

A NOTE ON COMENTARIOS AL CODICE BORGIA

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Comentarios al Códice Borgia. EDUARD SELER. Translated by MARIANA FRENK (Analytic Index: CARLOS GERHARD). Mexico and Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963. 2 vols. (267, 280 pp.) and facsimile (bound or screenfold format), frontispiece, figures, notes, tables, appendices, indexes.

"Among the most significant achievements of the pre-Hispanic cultures of Mesoamerica was the creation of a complex symbolism which provided a convenient means of pictorially and plastically objectifying the calendric-magico-religious concepts so intensely elaborated in the rich supernaturalism of this area. The symbol systems of the latest central and southern Mexican cultures display a particular wealth of imagination in the creation of forms, as well as an almost geometric precision in delineation." So this reviewer began a brief article published in 1958. By far the most copious expression of these symbol systems is found in the few surviving ritual screenfold books, the "codices." Among the most important of these is the *Codex Borgia*, "unstreitig die hervorragendste der altmexikanischen Bilderhandschriften," as the author of the work under review expressed it. Nothing is known of its earliest history. Judging from a brief annotation in Italian on one sheet, it is likely that it has been in Italy since the sixteenth century; at any rate, it was in the private collection of Cardinal Stefano Borgia in the eighteenth century and passed into

the possession of the Vatican in 1814. Its date and provenience are also unknown, but it was undoubtedly produced sometime during the Postclassic, probably somewhere in the "Mixteca-Puebla heartland" (southern Puebla-eastern Veracruz-western Oaxaca). Seler was convinced that it was the product of Nahuaspeakers; a considerable case for this can be made, but his "proof", based on the presence of the *atl tlachinolli* ("war") symbol, must be discarded (the same metaphor is found in Otomi, Mixtec, and probably other Mesoamerican languages).

Interestingly, the only surviving ritual pictorials from western Mesoamerica of indubitable pre-Hispanic date are all stylistically and iconographically closely related to *Borgia* and form a distinct group named after their most spectacular member (*Borgia, Vaticanus B, Cospi, Fejérváry, Laud, Fonds Mexicain #20, Porfirio Díaz Reverse* [pre-Hispanic date not certain]). They all seem to have functioned essentially as divinatory (especially calendric) manuals for the religious practitioners. Between them, they depict nearly all of the major late pre-Hispanic Central Mexican deities and a host of associated symbols. They constitute one of the prime sources for the reconstruction of the supernaturalistic ideology of this area—apart from their esthetic value, which is outstanding.

The 5 "core members" of the *Borgia* group (*Borgia, Vaticanus B, Cospi, Laud, Fejérváry-Mayer*) were all published as early as 1831 in England by Lord Kingsborough, but serious, systematic attempts at full decipherment were not really initiated until Seler's landmark research beginning in the 1880's. As Seler explains in the present work (Vol. 2, pp. 173-174), his prin-

cipal Rosetta Stone" was the annotated *tonalamatl*, probably originating in the Valley of Mexico or closely adjoining area, preserved in 2 colonial copies (*Codices Telleriano-Remensis* and *Vaticanus A*). He also made great use of the illustrations of deities and the detailed descriptions of their attire in the Sahagúntine *corpus*, while utilizing nearly all other relevant primary sources.

The turn-of-the-century patron of Mexicanist studies, Joseph Florimond, the Duc de Loubat, between 1896 and 1901 financed sumptuous facsimiles of all of the core members of the Borgia group except *Laud*, at the same time inviting Seler, as the best equipped scholar of the period, to elucidate their contents in monographs published at Loubat's expense. Accordingly, Seler, who in 1900 had already published, also with Loubat's help, the first careful analysis of the *Tonalamatl Aubin*, wrote detailed commentaries on *Fejérváry-Mayer* (1901), *Vaticanus B* (1902), and *Borgia* (Vol. 1: 1904; Vol 2: 1906; index and a minor addendum: 1909) (to *Cospi* he devoted only a short article [1900]). The *Tonalamatl Aubin*, *Fejérváry-Mayer*, and *Vaticanus B* commentaries were also published in excellent English translations; the *Borgia* commentary was not. This was doubly unfortunate, for not only was *Borgia* the most important and complex member of the group but its commentary came last and represented the capstone of Seler's interpretive work with the group as a whole. In it he attempted not only to elucidate in detail the contents of *Borgia* itself but also to provide what he termed "ein Handbuch der altmexikanischen Mythologie." Its restriction to the German language has long inhabited its more

general use among Mesoamericanists; its appearance for the first time in Spanish translation, roughly 50 years after its original publication, is, therefore, a very welcome event.

Along with the translation, a few changes have been made from the German edition. All of the figures (mostly the deservedly famous von den Steinen line drawings, which, however, occasionally contain minor errors) are retained with the same numeration, but their proveniences, provided originally in their captions, are here gathered into an appendix; the captions are also often combined. A thematic figure index is also a new feature; the textual index, however, is much skimpier than the original, which was prepared by Walter Lehmann. Some archaeological pieces illustrated by photographs in the German edition have been replaced with drawings by Abel Mendoza. A major, salutary change has been the placement of the annotated diagrammatic line drawings of each sheet opposite the appropriate facsimile sheet in the bound version of the facsimile, a considerable gain in convenience of consultation. The facsimile itself, based on color photographs of the original in Rome, appears to be adequate—if apparently a bit uneven in quality from sheet to sheet—generally comparing favorably with the 1898 Loubat facsimile. Only a careful comparison with the original, however, would enable one to judge its accuracy satisfactorily.

The translator (occasionally the editors) has included a few notes of her own, mostly brief comments on difficulties of rendering into Spanish certain obscure German words and phrases; she has also occasionally corrected what appear to have been minor errors in

the first edition. The not too literal translation appears to be generally reliable, although occasional lapses can be noted (e.g., Vol. 1, p. 29: "speers" is erroneously rendered "espada"; p. 40: an entire paragraph in the original is simply omitted; p. 75: "Nasenhalmmond" is incorrectly translated "orejera"; p. 102: "Guerrero" is mistakenly given for "Oaxaca"; etc.). Typographical errors are frequent but perhaps not excessive in a long publication of this kind. The Spanish versions of the songs and other passages in Nahuatl and Maya were made by Miguel León-Portilla and Demetrio Sodi; in Vol. 2, 2 of the Nahuatl texts were taken directly from Garibay's *Historia de la Literatura Nahuatl*. An attempt has been made to follow consistently a somewhat different Nahuatl orthography from that employed by Seler, based on the system currently used in Mexico by Garibay. Lastly, it might be noted that the addendum which was originally included in the index volume (III, published in 1909), comparing a section in *Porfirio Díaz Reverse* with *Borgia* 57, has been inserted in the appropriate place in Vol. 2 of this second edition.

A general word or two concerning this famous monograph is in order. How successfully did Seler "decipher" *Borgia*? In attempting to answer this question, it is well to keep in mind (as Nowotny has also recently stressed) that in the elucidation of Meso-american ritual pictorials one must always distinguish at least 2 distinct analytic levels: the identificatory and the interpretive. Basically, the first attempts to answer the questions "who" and "what?", the second, "why?" For obvious reasons, much more success is usually achieved on the first level. Seler, in spite of



occasional surprising identificatory lapses (often caused by his pursuance of pet theories), can usually be followed when operating on this first level. On the second level, however, his attempted explanations are often very speculative and forced. His besetting sin was an almost dogged determination to try to explain everything in sight, even when solid bases for explanation were lacking. He was never completely arbitrary or downright fanciful—as were so many of his predecessors and even contemporaries and successors; he always presented a reasoned case, however strained, and he was quite willing to change his mind after further cogitation or the appearance of further evidence. But he frequently erected elaborate interpretive superstructures on rather shaky foundations constructed out of various pet notions which run at times almost obsessively through his commentaries. These obsessions were more often than not “astronomical.” His earlier bent was a kind of “Venusian obsession,” i.e., exaggerating the importance of the role played by the “Venus calendar” in these ritual books. After 1906, this was replaced to a large extent with an even more pervasive “lunar obsession,” essentially the result, according to his own acknowledgement, of his “conversion” to the interpretive approach of a leading student of Indo-Germanic mythology and folklore, Ernest Siecke. The 2 stages in his thinking are rather neatly exemplified in the first and second volumes of the work under review, with the first still dominated by the Venusian approach, while the second, published 2 years later, just after his adoption of the lunar way of thinking, is saturated with this preoccupation.

In judging fairly the success of Seler's interpretations of the members of the *Borgia* group, certain inherent difficulties facing any investigator attempting this task must be clearly recognized. Above all, it must be stressed that most of the information on Contact period western Mesoamerican religion and magic derives from the Valley of Mexico and adjoining territory, while the *Borgia* group of pictorials appears to have originated in an area somewhat to the east and south, a region poorly documented for specifics of religious and divinatory ideology. Where sections are present which are obviously cognate with sections in the Valley of Mexico ritual pictorials, their interpretation is greatly facilitated—but these are only a small minority. Of the 27 sections of *Borgia*, I would judge that Seler achieved considerable success in his interpretations of 4 (2, 3, 14, 22) and some degree of success with 5 others (5, 11, 15, 16, 23). Of the remaining 18, however, his explanations, above the identificatory level, are, in my opinion, very speculative and in many cases quite likely erroneous.

But, it is fair to ask, could anyone have done better—or, more pertinently, *has* anyone done better? What I would regard as preferable interpretations of section 18 (=6 merchant deities: Thompson; prognostications involving departure days for merchant expeditions: Nowotny) and 21 (marriage prognostications: Nowotny) have been offered lately. Nowotny has also suggested a somewhat less complicated explanation for the calendrics of Section 17 ("Venus Cycle"), which has much to recommend it; he has also suggested a very different interpretation of Section 13, the *Borgia's* *lengthiest* and most important section, but neither his

nor Seler's probably can be regarded as satisfactory explanations of these remarkable, unique sheets. Nowotny has also suggested alternative interpretations of certain other *Borgia* sections, but these are relatively minor; most frequently, in his *Tlacuilolli* (1961), he merely adopts a more non-committal and less speculative stance than his predecessor. Many other suggestions for differing interpretations of sections of *Borgia* have been made by various other students since the publication of Seler's commentary, but, in this reviewer's judgement, most of these are of minor importance and space forbids their mention.

In short, few new important interpretative "break-throughs" regarding *Borgia* have been made since Seler's time; some improvements on his identifications and interpretations can undoubtedly be made, but probably nothing very earthshaking is in sight. Seler attacked a formidable problem in attempting fully to elucidate *Borgia*. His partial failure was due more to the limitations of the data at his disposal than to his weaknesses as a scholar, although a few foibles frequently led him to propound more speculative interpretations than an ideal standard of disciplined, critical scholarship would allow. Seler was a genuine pioneer in a previously poorly cultivated field; no earlier scholar had attempted anything like the thorough, determined attack he undertook to explain the contents of the major members of the *Borgia* group. In so doing, in spite of his many failures, he produced one of the great classics in the history of Mesoamerican studies. Its appearance now in the *lingua franca* of that field can only be very warmly welcomed.