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Bernardino de Sahagun. *Primeros Memoriales*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. xv + 334 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-2909-9.

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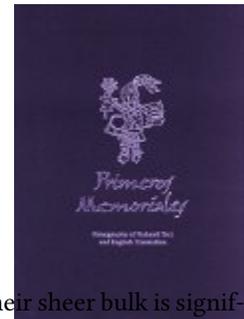
This critical edition of the *Primeros Memoriales* should find instant favor with the diverse community of scholars who study late pre-conquest and early colonial Mexico. Art historians, linguists, anthropologists and ethnohistorians are only some of those who will make use of this first full transcription of the Nahuatl ("Aztec") text, its translation into English, and the accompanying commentary. While not without minor flaws, it is nearly indispensable for their libraries; it also should be of some interest to other students of the Americas. Before proceeding further a few words are in order concerning the documentary context.

Colonial Mexico is uniquely endowed, among all the areas of early modern America, in having the most balanced extant sources in European and indigenous languages. This was due as much to native inclination as to Spanish requirements. On analogy with their own pre-Hispanic traditions of recordkeeping in which scribes painted/drew on native paper, many peoples of Mesoamerica quickly adapted to, and then excelled at, writing colonial texts in alphabetical versions of their own languages. This was true above all of the Nahuas ("Aztecs"), who by themselves or as irreplaceable assistants to clerics produced many secular and ecclesiastical writings in Nahuatl. The extent of this corpus in kind and quantity is hardly known even to most Americanists. Mundane materials include testaments, property deeds, town council minutes, election documents, records of civil and criminal cases, petitions, and city statutes; church items include books of Christian doctrine, sermonaries, confessional manuals, lives of saints, baptismal and marriage rolls, and the membership lists and constitutions of confraternities. More difficult to pigeonhole are Berlitz-style guides to the colloquial Nahuatl of the workplace and the marketplace, and collections

of traditional song and oratory. Their sheer bulk is significant as well. Nahuatl publications (most religious) during the colonial period total approximately ten thousand pages. The sum total of church manuscripts is greater yet; one sermonary alone in Mexico City contains 888 pages. This large ecclesiastical output is in its turn dwarfed by the Nahuatl notarial corpus.

Even amongst this varied company, the *Primeros Memoriales* stands out. Ostensibly written circa 1558-1561 for the utilitarian purpose of describing non-Christian practices prohibited under Spanish rule, the four "chapters" of the work range far afield in their depiction of traditional Nahua life. They also served as a trial run for the similar "Manuscript of Tlatelolco" (circa 1561) and especially for the much larger and even more wideranging twelve "books" of the *Florentine Codex* (circa 1578-1580). The information was gathered directly from native written and oral sources by Nahuas proficient in the new alphabetical writing. Initiating, guiding and shaping all three works was the Franciscan priest and philologist fray Bernardino de Sahagun. The size, scope and authenticity of these writings is literally unmatched in Nahuatl or any other Native American language. Although attention has usually focused on the larger *Florentine Codex*, the *Primeros Memoriales* is of great interest because much of its content never made it into the later work.

This version of the *Primeros Memoriales* deserves a warm welcome from the community of scholars. The present critical edition complements a companion volume by the same press which includes a color facsimile of the original manuscript. Since there is great value in its graphical elements (e.g., those of deities or deity-impersonators and their accouterments), presenting the



alphabetical text alone would not convey all the information contained in the manuscript. The press, the preparers of this critical edition, and Ferdinand Anders who prepared the facsimile, are to be commended for this dual presentation.

In addition, the editors and translators brought considerable expertise to their labors. The original transcriber and translator was Thelma D. Sullivan. She was an acknowledged authority on Nahuatl and Nahuas who died in 1981 leaving her work half-finished. Years later it was completed by the following five scholars. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (both in anthropology), the editors and translators of the *Florentine Codex*, worked on the alphabetical text. There are very few scholars in the world as well equipped to properly handle the often challenging Nahuatl of this text. Their job was further complicated by their decision to stay within Sullivan's style. Notwithstanding these difficulties, they completed their task with great success. Two notable experts on traditional Nahua artifacts and culture, H.B. Nicholson (anthropology) and Eloise Quinones Keber (art history), provided invaluable explanatory essays; Nicholson also took responsibility for bringing the entire project to a successful conclusion. Wayne Ruwet has no separate contribution to the book but his influence is felt throughout. A librarian by profession, he is well known for his consummate bibliographical skill and uncanny ability to ferret out even the most obscure relevant sources.

The critical edition is composed mainly of explanatory essays by Nicholson and Quinones Keber, the transcription and English translation, and a body of footnotes so extensive and illuminating that they deserve separate mention. Nicholson's "Introduction" is short (pp. 3-14) but he wastes no space in succinctly describing the history and significance of the manuscript and its authors. Especially welcome are brief summaries of the Nahuatl text from which I will now borrow. Chapter One, "Rituals and Gods," covers in thirteen paragraphs many aspects of traditional Nahua belief and ritual as well as "types of priests; the insignia and costumes of the principal deities and some data concerning their supernatural jurisdiction; temple structures; supplications and oaths; and twenty of the sacred chants sung in honor of the gods" (p. 8). Chapter Two, "The Heavens and the Underworld," covers in seven paragraphs the "celestial bodies, meteorological phenomena, the 365-day vague year, the 260-day divinatory cycle, auguries, dreams, and aspects of the underworld" (p. 10). Chapter Three, "Rulership," is the longest of the four chapters. Over seventeen paragraphs, it covers several key Nahua dynasties of central

Mexico and the lives of its rulers and nobles including "their duties, adornments, amusements, food and drink, residences, their admonishments to their subjects, and reasons for their anger and compassion; names and techniques of sorcerers and evil men and women; the education of youths of both sexes" and their mythohistorical origins from Chicomoztoc (Place of the Seven Caves) (p. 10). Chapter Four, "Things Relative to Man," consists of eleven chapters that range over the most disparate set of topics: "kinship terms, male and female personal names, human physiological terminology, nomenclature of the nobility, warrior costumes and insignia, diseases and cures, and terms of address among both nobles and commoners" (p. 11).

Quinones Keber's "An Introduction to the Images, Artists, and Physical Features of the *Primeros Memoriales*" (pp. 15-37 with related tables on pp. 38-51) is rich in information and insight. The extent of indigenous and European influences on the entire manuscript, the constantly varying relationships and roles of alphabetical text and graphical elements in conveying information, and a convincing reconstruction of the different stages of preparation and who was involved, are some of the main points covered in her fine contribution.

The footnotes live up to the preparers' reputations. I give here only a few representative examples, the first two occurring at the opening of Chapter Three (p. 185). One reads: "3. *Amo tle ipan mochiuh*: This phrase for 'nothing happened' was obviously not intended to be taken literally but only to indicate that, for the annalist, no conquests or major political or natural events occurred during the reigns of these rulers." Immediately following is "4. *Yn totzala yn acatzala*: 'among the rushes, among the reeds,' a poetic metaphoric couplet sometimes applied to the site of Mexico Tenochtitlan" [i.e., the site of future Mexico City]. How utterly unnecessary for specialists yet how immensely helpful for the vast majority who do not know Nahuatl and hence will often not recognize the standard conventions, idioms and clichés of the original text.

The opening footnote of paragraph seven of the first chapter covers fully three pages and is a mini-essay in itself (pp. 117-119). It addresses the question of whether the temple compound associated with this section and depicted graphically in the manuscript was that of Tepopolco (where the *Primeros Memoriales* was composed) or of Mexico Tenochtitlan. Some of the discussion centers around issues of interpretation more proper to art historical studies, an area in which I am admittedly not

well versed. Here I found myself in somewhat the same predicament as many others readers would elsewhere in the text. Yet the cautious and skeptical handling of the issues involved, as well as the presentation of various interpretations and possibilities, reassured me that the editors were maintaining the same standards of scholarly fairness and objectivity found elsewhere in this critical edition.

Special mention must be given to the “twenty sacred hymns” found in paragraph fourteen of Chapter One (pp. 128-152). This is the third largest collection of traditional Nahuatl song; less than two hundred are known to exist. These kinds of texts are among the most difficult to satisfactorily transcribe, translate and interpret. Among the problems: the spacing of alphabetical characters, notions of spelling, and the use of relatively sparse punctuation often depart from European norms; vocables (nonsense syllables inserted into the middle of “words,” apparently for rhythmic purposes) are not specifically identified; and the language itself is often used in ways not adequately explained by contemporaries. All these difficulties make securely identifying lexical items extremely difficult and problematical. There are very few modern scholars who possess sufficient experience, understanding and sensitivity to adequately work on Nahuatl song. Dibble and Anderson belong to this select group, and the latter is to be particularly commended for making this rare material available in a readily intelligible form (see the prefatory remarks, pp. 128-130).

This critical edition is not without its flaws but they are minor. The biggest criticism that might be leveled against it is the very narrow focus on the material at hand. A growing trend is to relate specialized local studies to broader currents in world history. While I consider this approach legitimate, I feel the preparers had no compelling reason to stray from their central focus. The sub-field of studies focusing on Sahaguntine writings is quite well developed. For the interested reader who wants to get a feel for the entire corpus, there is nothing better than the collection of essays in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagun—Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico* (Albany: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 1988). The five contributors to the *Primeros Memoriales* also left their mark on this work. The colonial context of Nahua Mexico is best appreciated in James Lockhart’s *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford Univer-

sity Press, 1992). Some notion of the place of Nahuas on the world stage can be gleaned from the essays in Stuart Schwartz’s *Implicit Understandings. Observing, Reporting and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

The high standards followed throughout the critical edition make even small imperfections annoying. Occasional carelessness in the Nahuatl transcription is rare but noticeable (e.g., see pp. 57, 64 and 194). This is undoubtedly due in part to the unfortunate death of Anderson on 3 June 1996; he ordinarily took great care in such matters. His passing also probably accounts for many of the remaining irregularities (however few and occasional) in the translation. For one such example, see p. 182: “mocoquichitl, maximeviltitit.” / “Greetings, O unique man.’” I differ in style and meaning: “O peerless warrior, do remain seated.” Contextual and grammatical cues govern my choice of words. An elaborate protocol governed how two people, one remaining in place and the other arriving, greeted each other. In this case, these few words by the arriving party attempt to minimize his supposedly worthless intrusion on a social superior. In addition, the second part of the greeting (whose verbal root is *ehuatica* “to be/remain seated”) is so common as to be not just a staple of conventional polite speech but practically a cliché. Even the usually stellar footnotes suffer from an occasional relapse. For example, the discussion of “cihuapan” on p. 59, footnote 19, goes through almost the whole range of possible meanings: “on the woman” and “on behalf of the women” and “about the women” and “in the time of the women.” However it fails to mention the obvious “place of the women.” The last may in fact be more appropriate in several instances although the translations made by Anderson and Dibble are entirely plausible too. I repeat, however, that all these flaws are minor and the non-specialist should use this critical edition with great confidence.

This version of the *Primeros Memoriales* sets the scholarly bar high. Its major accomplishments far outweigh its minor flaws. It deserves a spot in many personal as well as institutional libraries.

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