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Review of Williams, Robert Lloyd: Lord Eight Wind of Suchixtlan and the Heroes of Ancient Oaxaca

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Williams, Robert Lloyd: Lord Eight Wind of Suchix-tlan and the Heroes of Ancient Oaxaca. Reading History in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008. 216 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-72121-0. Price: £ 44.00

This book concerns a period of the precolonial history of one of Mexico's indigenous peoples: the Mixtecs or Ñuu Dzauí, "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 365 days were counted as well, named after a specific day (the "year bearer"), forming cycles of 52 years. Calculating the number of cycles involved in the succession of historical events and the genealogical sequence, research has shown that Mixtec written history goes back to the 10th century A.D.

Williams' book is the expanded version of his M.A. thesis, which grew out of twelve years of teaching the spring break Mixtec Workshop at the University of Texas, in collaboration with John Pohl, who has published extensively on precolonial Mixtec history and archaeology. The aim of that workshop was to introduce students to the reading of the Mixtec pictorial manuscripts. The "workshop enthusiasm" is palpable in this book. The author promises us: "We are going to read those rarest of all things ..." (30), and maintains this style by using terms such as "marvelous," "breathtaking," "mysterious," "wonder story," etc., and even occasional exaggerations: "the Mixtecs have the longest written royal histories in the world" (88). The author clearly has the U.S. workshop public in mind when he makes statements like "the Mixtecs were not us" (117).

The text is well written and contains appendices that provide short readings and schematic overviews of several segments of the Mixtec manuscripts (especially the codices Nuttall and Selden), clearly useful in the workshop context. It is also evident that Williams has occupied himself with this subject matter intensively and has a keen eye for details of the pictographic sources.

The focus of the main text is the interpretation of the first eight pages of one manuscript, Codex Nuttall, which deal with the life of one of the earliest rulers: Lord 8 Wind. Williams introduces this topic with discussions of the main conventions for reading such a pictographic codex, the system of the calendar, several important religious aspects (such as the ritual and cosmological mean-

ing of caves), etc. Here and in his interpretation of the different scenes, he gives an idea of the wide array of problems involved in this enterprise.

These pictorial manuscripts have already been the subject of study by quite a few scholars since the end of the 19th century. Obviously there have been and still are different opinions and "schools" of thought about how to read specific scenes. Williams' understanding of the Mixtec codices is heavily dependent on one specific line of interpretation, based on the book "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 Achiutla, 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., Yucufudahui, 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 Ñuu or Nuu, instead of *Ñuhu* (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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