# Archives: The Last Bastion of Memory

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The desire to remember and preserve the past is an inherent individual, familial, and societal need. In societies replete with stories, artifacts, and writings, this desire is easily satisfied. In societies where written records are scant and community knowledge is less than complete due to the destruction of one's cultural heritage and the removal of the few extant records and histories to far away archives, museums, and private collections, however, that desire for remembering and preserving is more difficult to satisfy and thus all the more important. Repositories of knowledge, such as those that are found in local and regional archives, aid in the consolidation and continuation of communities and cultures. Efforts are now being made within some institutions to collect records from other peoples without removing them from their countries of origin. These labors protect against loss and aid researchers in studying former Mesoamerican cultures without the loss of their heritage.

Within the Mesoamerican community, written works that were once commonplace and mundane within the upper echelon of society have long since become exceedingly rare amongst all groups. This has left the majority of the descendants of the pre-conquest indigenous peoples searching for a link between themselves and their past. In order to better comprehend the feeling of loss amongst the Mesoamerican peoples of today, an understanding of the records that still exist, how they were created, and for what purpose, will provide a springboard for further enlightenment about the complex issues surrounding the loss of their cultural antecedents.

Mesoamerican writing systems are of indeterminate age. Records that remain, and the time periods they represent, depend upon the medium that was used in their creation; this does not however lend itself to a clear view of how old the written word might be. Books, or códices, that remain were created of paper,



hide, or woven cloth. Paper was made by beating sheets of either bark or maguey fibers until they were flat and then gluing them to other sheets, multiple hides were stretched and then glued together to form stronger hides, and sheets of woven cloth glued together, also known as lienzos, were created. Paper and hides were covered in a plaster to provide a smooth writing surface. Lienzos on the other hand, did not lend themselves to plaster application and the pigments were thus applied directly to the surface of the cloth.[1] These are not however, the only media upon which indigenous writings still exist.[2] Sculptors often recorded histories, astrological observations and genealogies on buildings, lintels over doors, stelae that adorn courtyards, and other forms of permanent construction. Potters created ceramic pieces that were often incised, contained bas-relief hieroglyphs, or were painted.[3] Painters adorned walls in temples, homes, tombs and caves with the language that they spoke.

The records that remain must be understood within the context that they were created to properly focus on the role archivists should play in the preservation of the extant material. The cultural area that encompasses Mesoamerica is home to more than one hundred different modern language groups. At the time of the conquest (1521-1697), the number of languages was close to 150.[4] Each group of people wrote in the language they spoke. This would have created mass confusion in the understanding of the written word, even at the time of the con-quest, if it were not for certain unifying traits within the written word itself.

Throughout Mesoamerica the use of writing was utilized for a wide variety of social and societal necessities. Records were kept of business transactions, genealogies, and dynastic lists. Prose and poetry were also part of the written record. And soon after the

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[1] Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2000), 23-24.

[2] Robert Wauchope, ed., *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 14, 3, in Howard F. Cline, Charles Gibson, and H. B. Nicholson, ed., *Guide to Ethnohistorical Sources* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1975), 4-5.

[3] Francis Robicsek and Donald M. Hales, *The Maya Book of the Dead, The Ceramic Codex: The Corpus of Codex Style Ceramics of the Late Classic Period* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 3-9.

[4] Gordon Brotherston, *Painted Books from Mexico: Códices in UK Collections and the World They Represent* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 21-22.

conquest, transcription of oral histories took place when Spanish priests and monks interviewed the indigenous peoples.[5] Entire libraries were said to exist at the time of the conquest in the capitals of the Aztecs and the Quiché-Maya, and many books existed throughout the region in the hands of local communities and sometimes lords.[6] Motolinía, an early Spanish priest and historian, wrote in 1541, "historians in the Aztec world depicted conquests, wars, dynastic successions, plagues, storms, and 'noteworthy signs in the skies'." Texcoco, one of the sister states of Tenochtitlán, had a huge documentary archive. Historians were needed to arrange events in chronological order and specialists were utilized to work specifically with genealogical records, geographical limits, ceremonies and laws.[7]

Even before the conquest began in earnest in 1521, indigenous books and manuscripts were being sent back to Europe. However, beginning with the Night of the Long Knives, in which the Spaniards burnt the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán to the ground,[8] and continuing until the last books of the Itzá Maya were removed from Tayasal in 1697,[9] the removal and destruction of the Mesoamerican written record took on new meaning. The missionary role of the Catholic Church in New Spain required that the indigenous peoples be brought to the gospel and that all of their pagan ways, including their written records, be expunged. Bishop Zumárraga, the inquisitor of idolatrous practices in central Mexico, and who took a leading role in the burning of all native religious books, was accompanied in his efforts by Bishop Diego de Landa in the Yucatán.[10] This burning of pagan texts was known as an "auto-de-fé," or "act of faith." In Maní, Yucatán alone, more than twenty-eight of the sacred texts were lost in this manner. Bishop de Landa, described the book burning in Maní: "We found a large number of books in these characters and, as

[5] Wauchope, *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 15, 4: 313-314.

[6] Abraham Arrias-Larreta, *Literaturas Aborígenes de América: Azteca, Incaina, Maya-Quiche* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Indoamerica, 1968), 55-58, 179-181.

[7] Wauchope, *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 15, 4.

[8] Thomas Hugh, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 434-531.

[9] Grant D. Jones, *The Conquest of the Last Maya Kingdom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 101-102.

[10] Wauchope, *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 14, 3: 15-16.



they contained nothing in which there was not to be seen superstition and lies of the devil, we burned them all, which they regretted to an amazing degree, and which caused them affliction."[11] In the Mayan area of New Spain the loss was such that even today only four códices have been found that can be definitively declared Mayan.[12] This does not mean that their provenance has been ascertained, and thus they are of considerably less benefit to the Mayan community than would be hoped.

It should not be assumed that all of the works that have been lost were lost in the purges of the Inquisition. The climate in many parts of Mesoamerica is such that there is very little chance that documents will remain unless inscribed in stone or on ceramics. Paintings are often lost simply because there is no way to protect them. Theft is also key to understanding the loss of many of the precious written texts.

There are texts that have survived from pre-conquest times and others that were written soon after the conquest by individuals who still knew how to create them. The total number of these códices and manuscripts is difficult to ascertain due to the diffusion of the remnant works, but attempts have been made to locate and document their existence. One of the best and most comprehensive efforts is contained in *The Handbook of Middle American Indians: Volumes 12-15*. These volumes list over one thousand pictorial manuscripts and almost one thousand more texts written as prose, poetry, history, títulos, geographies, etc. Nearly two thousand manuscripts exist to teach the descendants of the Mesoamerican peoples about their beliefs, customs, and practices. This number becomes significantly less impressive when one considers that less than twenty of that number can be dated prior to the beginning of the conquest in 1521.

That does not, however, mean that written works from the period soon after the conquest are not important. Three spectacular examples are the *Popol Vuh*, *The Annals of the Cakchiquels*, and the various *Books of Chilam Balam*. The *Popol Vuh*, written sometime between 1550 and 1555, is the Quiché-Maya account of the creation of the world, and the history of the

[11] Robicsek, *Book of the Dead,* xix.

[12] David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1995), 41-46.

Quiché people. Abraham Arrias-Larreta states that the *Popol Vuh*, the "splendid Maya-Quiché creation sometimes rivals and sometimes surpasses the philosophical depth and the imaginative power of the most famous theogonical legends of the world. And it is, at the same time, an epic of high literary quality and, possibly, the most brilliant expression of the ancient American mind".[13] *The Annals of the Cakchiquels*, written from 1571-1604, is another account of the creation, as well as the history of the Cakchiquel people prior to, and after, the conquest.[14]

Finally, the *Books of Chilam Balam* contain the Yucatec Maya view of the creation, as well as the prophecies of five Mayan priests who predict the subjugation of their people and the coming of foreigners to their land.[15] While the survival of these books, in their various forms, is of importance in understanding the role of archives in preserving the heritage of the Mesoamerican peoples, any of the extant manuscripts from Mesoamerica can be studied.

We will now turn our attention to the various códices and the historical antecedents that have brought them to their current repositories. Current titles of códices have been derived from a strictly European style of referencing. The Codex Borgia derives its name from a former owner, the Codex Nuttall from the woman who discovered it, the Códice Baranda from its patron, the Códice de Tlatelolco from its presumed provenience, and the Dresden Codex from the location where it was discovered. Also, some are named for some feature of their content.[16] Aside from one written text that is named for its provenience, this way of thinking does not lend itself well to rediscovering the original context in which a codex was discovered or the people who wrote it.

Like all of the pre-conquest manuscripts, the early history of the Codex Nuttall is obscure. It was "discovered" in the Dominican monastery of San Marco in Florence, Italy in 1859. Some have suggested that this codex was one of two sent by

[13] Abraham Arias-Larreta, *Pre-Columbian Literatures* (State College: Mississippi State University, 1964), 95.

[14] Adrián Recinos and Gisele Díaz, tr., *The Annals of the Cakchiquels* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 43-161.

[15] *Maud Worcester Makemson, tr.,* The Book of the Jaguar Priest: A Translation of the Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin *(New York: Henry Chuman, 1951), 3-227.*

[16] Wauchope, *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 14, 3: 7-8.



Cortés to Charles V in 1519.[17] Soon after its discovery, the text was given as a gift to Robert Curzon, the fourteenth Baron Zouche. Upon his death in 1873 the manuscript was passed on to his son who gave the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, and more importantly Zelia Nuttall, permission to make a facsimile copy in 1898. This copy was published in full color in 1902. Some errors in this version were fixed in 1975.[18]

The Codex Borgia, one of the finest single examples of pre-conquest writing, arrived in Europe sometime early in the sixteenth century, although it is not known exactly when. It was not heard of again until Alexander von Humboldt saw it in the possession of the estate of the late Cardinal Stefano Borgia in 1805. He wrote that Cardinal Borgia had acquired the codex from the Giustiniani family. The Giustiniani family had en-trusted the codex to several servants who had in turn given it to their children as a toy. The condition of the codex was thus greatly diminished, including three pages that had been burnt by fire.[19] After a protracted legal battle returned the codex to the Borgia family museum, it was eventually given to the Apostolic Library of the Vatican at the conclusion of the nineteenth century. It is still housed there today. Several editions have been published in the past, including the Kingsborough in 1830, Ehrle in 1898, Seler in 1904, and the Nowotny in 1976, each adding something new to the existing body of work on the subject.[20] It is currently believed that it was originally painted in central or southern Puebla, in the vicinity of Tepeaca, Cuauhtinchan, or the Tehuacán Valley.[21]

The Codex Telleriano-Remensis, a particularly interesting Mexican colonial manuscript, is currently within the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, France. While its origins are unknown, most scholars believe it was written around 1563. The manuscript, written on watermarked paper, was probably manufactured in Genoa, shipped to Spain and then Mexico, where

[17] Zelia Nuttall, ed., *The Codex Nuttall: A Picture Manuscript from Ancient Mexico* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1975), x.

[18] Wauchope, *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 14, 3: 176-177.

[19] Gisele Diaz and Alan Rodgers, *The Codex Borgia: A Full-Color Restoration of the Ancient Mexican Manuscript* (New York: Dover Publicatons, Inc., 1993), viii-ix.

[20] Ibid., viii.

[21] Ibid., ix.

it was written, before returning to Europe. In the seventeenth century it belonged to the French bibliophile Charles-Maurice Le Tellier, the archbishop of Reims.[22] The name of this manuscript is thus derived from the name of the collector and the Latin form of the town name Reims. Having recognized that he would never make use of his manuscript collection, Le Tellier gave most of his collection to the Bibliothèque du Roi, the predecessor of the Bibliothèque Nationale.[23] Alexander von Humboldt discovered this document while searching through the Nationale's holdings, and published many of its paintings in 1810.

Perhaps of more significance is the origin of the rest of the 429 inventoried items that comprise the Mesoamerican manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale. The majority of all the works came from the collection of Eugène Goupil, who was "born in Mexico from a French father and a Mexican mother who descended from the Aztecs in a direct line." Goupil had acquired the collection from a friend in 1889, Joseph-Marie Aubin, who had been ruined by the Panama scandal.[24] He debated for a time the merit of giving the collection to Mexico, but deciding that Mexico was "rather remote" and "few persons would consult it," he decided to donate the collection to "the center of the intellectual world, [the] mandatory stop for the travelers of science," the Bibliothèque Nationale.[25]

The attitude exhibited by Eugène Goupil prior to donating his collection to the Bibliothèque Nationale is indicative of the feeling of superiority that existed in various countries of the world when dealing with the native peoples of Mesoamerica. The same people who created the codices and other manuscripts were considered incapable of protecting their own patrimonial interests. This point of view led to the creation of specialized collections of Mesoamerican literature within libraries, museums, and archives outside of Mesoamerica. There are more than sixty-four major repositories of early American literature located around the world,

[22] Eloise Quiñones Keber, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis: Ritual, Divination, and History in a Pictorial Aztec Manuscript* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), x.

[23] Ibid., ix.

[24] Ibid., x.

[25] Ibid.



of which only twenty-three are located in Mexico and Central America, and only nineteen are located in Mesoamerica proper.[26]

The Spaniards, who always exhibited a passion for "bureaucratic minutiae," created a general archive at the palace fortress of Simancas in 1545. Official documents relating to the governing of the Indies were housed together, and as lesser administrative collections arrived, they too were added.[27] There was, however, no concerted effort to systematize the collection until the time of the Bourbon dynasty in the eighteenth century. In 1780, to refute current criticisms being put forth by the English, French and others, Charles III ordered Juan Bautista Muñoz, the royal chronicler, to gather documentation. While Muñoz was able to complete one hundred and twenty-six volumes prior to his death, the most important thing he was able to do in order to aid future research, was persuade the Spanish Crown to establish the General Archive of the Indies in Seville in 1785.[28] Although not all records were gathered, many came in from Simancas and elsewhere relating to the governing of both the Indies and the Philippines. The Crown also ordered that documentation be provided from overseas officials, and within each Audiencia of the New World records were compiled and copies sent to Spain.[29]

This compilation of records led to the formation of the National Archives of Mexico in 1823. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many of the individual Mexican states also created local archives.[30] In both cases, publications relating to the documentary evidence contained within their collections have come forth. These are not however, the only records which have been gathered. In Guatemala the most important depository is the Archivo General del Gobierno of Guatemala. Following an important law passed in 1937, systematic additions of records from both the Archivo Colonial and the Archivo Municipal de Guatemala have been made.[31] Every country in Central America has its own national archives, and while several have suffered

[26] Wauchope, *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 14, 3: ix-x.

[27] Wauchope, *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 13, 2: 5-6.

[28] Ibid., 5.

[29] Ibid., 5-6.

[30] Ibid., 6.

[31] Ibid.

losses due to earthquakes and fires, the majority of all known records are now housed in central depositories.

Archives have the daunting task of collecting what is most beneficial historically for the locale and to the society that exists within it. This is often achieved on the whim of the archivist, or in the case of the early Spanish archives, upon the command of someone who wants something specific to be housed. The Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS), upon drafting its constitution in 1791, expressed the goals that they sought for their institution: "The preservation of books, pamphlets, manuscripts, and records, containing historical facts…to mark the genius, delineate the manners, and trace the progress of society in the United States…and rescue the true history of this country from the ravages of time, and the effects of ignorance and neglect."[32]

The American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), utilizing the MHS constitution as a guide post, as did many of the early collecting societies, decided how to best serve the Jewish population of the United States upon incorporating in 1892. There was some discord between the members about the most effective way that anti-semitic feelings throughout the United States could be combated. One member declared that he felt the collection and preservation of documents would be sufficient. He wanted the society to stress "especially the collection of documents by which it is shown how the Jews of the United States have attained their high intellectual position, and they need not stand back in any community in this country and they are on the highway to greater success…"[33] Reform rabbi Kaufmann instead proposed that "we should not simply as scholars and historians register facts but…should publish such essays, articles or longer works that would stir the interest of the Jews and show our fellow citizens what the Jews have done in the history of culture in America."[34]

For the Jewish people collective memory is of great importance. Maurice Halbwachs, "pioneering explorer of the 'social framework of memory' in the 1920s, said that only social groups determine what is worth remembering and how it will be

[32] Elizabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," in *The American Archivist* 63,1 (Spring/Summer, 2000): 134-135.

[33] Ibid., 135-139.

[34] Ibid., 138.



remembered."[35] He also stated that, "what social groups choose to remember not only determines them as a group by creating a common memory for its members but also defines them."[36] While these two statements appear to be contradictory they are clearly related to the preservation of archival materials. The past, and the story that is preserved from it, is created by the individuals who preserve the memories and pass them on.[37]

During World War II the Germans became exceedingly efficient at locating, removing and eliminating records. Entire libraries were wiped out, individual collections were sought and either confiscated or destroyed, and entire archives were ransacked. Much that was not destroyed was relocated to Germany where it was utilized as the foundation for research on the Jews and their faith.[38] The truths that were sought were often arbitrary, and the uses to which they were put even more so.

Throughout the war records were sought out, fought for, captured and destroyed by both sides. As not all records were returned immediately, and some have yet to be repatriated, it is important to understand why these archival records are so important. Linda Barnickel says that, "in the mere custody of records there is power. This power can exist in many forms, including the use of documents against their former owners or creators, and the destruction of documents in an effort to rob a people of their cultural identity."[39]

George Orwell, in his book *1984*, explains the actions of the Bureau of Records:

> Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date….All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary….Every Record has been destroyed or falsified, every Book has been rewritten,

[35] Hilda Nissimi, "Memory, Community, and the Mashhadi Jews During the Underground Period," in *Jewish Social Studies* 9,3 (Spring/Summer, 2003): 76-77.

[36] Ibid., 77.

[37] Ibid., 87.

[38] Marek Sroka, "The Destruction of Jewish Libraries and Archives in Cracow during World War II," in *Libraries & Culture* 38,2 (Spring, 2003): 154-157.

[39] Linda Barnickel, "Spoils of War: The Fate of European Records During World War II," in *Archival Issues* 24, 1 (1999): 7-20.

> every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered….History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present.[40]

One would hope that this depiction is not a realistic picture of modern day archives. It is important however to remember that archival work is subjective.[41] The voices of the past that are heard through the records that archives maintain are only as accurate as the voices that are utilized to tell that story. Archivists give meaning and truth to "authentic" voices of the past by accessioning documents; however, it is the archivist who makes the decision about what is authentic and what is not.[42] Archives are subject to and "products of the vagaries of circumstance, accident and interest."[43]

Efforts within the archival realm to create and maintain the cultural identity of the Mesoamerican people is ongoing and constant. As has been discussed previously, the approximately two thousand indigenous documents still in existence are scattered throughout the world. There are also many other documents that are housed in archives in Mesoamerica and the world that relate to the indigenous peoples after the conquest. Archives, libraries, and museums throughout the world contain pieces of the story of these peoples. An excellent example of what can be done, without removing the patrimonial records of a civilization, is the collection of the Tozzer Library at Harvard University. Their collection consists of photographic re-productions, microfilm, manuscript facsimiles and transcripts of virtually all known Mesoamerican anthropological literature.[44] While it is true that they have several original manuscripts, they have made an effort to collect copies of original documents without removing them from their context.

Many alternative methods are being sought as additional sources of information on the peoples of Mesoamerica and their culture. Ian S. Graham of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology

[40] George Orwell, *1984* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 128.
[41] Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect," 147.
[42] Ibid., 147.
[43] Randolph Starn, "Truths in the Archives," in *Common Knowledge* 8, 2 (2002): 393.
[44] John M. Weeks, "Maya Ethnohistory: A Guide to Spanish Colonial Documents," in *Anthropology* 34 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Publications, 1987), 1.



and Ethnology has been collecting all known hieroglyphs from every excavated site throughout Mesoamerica. His work has already reached over twenty-five volumes and is continuously growing, as more and more research is made available. Other records are being compiled by ethnographers who, utilizing scientific methods of investigation, are studying the descendants of the Mesoamerican peoples and recording oral histories. These sources of information are of immense importance when one considers that they constitute more documentation on many of these peoples than is known to have survived the conquest and the colonial period. Archivists have new means of complimenting their already existing manuscripts and documents without removing the patrimonial heritage that has remained. These new archival methods, coupled with emergent cultural sensitivities among archivists, have increased the potential of better preserving the Mesoamerican peoples' cultural memory and thus their cultural heritage.