This book concerns a period of the precolonial history of one of Mexico’s indigenous peoples: the Mixtecs or Nuu Dzau, “Nation of the Rain,” traditionally living in the southern Mexican states of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero. Today an estimated number of 450,000 persons speak the Mixtec language, but, as the large majority of them are already of advanced age, the erosion and disappearance of the language — and of the oral literature and indigenous knowledge expressed in it — is imminent. Bad living conditions and lack of work and opportunities have propelled a significant percentage of the Mixtec population to migrate to other areas of Mexico, or to the United States.

Before the Spanish invasion (A.D. 1521) the Mixtec region was divided into a number of small realms or city-states, each governed by its own dynasty. The history of those dynasties was registered in pictorial manuscripts (codices), a few of which survived colonial destruction: they now occupy an important place in ancient Mexico’s art and literature. Individual rulers were identified through a “calendar name,” i.e., their day of birth in the ancient 260-day calendar, consisting of the combination of a number (1 to 13) with one of the twenty day signs. A more poetic “given name” was added. Years of the 52 year cycle (1 Reed) with the first day of the 260-day count (1 Alligator), and, therefore, has been interpreted as a general metaphorical reference to the time of creation or the beginning of history: “on the first day, in the realm of 8 Deer. The Archaeology of the Mixtec Codices” by Bruce Byland and John Pohl (Norman 1994), as well as on other publications by John Pohl. Although one might not expect this from a book that started as an M.A. thesis, Williams takes the ideas expressed in those publications as point of departure, without further discussing their background.

For example, he follows unquestioningly the identification of place signs proposed by those authors, without attributing the original investigators who made those identifications, nor their arguments, nor the debates that occasionally arise about them. Thus, Williams refers simultaneously to the identification of the ceremonial center Achiultla, made by the Mexican historian Wigberto Jiménez Moreno (not mentioned) and to an additional — different — identification proposed by Byland and Pohl. He incorporates (generally without attribution) several of my own place sign identifications (e.g., Yucuñuhubai, Chalcatongo, Zaachila, and Mogote del Cacique), but uncritically follows Byland and Pohl in their identification of a set of place signs such as Hua Chino and neighboring sites in the Tilantongo area, which I have challenged in print.

Williams does include a large bibliography, but hardly uses that potential in his text. As is the case in more contemporary works of U.S., authors concerning ancient Mexican topics, references to and discussions of Spanish publications are conspicuously absent. There are a few consistent misspellings: the indigenous alcoholic beverage appears as “pulche” instead of pulque, and the Mixtec term for deity appears as Nuu or Nuu, instead of Nuhu (with glottal stop).

Williams’ reading of Codex Nuttall, pp. 1–8, aims at showing the historical character of the information about Lord 8 Wind. His focus on chronology remains limited, however, to the pages under scrutiny, without going into the intricacies of this topic for the whole corpus. Williams mentions but disregards the idea of other interpreters that certain dates should be understood as markers of the foundation of realms or dynasties, i.e., as symbolic or ceremonial units rather than as chronological indicators of specific moments in history. The first scene in Codex Nuttall, p. 1, shows Lord 8 Wind being born out of earth. The accompanying date Year 1 Reed, day 1 Alligator, is formed by the combination of the first year of the 52 year cycle (1 Reed) with the first day of the 260-day count (1 Alligator), and, therefore, has been interpreted as a general metaphorical reference to the time of creation or the beginning of history: “on the first day, in the first year”. Williams (93) proposes the de facto separation of the year from its associated day to combine...
it instead with the calendar name of Lord 8 Wind, as if it were the year of his birthday (a somewhat questionable procedure). Using charts of the 52-year cycles, he then correlates that year with A.D. 935. A few pages further (Nuttall, p. 5) we find the marriages and children of Lord 8 Wind. His firstborn son is accompanied by the sign of an arrow with a stream of red liquid (possibly blood) and the date Year 2 Reed, day 2 Reed. Williams (117) interprets the arrow as an indication of Lord 8 Wind’s death (as the point is directed to his figure, which is situated below the mentioned scene): this would have been when he was 92 years old, in A.D. 1027. We should notice, however, that any explicit pictorial reference to Lord 8 Wind’s death (e.g., a representation of the protagonist with closed eyes or as a mummy bundle) is conspicuously lacking. The arrow with red liquid in combination with the date might also be interpreted as the sign of a place where the son is going to rule. In the long list of places with their ceremonial dates in Codex Vindobonensis we find the same Year 2 Reed, day 2 Reed combined with a “Hill of Red Liquid with Legs” (Vindobonensis, 41-I). Recalling that “leg” in the Mixtec metaphorical and ceremonial “Language of the Lords” is homonymous with the normal word for “arrow” (which leads to combinations such as “Arrow Legs” in personal names), we might conclude that we are looking at the same (place) sign, and consequently not at an indication of someone’s death.

Reading the dates on Nuttall, pp. 1–2, in a “more sophisticated reading order less obvious to casual inspection” (97), i.e., different from the normal reading order in the codices, Williams reconstructs a “reading sequence [that] is roughly circular or oval” (98), which would permit calculating the dates as a historical sequence compatible with a human life span. As a result Williams concludes that Lord 8 Wind during the first part of his life must have been a “great wizard, priest/shaman, or santo,” who then converts into a “normal human being” and marries his first wife at the age of 73 (116f.). Williams recognizes that some other chronological elements, referring to one of Lord 8 Wind’s daughters, remain “irresolvable” (120).

Later Codex Nuttall (7–8) shows Lord 8 Wind meeting Lord 2 Rain Ocoñaña, a young prince belonging to the Tilantongo dynasty. According to Williams’ calculations, Lord 8 Wind would have been 146 years old at the time of this meeting, and, therefore, “obviously deceased” (123, 147). In the next scene, Lord 2 Rain appears seated in a temple on top of a mountain: according to Williams too, he would be dead, as the accompanying date – Year 10 Flint, day 1 Eagle – occurs four years after his known death date (A.D. 1096). The pictorial representation of both Lords, however, shows them to be very much alive: no closed eyes, no mummy bundles in these scenes. This would be a reason to consider alternative interpretations. The Year 10 Flint, day 1 Eagle, is a well-known sacred or ceremonial date associated with the West (and its Patron Goddess, the Grandmother of the River, Lady 1 Eagle) in Codex Vindobonensis (17): this might suggest that it should not be read as just marking a moment in the chronological sequence.

Williams, however, dissociates the year sign 10 Flint in Codex Nuttall, p. 8, from the day 1 Eagle, and instead connects it with another day: 2 Flint, located in the mountain under Lord 2 Rain. He points out that the same day 2 Flint in a Year 10 Flint is also mentioned in the biography of the most important individual in Mixtec history, Lord 8 Deer “Jaguar Claw,” in the context of funerary rituals after the killing of Lord 8 Deer’s half brother in a steam bath (Nuttall, 82). Although these scenes do not mention the name of Lord 2 Rain at all, and although everything seems to indicate that the rituals are performed for Lord 8 Deer’s half brother, Williams concludes that the mortuary bundle mentioned here must be that of Lord 2 Rain.

As we can see, Williams’ reasoning quite often departs drastically from what the codices actually show and does not take into account plausible alternatives. The result is inconsistent and not convincing. The explanations and ideas derived from such problematic readings are equally shaky.

In the introduction, John Pohl too points to the possible ceremonial and nonsequential character of certain dates and calls the solutions proposed by Williams “provocative” (13). In addition, he offers in a note a different interpretation of the meeting of Lord 2 Rain with Lord 8 Wind (23). Pohl further refers to other studies of him that “prove conclusively” his earlier identifications of Hua Chino and other sites (22). This is not the place to take that technical debate up again, but it seems to me that both authors too hastily claim that they have demonstrated their case, while in fact a lot remains hypothetical and controversial.

My critical comments do not mean to detract from the intrinsic value of this book as a detailed and interesting iconographical exercise. Readers may become fascinated by some of Williams’ observations, and should feel stimulated to undertake their own research by contrasting his ideas with those of other scholars. Lively debates are essential for the progress of a discipline.

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