of *Ms. Aubin 20* using archaeological drawing techniques. It will rely on the results of the analysis of the manuscript using a non-invasive, image registration technique called hyper- and multispectral imaging, as well as on observations of the remains of the painting using a naked eye and a digital microscope, the expertise of the project members and their comparative studies with other codices. Hyperspectral imaging will also make it possible to locate the exact place of origin of the codex. The added value of this project is an effective combination of research in humanities using modern physicochemical technologies, which allows historians to obtain the results they are looking for, and science researchers to improve their technology.

The effect of the work will be the publication of the first comprehensive commentary on *Ms. Aubin 20*, which will accompany its first reproduction published in real scale, reproductions of its early copies, and finally, a full-color reconstruction of this unique pre-Hispanic book.