

MISSIONARIES' BEASTS IN NEW SPAIN: THE UTILIZATION OF THE
EUROPEAN BESTIARY TRADITION IN SAHAGÚN'S *FLORENTINE CODEX*

by

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Friar Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, more commonly known as the *Florentine Codex*, begun in 1558, is arguably the most comprehensive source of information concerning the pre-colonial and colonial indigenous cultures of New Spain. This compilation, produced both by Sahagún and indigenous aides, documents the convergence of Aztec and European cultures. As such it represents the hybrid nature of colonial culture and is best approached from an understanding of both its European and Aztec influences. It is the aim of this thesis to consider the *Florentine Codex*, and Book Eleven ("Earthly Things") specifically, in the context of the European bestiary tradition. This thesis will illuminate Sahagún's role as a Franciscan missionary and the ways in which he utilized Aztec animal imagery

syncretically, for the purpose of evangelization. Analysis takes the form of case studies concerning the jaguar, birds, and serpents.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Found in conjunction with the text of Book Eleven, entitled “Earthly Things,” of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* are 264 illustrations of various fauna found throughout New Spain. Appearing above, below, or next to the textual entries they illustrate, these images are primarily taxonomic in nature as seen with the jaguar (figure 1). However, other images, such as those accompanying the falcon entry (figures 2, 3, and 4) directly relate to the narratives or specific information recounted in the text. Images such as these reinforce Book Eleven’s identity as a component of a missionary document and Sahagún’s goal of evangelization through their emphasis on the religious and spiritual aspects of the animals they represent. For example, figure 4 shows the falcon interacting with a representative of the Aztec patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, as described in the text. This image serves to highlight the indigenous association between the real world falcon and the otherworldly Huitzilopochtli. This connection portrays the indigenous population of New Spain as culturally sophisticated, primarily in the eyes of European missionaries, Sahagún’s intended audience. This sophistication argues the case that the indigenous population is not barbarous, but instead civilized and able to welcome Christ into their souls, an important concern of Sahagún’s, a Franciscan cleric. This thesis examines the visual and textual entries for fauna in Book Eleven in order to determine how they enhance the missionary effort in sixteenth century New Spain and reinforce Sahagún as a product of his environment.

In 2000, historian Walden Browne claimed, “those scholars who have attempted to show the influence of medieval thought on Sahagún’s work are on much firmer ground.”¹ This claim calls into question the decades of modern scholarship on Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and the interpretations of his most prominent work, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, more commonly known as the *Florentine Codex*, a twelve volume document begun in 1558 in the Viceroyalty of New Spain (1532-1821).² Valued for its detailed account of Nahua culture in Mesoamerica, the *Florentine Codex*, one of the most important and influential proto-ethnographic documents, is from sixteenth century Colonial Mexico. As such, scholars have often focused on Sahagún as an early modern anthropologist. Historian J. Jorge Klor de Alva has even gone so far as to label Sahagún the “father of modern ethnography.”³ However, this predominant approach effectively ignores the fact that Sahagún was a Franciscan friar who went to New Spain to further the propagation of the Christian faith among the indigenous population. Through recognition of Walden Browne’s call to analyze Sahagún’s work in light of its medieval influences, one can acknowledge both his pioneering role as a proto-ethnographer, as well as a friar concerned with evangelization.

¹ Walden Browne, *Sahagún and the Transition to Modernity* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 91.

² The Viceroyalty of New Spain refers to the Spanish colony in the Americas that encompassed primarily Mesoamerica and portions of what is today the Southwestern United States and Central America.

³ J. Jorge Klor de Alva, “Sahagún and the Birth of Modern Ethnography: Representing, Confessing, and Inscribing the Native Other,” in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth Century Aztec Mexico*, eds. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber, 31-52 (Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies the University at Albany State University of New York, 1988), 39. Thomas S. Bremer also refers to Sahagún as the “father of modern anthropology” in his essay “Sahagún and the Imagination of Inter-Religious Dialogues,” in *Sahagún at 500: Essays on the Quincentenary of the Birth of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún*, ed. John Frederick Schwaller, 11-29 (Berkeley, CA: Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003), 12.

Pre-contact Mesoamerican culture was radically different from that of Western Europe. Religious and social structures varied so greatly between the two cultures that early Spanish conquistadors and missionaries faced substantial cultural roadblocks on their path toward colonization and evangelization. This being said, the Aztecs of the central valley of Mexico fostered a rich and diverse society that shared at least one specific element with Western European culture: the integrated use of animal imagery and symbolism in religion. The Aztecs had a strong connection to the natural world around them, incorporating natural images into their religious and social life. For example, jaguars served as symbols of kingship, as well as avatars of the Aztec deity Tezcatlipoca. Likewise, Western European cultures utilized large cats, such as the lion, to mark kingship and royal lines, as can be seen in the Castilian coat of arms.

The Aztec use of animal imagery and symbolism, and its analogous counterpart in Western Europe, provide a foundation from which to address Browne's claim as well as understand one of the most enigmatic volumes of the *Florentine Codex*. Book Eleven is the largest volume of the twelve and is focused on the flora and fauna of Mesoamerica. The size and content of this volume force us to consider why Sahagún would devote so much time and space to its compilation. How is one to interpret Book Eleven's role in the *Florentine Codex*? Following Walden Browne one should turn to Sahagún's possible medieval influences. At first glance Book Eleven appears rather straightforward, devoid of any radical pre-contact references, merely listing and describing plants and animals. However, upon further inspection one finds that many entries also contain interpretations of animal behavior that are reminiscent of those found in medieval bestiaries. For example, in chapter two of Book Eleven, Sahagún discusses the pelican. The entry

describes the physical characteristics of the bird, such as its large head and white body, as well as where it can be found. Following this information, Sahagún tells of the beliefs surrounding the pelican and then relates them to specific elements of Aztec society.⁴ Likewise, in a medieval bestiary the pelican's appearance and behavior are described, and then a particular element of the bird's behavior is interpreted in such a way that it illustrates a core Christian teaching or belief.⁵ Recognizing the significance of animal symbolism in both Aztec and European cultures influenced Sahagún to create Book Eleven as a sort of indigenous bestiary. As such, Book Eleven is not merely an early taxonomic text and instead actively supports Sahagún's goal of furthering and strengthening the Christian faith in New Spain. His primary objective for producing the *Florentine Codex* was to aid missionaries. Working under the instruction of the Franciscan Order, Sahagún was tasked with the responsibility of compiling information that would ultimately be useful for evangelization. By analyzing Book Eleven in the context of the European bestiary tradition, an approach never before undertaken, its usefulness as a missionary tool becomes clear. Additionally, this approach illuminates indigenous conceptions of animal symbolism in the mid-sixteenth century, allowing for a more complete picture of Nahua culture, as well as validates an often overlooked, yet substantial portion of the *Florentine Codex*.

Exploring the similarities between Book Eleven and the European bestiary tradition presents a new approach to the *Florentine Codex* as well as reinforces

⁴ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, vol. 11 "Earthly Things," trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1963), 29-30.

⁵ Richard H. Randall Jr. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Cloisters Bestiary* (New York City: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1960).

Sahagún's role in its creation as a Franciscan friar. As previously mentioned, scholarship on Sahagún tends to focus on his purported pioneering work in the fields of ethnography and anthropology. As early as 1932, historian Carlos de Bustamante published *A History of Ancient Mexico: Anthropological, Mythological, and Social: by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún*, in which he translated Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, and included an extensive introduction to the work and Sahagún. In this text Sahagún's work and methods were heavily discussed in an anthropological context.⁶ In 1988, ethnohistorians J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber edited a volume entitled, *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth Century Aztec Mexico*. In the introduction to this volume the editors refer to Sahagún as "the greatest of those missionary-ethnographers of New Spain."⁷ The essays included in this volume, particularly those by J. Jorge Klor de Alva and John Keber, promote Sahagún as an early ethnographer, focused on recording indigenous culture.⁸ They acknowledge Sahagún's identity as a Franciscan friar, but their discussions focus on his impact on modern ethnography and anthropology.

Also in 1988, J. Kathryn Josserand and Karen Dakin published a collection of essays, *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D Sullivan*, which

⁶ Carlos de Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico: Anthropological, Mythological, and Social: by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún*, trans. Fanny R. Bandelier (Nashville, TN: Fisk University Press, 1932).

⁷ J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber, "Introduction," in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth Century Aztec Mexico*, eds. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber, 1-11 (Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies the University at Albany State University of New York, 1988), 1.

⁸ John Keber, "Sahagún and Hermeneutics: A Christian Ethnographer's Understanding of Aztec Culture," in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth Century Aztec Mexico*, eds. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber, 53-64 (Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies the University at Albany State University of New York, 1988); Klor de Alva, "Sahagún and the Birth of Modern Ethnography," *op. cit.*

once again presented Sahagún as primarily an ethnographer. In his essay, “Molina and Sahagún,” Charles E. Dibble positions Sahagún among his contemporaries, including Fray Alonso de Molina and Fray Diego Durán, as working for the advancement of the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the Nahuatl community.⁹ As recently as 2002, scholars such as H. B. Nicholson and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma have also extensively emphasized Sahagún’s ethnographic work.¹⁰

Other scholars such as Louise M. Burkhart have attempted to bridge the gap between Sahagún the ethnographer and Sahagún the missionary.¹¹ In *Sahagún at 500: Essays on the Quincentenary of the Birth of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún*, Thomas S. Bremer makes a point of noting that Sahagún was not an historian or anthropologist as we understand the terms today, but was instead “simply a sixteenth century Franciscan missionary concerned with lasting evaluation.”¹² Amongst the other collected essays in

⁹ Charles E. Dibble, “Molina and Sahagún,” in *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan*, eds. J. Kathryn Josserand and Karen Dakin, 69-76 (Oxford: BAR International Series 402 (i), 1988).

¹⁰ H. B. Nicholson, “Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: A Spanish Missionary in New Spain, 1529-1590,” in *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún*, ed. Eloise Quiñones Keber, 21-39 (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2002); and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, “Sahagún and the Ceremonial Precinct of Tenochtitlan: Ritual and Place,” in *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún*, ed. Eloise Quiñones Keber, 43-61 (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2002).

¹¹ Louise M. Burkhart, “Doctrinal Aspects of Sahagún’s *Colloquios*,” in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth Century Aztec Mexico*, eds. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber, 65-82 (Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies the University at Albany State University of New York, 1988).

¹² Bremer, “Sahagún and the Imagination of Inter-religious Dialogues,” (previously cited in this thesis).

this volume, David A. Boruchoff's work focuses on Sahagún's mission of evangelization.¹³

Another prominent branch of Sahagúntine scholarship focuses on the material and stylistic conventions in Sahagún's text and images. Art historians Ellen T. Baird, Elizabeth Hill Boone, and Jeanette Favrot Peterson have written extensively on the European and indigenous influences on Sahagún's language and images.¹⁴ These scholars focus on a nuanced approach to Sahagún's work that serves to illuminate his position as an outsider looking into indigenous culture.

This thesis will build on the work of these art historians, as well as that of the other scholars who have been previously mentioned. An analysis of both the text and images in Book Eleven in the context of the European bestiary tradition allows for a more complete understanding of Sahagún's influences, as well as his position as a Franciscan friar who was concerned with evaluating and documenting Nahua culture for both his contemporaries as well as future generations.

As one of the most widely produced and popular manuscripts of the Middle Ages, bestiaries were often used to teach laity and clergy important aspects of Christianity.¹⁵ As a result, the bestiary format and content were fundamentally intertwined with the spread of the Christian faith, making them uniquely suited for evangelization. Book

¹³ David A. Boruchoff, "Sahagún and the Theology of Mission Work," in *Sahagún at 500: Essays on the Quincentenary of the Birth of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún*, ed. John Frederick Schwaller, 59-102 (Berkeley, CA: Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003).

¹⁴ Ellen T. Baird, "Sahagún and the Representation of History," (previously cited in this essay); Elizabeth Hill Boone, "The Multilingual, Bivisual World of Sahagún's Mexico," *idem*. Jeanette Favrot Peterson, "Crafting the Self: Identity and the Mimetic Tradition in the *Florentine Codex*," *idem*.

¹⁵ J. L. Schrader, *A Medieval Bestiary* (New York City: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, 1986), 3.

Eleven's bestiary elements speak to this connection serving to both educate European Christian missionaries and to present Aztec culture in a familiar format that allowed for them to find religious and cultural similarities, strengthening what they hoped would be the continued success of evangelization.

As an intellectual tradition that helped form current understandings of encyclopedic texts, the bestiary presented information in an organized manner. Likewise, Book Eleven records flora and fauna in defined categories organized in terms of similar characteristics. This thesis, however, challenges cursory analyses of Book Eleven that regard its contents as mere attempts at an early form of taxonomy, and thus Sahagún as simply an early ethnographer. The European bestiary tradition thus provides a compelling framework for examining Book Eleven and developing a more complete view of Sahagún as a Franciscan friar confronted with the unique challenges of pursuing his mission in sixteenth century New Spain.

The *Florentine Codex*, and consequently Book Eleven, arose out of a climate of cultural convergence and exchange. During the latter half of the sixteenth century, Spanish conquistadors, friars, and colonists introduced Western European cultural traditions and attitudes to the indigenous population of Mesoamerica. Concurrently, the Spaniards were exposed to the deeply ingrained beliefs and customs of the indigenous population. In addition to cultural ideologies, the Spaniards and the indigenous populations sharply contrasted in their modes of visual representation and artistic philosophies. The resulting products of this encounter often embodied varying degrees of European and indigenous conventions. To examine the *Florentine Codex* is to acknowledge, in some way, its relation to the cultural climate in which it was produced.

On a basic level, the *Florentine Codex* can be understood as an amalgamation of European and indigenous influences. However, the manifestations of these influences, and their implications, should not be oversimplified.

Numerous scholars have attempted to conceptualize various approaches to understanding and discussing the inherent complexities of the *Florentine Codex*. One of the larger challenges is the use of terminology and its implications in such endeavors. How scholars discuss cultural convergence and mixing presents its own unique challenges. Various terms carry with them social and political nuances that color perceptions of the colonial period in Mesoamerica and consequently the visual culture produced during that period. As early as 1964 George Kubler presented a list of terms that he felt provided a framework for discussion. In “On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Pre-Columbian Art,” Kubler describes the process by which he believes indigenous symbolic systems were broken into pieces and then “assimilated into the colonial fabric.”¹⁶ According to Kubler, this process could take one or more of five different forms: juxtaposition, convergence, explants, transplants, and fragments. Juxtaposition exists when the two cultures in question exist simultaneously with no interaction. Convergence describes situations in which two different cultural traditions produce similar social patterns that are interchangeable in the colonial environment under the conditions of the dominant culture. Explants refer to elements of indigenous culture that continue to develop during the colonial period. Transplants are specific portions of indigenous traditions that are absorbed into colonial attitudes without any major

¹⁶ George Kubler, “On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Pre-Columbian Art,” in *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, eds. S. K. Lothrop, et al., 14-34 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 17.

alterations. Along a similar vein, fragments refer to specific pieces of indigenous culture that are utilized repeatedly by the dominant cultural group without comprehension.¹⁷

Kubler's representation of the products of the cultural encounter between the Spaniards and the indigenous population provides scholars with highly specific parameters for discussing the *Florentine Codex*. However, in Kubler's view, all authentic, pure elements of indigenous culture were lost during the colonial period and his development of terminology reflects this, with the exception of transplants, which he refers to as "uncommon."¹⁸ While Kubler's discussion is helpful and thorough, no one term serves to adequately describe Sahagún's work in the *Florentine Codex*, nor its numerous interpretations. As a product of the colonial environment, and a collaborative effort by Sahagún and members of the indigenous community, the manuscript certainly encompasses various indigenous and European modes of representation. What Kubler's terms do not provide is a means by which to understand the *Florentine Codex* as a unified project, and not just fragments of two cultural traditions.

In her essay, "Synthesis and Survival: The Native Presence in Sixteenth-century Murals of New Spain," Jeanette Favrot Peterson discusses the presence of indigenous influences in *convento* murals, and in so doing utilizes Kubler's terminology and introduces the concept of syncretism. According to Peterson, syncretism is analogous, to a degree, to Kubler's conception of convergence. In her eyes, syncretism applies to those instances when indigenous traits maintain their original form and function, but did not conflict with the ideology of the dominant culture, in this case of Catholicism. This is

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

particularly relevant to this thesis' discussion of Book Eleven of the *Florentine Codex*, as the text and images relate indigenous ideologies to a Christianized context.¹⁹ Peterson's presentation of syncretism does not fully apply to Book Eleven, but it does provide a framework from which to discern and understand indigenous contributions to the interpretations of animal behavior found in this volume. What is more, this particular understanding of syncretism allows for interpretations of both indigenous and Christian meaning within the text of Book Eleven. This provides an opportunity for understanding how Sahagún used Book Eleven to aid in evangelization by presenting the indigenous population in a Christian context, thus rendering them more approachable to Spanish audiences. This will be discussed further in later chapters concerning with specific examples from Book Eleven.

While the work of Kubler and Peterson provide a solid foundation for understanding cultural production in New Spain, the most influential theories of the products of cultural contact in Mesoamerica for this discussion are those by art historians Cecelia Klein, Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, as well as historian James Lockhart. These scholars posit theories that allow for more nuanced interpretations of cultural contact and exchange. Where Kubler argued against the presence of native agency in colonial culture, Klein and Lockhart present models that allow for investigation and interpretation of native influences in instances where they may not be readily apparent. Additionally, Dean and Leibsohn offer a theoretical approach that not only incorporates native agency but explores the various facets that come with any discussion of cultural exchange.

¹⁹ Jeanette Favrot Peterson, "Synthesis and Survival: The Native Presence in Sixteenth-century Murals of New Spain," *Phoebus*, 7 (1995), 18.

First introduced in 1985, James Lockhart's concept of double mistaken identity presents an interpretation of colonial Mesoamerican culture that combines indigenous and European influences into a single entity. Like a two-sided coin, Lockhart proposes that the results of indigenous and Spanish cultural contact can be viewed separately from both vantage points. He explains that "each side of the cultural exchange presumes that a given form or concept is functioning in a way familiar with its own traditions and is unaware or unimpressed by the other side's interpretations."²⁰ He uses the example of the *altepetl*, loosely analogous to the concept of a city-state, to illustrate this concept. In this example Lockhart explains how the Nahua conception of the *altepetl* differed in principle from the Spanish concept of a province or municipality. However, the *altepetl* survived because both the indigenous community and the Spaniards believed it was functioning in accordance with their own beliefs.²¹

Lockhart's double mistaken identity model allows cultural production of colonial Mesoamerica to exist independently of its various influences, but provides a means of discussing how members of each community would have been able to interpret developing colonial concepts. In regards to the current discussion, double mistaken identity allows for nuanced interpretations of how two audiences, one indigenous and one Spanish, may have understood the symbolic significance placed on native animals. As with Peterson's discussion of syncretism, this lends itself to discussing Book Eleven's role in the propagation of the Christian faith among indigenous communities. By

²⁰ James Lockhart, "Double Mistaken Identity: Some Nahua Concepts in Post-Conquest Guise," in *Of Things of the Indies: Essays Old and New in Early Latin American History*, 98-119 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 99-105.

understanding how Book Eleven may have been perceived by both indigenous and Spanish audiences one can argue that Sahagún's presentation of animal symbolism served to strengthen cultural connections between indigenous communities and the Spanish colonizers. From a European viewpoint, the entries in Book Eleven serve to Christianize the indigenous population, thus making them more acceptable to Spanish audiences. On the other hand, indigenous audiences may not have been cognizant of the Christian undertones of some of the entries in Book Eleven, instead viewing the document as an application of European methods to indigenous information. In this way, both audiences viewed Book Eleven as a document that represented their own interests, thus linking the two groups.

While Lockhart's concept of double mistaken identity presents one of the more nuanced models for understanding the cultural exchange of the colonial period, it still runs the risk of ignoring the unique interpretations that can result from viewing this period as possessing its own separate identity, neither fully indigenous nor fully European. A potential solution to this problem, and one that is better suited for a discussion of visual production, is Cecelia Klein's concept of visual bilingualism, first discussed in her essay, "Depictions of the Dispossessed."²² Visual bilingualism, as presented by Klein, is a means by which native communities subverted elements of the dominant culture and used those elements against that culture. In this way, indigenous communities maintained an element of self-representation.²³ Additionally, in these instances the dominant culture may perceive that the indigenous community has

²² Cecelia F. Klein, "Depictions of the Dispossessed," *Art Journal*, 49/2 (Summer 1990), 106-109.

²³ *Ibid.*, 107-109.

assimilated, while the indigenous community has developed different understandings and meanings for elements of the dominant culture. The results of this process ended up being neither fully indigenous (in the sense of pre-contact thought and culture) nor European, but instead a representation of the colonial environment and the conditions of the colonized. In relation to Book Eleven, the concept of visual bilingualism allows one to argue for indigenous agency in the production and interpretation of material within the *Florentine Codex*. The various animal entries that seem to Christianize the indigenous population from a Western perspective, may in fact be efforts by Sahagún's indigenous aides to claim ownership of European cultural elements and, in effect, "indigenize" them. In this respect, Book Eleven becomes both a means to foster Christianity among indigenous communities, as well as to represent the developing cultural identity of those communities. This is particularly relevant as the *Florentine Codex* was begun thirty-seven years after the fall of Tenochtitlan and Sahagún's young aides (though not the elders who were often informants from whom Sahagún and his aides gathered information) had never known a cultural environment that did not include Spanish influences. It should be noted that while the role of Sahagún's aides and native agency is valuable to a full interpretation and discussion of the *Florentine Codex* this thesis is primarily concerned with Sahagún's intentions and the role of medieval European influences on the codex as a whole and Book Eleven in particular. Scholars such as Ellen T. Baird, Serge Gruzinski, and Jeanette Peterson have comprehensively discussed the issue of native agency in the *Florentine Codex*.²⁴

²⁴ For further reading on the role of native agency in the *Florentine Codex* see: Ellen T. Baird, "Sahagún's Codex Florentino: The Enigmatic A," (previously cited in this thesis); Ellen T. Baird, "Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* and *Codex Florentino*: European Elements in the Illustrations," in *Smoke and Mist*:

While double mistaken identity and visual bilingualism provide excellent workable models for discussing Book Eleven and its relationship to the European bestiary, they are not fully inclusive nor do they necessarily provide a means of understanding the *Florentine Codex* as a whole. In 2003, art historians Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn investigated the concept of hybridity and its implications for the study of visual culture in colonial Spanish America in their essay, “Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America.”²⁵ Referring to the *Florentine Codex* as a hybrid object acknowledges it as a product of a unique cultural environment. However, the use of the term “hybrid” is not free from limitations. As Dean and Leibsohn note, the hybrid “evoke(s) particular – especially political – connotations.”²⁶ Additionally, they emphasize how any discussion of hybridity or cultural mixing emphasizes power structures that serve to marginalize indigenous cultures in that they are only considered in regards to the results of European expansion. Thus to discuss Book

Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan, eds. J. Kathryn Josserand and Karen Dakin, 15-40 (Oxford: BAR International Series 402 (i), 1988); Ellen T. Baird, “Adaptation and Accommodation: The Transformation of the Pictorial Text in Sahagún’s Manuscripts,” *Phoebus*, 7 (1995), 36-51; Baird, “Sahagún and the Representation of History,” (previously cited in this thesis); Elizabeth Hill Boone, “The Multilingual, Bivisual World of Sahagún’s Mexico,” in *Sahagún at 500: Essays on the Quincentenary of the Birth of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún*, ed. John Frederick Swallow, 137-166 (Berkeley, CA: Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003); Serge Gruzinski, *Painting the Conquest: The Mexican Indians and the European Renaissance*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (Paris: Flammarion, 1992); Klor de Alva, “Sahagún and the Birth of Modern Ethnography: Representing, Confessing, and Inscribing the Native Other,” (previously cited in this thesis); Eloise Quiñones Keber, “Reading Images: The Making and Meaning of the Sahaguntine Illustrations,” in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth Century Aztec Mexico*, eds. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber, 199-210 (Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies the University at Albany State University of New York, 1988); Jeanette Favrot Peterson, “Crafting the Self: Identity and the Mimetic Tradition in the *Florentine Codex*,” in *Sahagún at 500: Essays on the Quincentenary of the Birth of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún*, ed. John Frederick Swallow, 223-253 (Berkeley, CA: Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003).

²⁵ Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, “Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America,” *Colonial Latin American Review*, 12/1 (2003), 5-35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Eleven and its contents as hybrid is to distinguish them as different from things truly European and to suggest that, perhaps due to their indigenous influences, they are somehow less worthy than either some kind of “pure” indigenous or European culture.²⁷ This being said, hybridity, as a theoretical framework, does have redeemable qualities. For instance, it has the ability to challenge accepted norms. Dean and Leibsohn also make a point of noting that hybridity is often conceived of as a duality, a mixing of the colonized and the colonizer. This places the concept of hybridity conceptually closer to Kubler’s juxtaposition or convergence, and Peterson’s syncretism.

Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn also argue that hybridity in colonial Spanish America has various levels of visibility. In other words, cultural mixing is not always evident or easily discernable in the visual record.²⁸ This suggests that an object’s hybridity might be an inherent quality allowing one to argue that, by virtue of the conditions of an object’s production, it is representative of cultural convergence. This is important because it accounts for not only individual responses to cultural production, but also the environment from which it emerged. Thus colonial cultural production can be viewed as a separate, independent creation.

Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn’s presentation of hybridity is relevant to this discussion of Book Eleven of the *Florentine Codex* because it is imperative to confront the nature of the text’s production and the end results of disparate influences. Additionally, when looking at Book Eleven in relation to the European bestiary tradition it is important to acknowledge how this influence is manifested in both the text and

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸ Ibid., 9-13.

images found within the document. Each textual entry has a corresponding illustration. Often these illustrations function as indicators of the physical appearance of the animal in question. In other instances they further the narrative presented in the text. In each case the image and the text work together to reinforce certain messages. It is one aim of this discussion to explore the ways in which the images in Book Eleven reinforce the text and emphasize the syncretic nature of the document. Moreover, by exploring the relationship between the text and images in Book Eleven, this discussion will illuminate the instances of indigenous agency found throughout the *Florentine Codex*. Additionally, the European bestiary tradition is characterized by the interplay between textual and visual imagery. In order to adequately understand how the bestiary tradition may have influenced the production of Book Eleven it is crucial to explore the relationship between the text and images in Book Eleven and their corresponding counterparts in the bestiary tradition.

In the chapters that follow the fauna found in Book Eleven will be examined in the form of case studies on the jaguar, eagle, falcon, pelican, and serpent. These animals have been chosen for their prominence in indigenous Aztec culture, their significance within Book Eleven, and the existence of bestiary correlates. Through a detailed look at the importance of animal symbolism in Aztec culture and its manifestation in Book Eleven, one can begin to compare Book Eleven's format and function to that of the European bestiary. Additionally, by looking at the European bestiary tradition one can highlight the significance of animal symbolism in Western European culture. This will then be compared to the nature of Aztec animal symbolism. Through this comparison one can argue that Sahagún was able to connect the Aztec and Spanish communities through similar cultural characteristics through the use of the bestiary format in Book

Eleven of the *Florentine Codex*. Through this connection Sahagún was able to Christianize the Aztecs in the eyes of his European audience, thus reinforcing the possibility of the continued success of Novohispanic evangelization.

CHAPTER II

THE *FLORENTINE CODEX* AND THE EUROPEAN BESTIARY TRADITION**Introduction**

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* is one of the most cited texts for Mesoamerican life and beliefs. However, Book Eleven, entitled "Earthly Things," is often overlooked. A close inspection of this volume reveals that within the book's discussions of the various animals important native cultural and religious information is recounted. Also present are possible Christian interpretations embedded within the text. The presence of this information allows Book Eleven to serve as an educational document about both indigenous wildlife and significant native beliefs that could aid missionaries in their approach to evangelization. Additionally, the Christian undertones strengthen possible connections between the European missionaries and the indigenous population. To understand Sahagún's approach to the production of the *Florentine Codex*, as well as glean his possible intentions, it is necessary to situate Sahagún as a sixteenth century friar dedicated to converting and educating the indigenous people of New Spain.

Sahagún: His History and the Novohispanic Environment

Sahagún was born around 1500 in a small town in the León province of Spain.²⁹ While little is known of his childhood, it is likely that this formation influenced his later career. In her introductory essay for *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún*, Eloise Quiñones Keber suggests that Sahagún's childhood home and his experiences there as a young adult shaped the type of cleric he

²⁹ Nicholson, "Fray Bernardino de Sahagún," 22.

would become and the type of “ethnographic” work he did.³⁰ For instance, Sahagún’s birthplace, Sanctus Facundus, later renamed Sahagún, was an important stop on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela.³¹ As a result, a wide variety of people from all over Western Europe, and perhaps beyond, passed through this community, exposing its inhabitants to the world outside of Northern Spain. These pilgrims may have first sparked young Bernardino’s interest in cultures and people outside of his own. Additionally, Sahagún’s hometown had other unique features that may have influenced his adulthood. Keber argues that the various Roman, Arabic, and Christian ruins, particularly the remains of a Benedictine monastery dedicated to Sts. Facundus and Primitivus, that surrounded Sahagún may have fostered an appreciation for a multi-cultural approach,³² which would manifest itself in the production of the *Florentine Codex*.

Sahagún eventually studied at the University of Salamanca. During his tenure there he entered the convent of the Franciscan Order, where he was ordained a priest. In 1529, he was recruited by Fray Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo, one of the original twelve Franciscans to come to New Spain, to join him in the religious education of the native

³⁰ Eloise Quiñones Keber, “Representing Aztec Ritual in the Work of Sahagún,” in *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún*, ed. Eloise Quiñones Keber, 3-19 (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 8-10.

³¹ Nicholson, “Fray Bernardino de Sahagún,” 22.

³² Keber, “Representing Aztec Ritual,” 7. Keber strengthens her argument by discussing the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures and traditions that permeated sixteenth century Spain. Additionally, Nicholson notes in his essay, “Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: A Spanish Missionary in New Spain,” 22 (previously cited in this thesis) that there is speculation that some of Sahagún’s family were Jews who converted to Catholicism, suggesting that he may have had personal experience with cultural blending and the results of the conversion process. Perhaps this instilled in him a further appreciation for different cultures as well as a desire to evangelize.

people.³³ Sahagún left Spain later in that year with nineteen other Franciscan friars on a ship that also transported young, indigenous, Mesoamerican men back from their presentation at the Spanish Court. His encounter with these men began his study and eventual mastery of the Aztec language, Nahuatl.³⁴ This mastery would be a boon in his later missionary and ethnographic work.

When Sahagún arrived in New Spain in late 1529, he was undoubtedly presented with challenges unlike anything he encountered on the Iberian Peninsula. Vast language and cultural barriers separated the clergy from their would-be flock. Therefore, Sahagún first set himself to furthering his command of the Aztec language.³⁵ Additionally, Sahagún spent the majority of his career in New Spain conducting missionary fieldwork, with only a brief interlude from 1536 to 1540 spent teaching at the Franciscan school for the sons of the indigenous elite, the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, just north of Mexico City.³⁶ His time in the field, working closely with the native people, and his tenure as an educator of their sons cemented his interest in, and appreciation of, native culture, as well as his desire to record and document it as an aid in the Christianization of the Nahuas, as well as the eradication of idolatry.³⁷

³³ Bremer, "Sahagún and the Imagination of Inter-religious Dialogues," 14.

³⁴ de Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, 3.

³⁵ Bremer, "Sahagún and the Imagination of Inter-religious Dialogues," 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁷ While the circumstances surrounding the commissioning and production of the *Florentine Codex* will be discussed later in this chapter, it should be noted that Sahagún also engaged in relatively self-motivated projects that incorporated his knowledge of Nahuatl, such as his *Colloquios*. For an interesting discussion of this document see: Burkhart, "Doctrinal Aspects of Sahagún's *Colloquios*," (previously cited in this thesis).

Sahagún's entry into recording Mesoamerican culture might have been sparked by his time with the indigenous population, but his desire to do so was by no means unique. Almost as soon as the Spanish arrived in Mesoamerica they began recording what they saw and experienced for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was surveying their newly acquired territory and subjects. In fact, in 1525 the Spanish Crown approved a project that would require an extensive investigation of the region around what is today Mexico City. The responsibility of completing the project, entitled *Descripción de la Nueva España*, changed hands numerous times until, in April of 1530 under the Second Audencia, a select group of Franciscan and Dominican friars was given the task. At this time the Crown also decided to expand the scope of the project by requiring that it include information regarding indigenous lifestyle and culture. The project was finally completed in 1532, and must have been well received because in 1533 the Crown ordered further investigation and more documentation. The *Descripción* was, in a sense, the beginning of all later ethnographic work, especially by the Franciscans, to be produced in New Spain.³⁸

While not directly involved with the creation of the *Descripción*, Sahagún himself produced a number of written works while in New Spain. In addition to his Nahuatl vocabulary, sermons, and prayers³⁹ Sahagún also compiled a comparatively small

³⁸ Georges Baudot, *Utopia and History in Mexico: The First Chroniclers of Mexican Civilization (1520-1569)*, trans. Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1995), 27-33. Here I have only briefly summarized some of the early works by Spanish missionaries and colonizers that laid the foundation for, and most likely, influenced, the work of Sahagún. For a more comprehensive discussion of the various documents that were written during the early years of colonization in New Spain, and a rich discussion of the Franciscans place in that history, consult the entirety of Baudot's text.

³⁹ See de Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico* (previously cited in this chapter).

document that served as a forerunner to the *Florentine Codex*. Documenting aspects of indigenous culture, the *Primeros Memoriales* (1559-61) was created in much the same way as the *Florentine Codex*, through interviews with native noblemen, primarily from Tepepulco. The information gathered was then organized into four chapters: rites and deities, heaven and hell, rulers, and human things,⁴⁰ much of which was expanded for the *Florentine Codex*.

It should be noted that Sahagún was not the only mendicant friar to document indigenous culture. Beginning in the 1560s, the Dominican friar Diego Durán produced three works analogous to the *Florentine Codex*: *The Book of the Gods and Rites*, concerning details of Aztec culture and religious practices; *The Ancient Calendar*, concerning the Mesoamerican system of marking time; and *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, concerning Aztec history.⁴¹ Like Sahagún, Durán wished to document indigenous culture and was commissioned to do so by his superiors.⁴² It is important to note, if only briefly, Durán's contribution to the documentation of indigenous culture in sixteenth century New Spain because it indicates that Sahagún was not working in a vacuum. Mendicants across New Spain recognized the value in recording and learning about indigenous culture. However, Sahagún's work in the *Florentine Codex* differs significantly from Durán's in at least one crucial aspect: the focus on the natural world found in Book Eleven.

⁴⁰ Ellen T. Baird, "Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* and *Codex Florentino*," 15-16.

⁴¹ Fray Diego Durán, *The Book of Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, trans. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 34.

In Book Eleven of the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún documented flora and fauna, information, like Durán, he had not included in his own *Primeros Memoriales*. Book Eleven represents one of the only examples in colonial New Spain where a mendicant friar incorporated natural history into a document primarily concerned with cultural documentation. This is not to say that Sahagún's interest in the natural world of New Spain was entirely unique. Contemporary figures, such as Francisco Hernández, devoted themselves to surveying and documenting the world around them. During the mid to late sixteenth century, Hernández documented more than 3000 plant species in Mesoamerica.⁴³ His work marked a growing interest in the natural world, as well as an increased desire for documentation of Spanish imperial property.⁴⁴ While the context of Hernández's work indicates that Sahagún was perhaps responding to growing trends in the study and classification of his cultural environment, the differences between Hernández's herbal and Book Eleven further highlight Sahagún's role as a friar and his dedication to developing a cultural understanding of the indigenous community. Where Hernández's work focuses more on direct observations of nature, Book Eleven incorporates observation with interpretation and religious undertones; a difference that speaks to Sahagún's utilization of the European bestiary tradition.

⁴³ Dora B. Weiner, "The World of Dr. Francisco Hernández," in *Searching for The Secrets of Nature: The Life and Works of Dr. Francisco Hernández*, eds. Simon Varey, Rafael Chabrán, and Dora B. Weiner, 3-10 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.

⁴⁴ See Peter O'Malley Pierson, "Philip II: Imperial Obligations and Scientific Vision," in *Searching for the Secrets of Nature: The Life and Works of Dr. Francisco Hernández*, eds. Simon Varey, Rafael Chabrán, and Dora B. Weiner, 11-18 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); and Rafael Chabrán, "The Classical Tradition in Renaissance Spain and New Trends in Philology, Medicine, and Materia Medica," in *Searching for the Secrets of Nature: The Life and Works of Dr. Francisco Hernández*, eds. Simon Varey, Rafael Chabrán, and Dora B. Weiner, 21-32 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

By looking briefly at the work of Sahagún's contemporaries it is clear that he was not the only sixteenth century European interested in documenting his new environment. It is also clear that the reasons for documentation often varied. However, these comparisons also reveal that in the depth of his work and the incorporation of natural history and cultural information, he was unique.

The Florentine Codex

In 1557, Sahagún's superior, Fray Francisco de Toral, requested that he compile a comprehensive document that would include all of the information missionaries would need to know about the native population in order to convert them successfully.⁴⁵ This request was the impetus for the *Florentine Codex*, but it does not divulge all of Sahagún's motivations or intentions for the project. To gain the fullest possible understanding of the *Florentine Codex*, and the way it functions as a missionary document, one must explore Sahagún's own motivations in interpreting the commission and the way in which the document was produced.

While Sahagún was required to compile a document to aid the Catholic clergy as they worked with their Nahua parishioners, the amount and type of information he was to include was not specified. He could have simply gathered only what he felt was the most basic and essential information. Instead, he relentlessly accumulated a wealth of information from interviews with indigenous elders in Tenochtitlan, Tepepolco, and Tlatelolco, and compiled twelve volumes of material. In fact, it has been suggested that

⁴⁵ Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 114.

much of Sahagún's work deviated from his missionary goals,⁴⁶ such as detailed descriptions of indigenous animal and plant life, as well as accounts of domestic building practices. However, in the prologue to the codex's Book One, "The Gods," Sahagún tells us what he believed he was doing:

I was ordered by my superior to write, in the Mexican language, what to me would seem useful for the culture, support, and teaching of Christianity among these natives of New Spain, which would at the same time be of assistance to the workers and ministers of the Christian faith.⁴⁷

From this it would seem that his primary goal was always to increase evangelical effectiveness. How then are we to reconcile Sahagún's words with his work? The answer to this lies, in part, in his affiliation with the Franciscan Order and the methods he employed to produce the *Florentine Codex*, such as his use of the bestiary format in Book Eleven.

As a Franciscan, Sahagún would have hoped to create a perfect indigenous, Christian community in New Spain; one free from the abuses and trappings found in Europe,⁴⁸ one more like what was seen as a purer faith of the "primitive" church of the time of the apostles. Moreover, the Franciscans, and other mendicant orders, believed that true conversion could only be achieved if a person consciously and willingly chose to follow Christ. This philosophy suggests that the Franciscans saw the native Mesoamericans as true human beings capable of attaining the Christian ideal; an image promoted in Book Eleven through the cultural comparisons between the Aztecs and Europeans.

⁴⁶ Klor de Alva, "Sahagún and the Birth of Modern Ethnography," 34.

⁴⁷ As quoted in, de Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, 21.

⁴⁸ Klor de Alva, "Sahagún and the Birth of Modern Ethnography," 37.

The *Florentine Codex* was originally intended for Sahagún's fellow Franciscans. Due to the nature of his intended audience, Sahagún may have been attempting to elevate the native population in the eyes of his predominantly European audience, framing them as civilized people with the capacity to understand complex natural and cosmic ideologies as opposed to unredeemable, semi-human pagans.⁴⁹ This sort of inclusive approach was not unique to Sahagún. As a general rule mendicant orders were tolerant and accepting, in varying degrees, of indigenous culture, as long as it did not encroach upon or negate the establishment of Christianity in New Spain.⁵⁰ To promote Christianity and community the Franciscans not only tolerated certain aspects of indigenous culture, but incorporated them into their methods of proselytizing and their sponsored artworks. For example, the architecture of many Franciscan *conventos* (e.g. Huejotzingo in Puebla and San Gabriel in Cholula) incorporated elements of indigenous architecture, resulting in open and *posas* chapels, in order to make the conversion process smoother.⁵¹

In addition to the evangelical atmosphere in which he was working, Sahagún's personal experience and his methods for gathering information for the *Florentine Codex* also influence the way the final product can be interpreted. As previously mentioned,

⁴⁹ The issue of Franciscan missionary philosophy and Sahagún's place within it is a topic too large for the scope of this discussion, but it is important to understand, at least in part, the world in which Sahagún lived and worked. For more information on Sahagún and Franciscan missionary philosophy, see Boruchoff, "Sahagún and the Theology of Mission Work," (previously cited in this thesis).

⁵⁰ See: Peterson, "Synthesis and Survival," (previously cited in this thesis). In this essay Peterson notes the various ways indigenous culture was incorporated into the mural programs of Augustinian and Franciscan monasteries. For further reading on the topic of mendicant incorporation of indigenous motifs, etc see: Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542-1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); and Alfred Neumeyer, "The Indian Contribution to the Architectural Decoration in Spanish Colonial America," *The Art Bulletin*, 30/2 (June, 1948), 104-121.

⁵¹ Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage*, 17-39. Lara discusses numerous influences on *convento* architecture for the purpose of exploring how architecture can influence the conversion process.

Sahagún spent the majority of his time as a parish priest, working directly with the indigenous people. He lived among them, taught their children, and became their spiritual leader. As a result of the time he spent with them, Sahagún developed a deep appreciation for the Nahuas and indigenous culture, simultaneously winning their confidence and affection.⁵² Through his connection with the indigenous people, Sahagún acquired an unprecedented amount of information and details concerning Aztec culture of generations past, and was able to create a comprehensive document that preserved elements of their culture, while at the same time educated people who would alter it.

Sahagún's Aides and Informants

To fulfill the request made by his superior, Sahagún used his relationship with the native population and his links to the Colegio de Santa Cruz. The *Florentine Codex* was the result of years of gathering information with the help of young bi- or trilingual aides and informants, all members of indigenous communities believed by missionaries to be fully converted to Christianity. Beginning in 1558 and continuing until 1569, Sahagún traveled with his aides to Tepepolco, Tlatelolco, and Tenochtitlan. In each of these communities, he gathered eight to ten elders who remembered pre-Colonial indigenous traditions.⁵³ Sahagún's young aides interviewed these men and recorded their answers in both Spanish and Nahuatl. Sahagún then organized this information into the twelve

⁵² de Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, 3.

⁵³ Pete Sigal, "Queer Nahuatl: Sahagún's Faggots and Sodomites, Lesbians and Hermaphrodites," *Ethnohistory*, 54/1 (Winter, 2007), 18. See also de Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico* (previously cited in this thesis).

volumes that now comprise the *Florentine Codex*. This task was long and often tedious, but Sahagún took great pains to ensure that his information was authentic and credible.⁵⁴

One of the methods Sahagún used to ensure that his information was accurate and credible was through the assistance of his aides. These young men were uniquely situated in the sixteenth century colonial environment of New Spain. As sons of indigenous elites, they came from families that had once known power and prestige during the pre-contact period. In order to maintain control over the large populace, the Spaniards solicited the aid of the surviving indigenous ruling and noble classes. This objective was achieved, in part, through the formation of schools to train their sons.⁵⁵ One of the most prominent schools developed by the Franciscans was the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Santiago in Tlatelolco. Officially inaugurated on 6 January 1536 after the arrival of the first Viceroy of Mexico, Don Antonio de Mendoza, the school catered specifically to the sons of the indigenous lords. The students at the Colegio were taught courses based on the liberal arts, as well as classes in theology, medicine, and painting.⁵⁶ Additionally, they were taught to write in Nahuatl in the Latin alphabet, and many became literate in Spanish and Latin as well as their native Nahuatl. Thus, the next generations of leaders of the Catholic indigenous communities in Tlatelolco were indoctrinated into European, Spanish culture, in an attempt to ensure the propagation of

⁵⁴ Ellen T. Baird, "Sahagún and the Representation of History," 117.

⁵⁵ Juan Estarellas, "The College of Tlatelolco and the Problem of Higher Education for Indians in 16th Century Mexico," *History of Education Quarterly*, 2/4 (December, 1962), 234. For further reading on the education of Sahagún's aides see: Elizabeth Hill Boone, "The Multilingual, Bivisual World of Sahagún's Mexico," (previously cited in this thesis).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 235-236.

the faith. This educational background also prepared Sahagún's aides for their work on the *Florentine Codex*.

The role of the indigenous aides in the creation of the *Florentine Codex* must not be underestimated. Not only was their knowledge of indigenous culture invaluable, their influence made the Codex a unique document that combined both European and indigenous traditions. The young men who assisted Sahagún in the production of the *Florentine Codex* were, as Susan Schroeder notes, "a crucial part of the content of conquest literature,"⁵⁷ because often the perspectives of the indigenous were rarely taken into account by Spaniards writing about post-Conquest New Spain.⁵⁸ As Christianized members of the indigenous community their personal experiences reflected the same combination of European and native influences found in the Codex. Thus much of what is in the *Florentine Codex* is not just an isolated instance of two disparate influences combining in the production of a single document, but rather a reflection of an indigenous past remembered and recorded by people whose upbringing and lifestyle did not fit into either an indigenous or European category, but were instead representative of the outcome of the convergence of the two cultures. These entangled levels of meaning, in conjunction with the knowledge that Sahagún has the ultimate say over the final material, suggests the possibility of visual bilingualism or double mistaken identity

⁵⁷ Susan Schroeder, "Looking Back at the Conquest: Nahua Perceptions of Early Encounters from the Annals of Chimalpahin," in *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial Mexico in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble*, ed. Eloise Quiñones Keber, Susan Schroeder, and Frederick Hicks, 81-94 (Lancaster, CA: Labyrinthos, 1994), 81.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

within the text of the *Florentine Codex*.⁵⁹ Where one group may see a representation of Christian elements, the other might see only their own cultural background. For example, based on the Nahuatl translation of the Book Eleven text,⁶⁰ it is evident that a degree of Christianization or Westernization of indigenous culture can be found in the recounting of the earthly things of New Spain. This Christianization speaks to the influence of the European bestiary on Book Eleven as well as the influence of the missionary effort supported by the document. This hybridity, or combination of influences, evident in both the text and images,⁶¹ makes the *Florentine Codex* a rich and complex document that requires multiple levels of interpretation, including an examination of Book Eleven in the context of the European bestiary tradition.

The European Bestiary Tradition

Numerous scholars have commented on the structural link between medieval encyclopedic texts, such as the bestiary, and that of the *Florentine Codex*.⁶² Both European encyclopedic texts and the *Florentine Codex* are divided into volumes, chapters, and entries. For example, bestiaries are typically divided into anywhere from thirty to sixty chapters, and within these chapters animals are grouped into categories,

⁵⁹ See Klein, "Depictions of the Dispossessed," and Lockhart, "Double Mistaken Identity," (previously cited in this discussion). See also chapter one of this thesis for a detailed discussion of these theories and their relevance to this discussion.

⁶⁰ The textual analysis of Book Eleven is based on Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble's 1962 translation of the Nahuatl text.

⁶¹ See Ellen T. Baird, "Sahagún's Codex Florentino: The Engimatic A," 288-292.

⁶² Walden Browne, *Sahagún and the Transition to Modernity*, (previously cited in this thesis); Luis Weckmann, *The Medieval Heritage of Mexico*, trans. Frances M. Lopez-Morillas (New York City: Fordham University Press, 1992).

such as reptiles, birds of prey, etc.⁶³ Book Eleven is similarly organized. It is divided into categories, animals and plant life, and within these categories are chapters, such as four-legged beasts, and within each chapter are entries for individual animals, such as the jaguar. While these structural similarities have been well noted, the textual similarities between the bestiary and Book Eleven that illuminate the theme of evangelization found throughout the *Florentine Codex* have never been fully investigated.

Sahagún, as a Franciscan friar and an alumnus of a European university, would not only have been exposed to the bestiary tradition, but likely well versed in it. Bestiaries were second only to the Bible in popularity during the Middle Ages. They originated with a document produced in Alexandria in the second century CE. Known as the *Physiologus*, this document is considered the prototype for the bestiary because it was a moralized treatise containing animals.⁶⁴ While the *Physiologus* is considered the prototype for the medieval bestiary, it was Plutarch who, during the first quarter of the second century CE, wrote about animals in a theological context. In his writings he discussed the Egyptian belief that they could uncover truths about their gods through their experiences with nature.⁶⁵

⁶³ Xenia Muratova, *The Medieval Bestiary*, trans. Inna Kitrosskaya (Moscow: Iskustovo Art Publishers, 1984), 16.

⁶⁴ Wilma George and Brundson Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts: Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd., 1991), 1. See also: J. L. Schraeder, "A Medieval Bestiary," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 44/1 (Summer, 1986), 3.

⁶⁵ Schraeder, "A Medieval Bestiary," 3.

After the *Physiologus*, the most influential text for the medieval bestiary was Isidore of Seville's seventh century CE *Etymologiae*, an authority on natural history.⁶⁶ From these early works the European bestiary developed into an orderly genre, grouping animals into categories such as beasts, birds, and reptiles.⁶⁷ The texts found within the bestiary are typically structured so that the animals' physical appearances and behaviors are described first, lending a scientific credibility to the text.⁶⁸ This description is then followed by a moralized explanation. For example, a typical bestiary entry for the owl states: "The owl thrives in darkness and flies about in the night. The owl is a symbol of darkness and hence of the Jews who rejected Christ, the Light of the World, as their king."⁶⁹ In this brief example one can see how the author interprets the nocturnal habits of the owl as an analogy for the people of the Jewish faith. By utilizing an observable feature of owl behavior the author was able to express Christian thinking concerning the Jews, as well as re-emphasize Jesus Christ as the true Messiah, in a way that was perhaps both approachable and easily understandable. Due to this approach, bestiaries were commonly used in convents and monasteries to instruct novices. Additionally, priests would often use the texts in sermons to educate the lay population.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Janetta Rebold Benton, *The Medieval Menagerie: Animals in the Art of the Middle Ages* (New York City: Abbeville Press, 1992), 69.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* It should also be noted that the popularity of bestiaries also spurred the production of more specified texts, such as Hugh of Folieto's famous *Aviaryum*, a bestiary-like text devoted solely to birds. See George and Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts*, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 108-109. Benton also notes that this perceived scientific credibility also enhanced the believability of the theological and moral messages in the bestiaries.

⁶⁹ Richard H. Randall, Jr., *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Cloisters Bestiary* (New York City: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1960), 56.

⁷⁰ Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 37-38.

The popularity of the bestiary may be attributed to the way in which the medieval world perceived of animals and the interaction between God and the natural world. To the medieval mind, the animal kingdom was a means through which one could understand the human condition and place within the universe. Animals served as a reminder of the world around us and our divinely appointed role in that world. The realm of animals was ripe with opportunities for exploring humanity's role in creation as well as allusions to the Word of God and the salvation of mankind.⁷¹ The texts found within the medieval bestiary reflect this mindset.

The structure and content of European bestiaries would have been familiar to Sahagún's aides as bestiaries and other European encyclopedic texts made their way to New Spain with the mendicant friars.⁷² The presence of these texts at the Colegio de Santa Cruz indicates that Sahagún's aides, as former students at the Colegio would have been familiar with bestiaries or other encyclopedic texts and the ability of these documents to link animals to cultural and religious elements of a particular society. This familiarity likely influenced Sahagún's approach to the production of the *Florentine Codex*.

Aztec History and Cosmology

Book Eleven can only be examined in the context of the European bestiary tradition and as an aid to evangelization once a foundation of Aztec culture and heritage has been established. Without an understanding of Aztec history and cosmology the subtleties of indigenous culture expressed in Book Eleven would be lost. Moreover, the

⁷¹ Schraeder, "A Medieval Bestiary," 3.

⁷² Among the texts used at the Colegio de Santa Cruz were illustrated bestiaries and other related texts produced by the friars and students. Serge Gruzinski, *Painting the Conquest*, 189.

similarities between Aztec culture and Western European Christianity would be almost indiscernible. Thus, it is helpful to look briefly at the Aztecs and their society in order to determine how the entries in Book Eleven relate to indigenous cultural and religious concepts.

The Aztecs, who referred to themselves as the Mexica, had a migratory history.⁷³ They believed their ancestors had originated in Chicomoztoc, “the Place of the Seven Caves,” and the migrated to Aztlan, “the Place of the White Heron.”⁷⁴ While in Aztlan, the Aztec’s patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, appeared and told them to follow him to their place of destiny. From Aztlan, the Aztecs journeyed through Central America to the basin of Mexico where they lived a nomadic lifestyle for over a century.⁷⁵ Finally, the Aztecs arrived at Lake Texcoco, in what is today central Mexico. In the middle of the lake was their promised sign from Huitzilopochtli, an eagle, holding a serpent in its beak, perched atop a cactus, signaling their arrival at their promised land and the end of their migration. On this spot the Aztecs built their capital city, Tenochtitlan, from which they would eventually rule over a large empire that spanned Central America.

The Aztecs are perhaps most commonly known as a militaristic culture, partially because they maintained control over their empire, in part, by waging war on their neighbors and conquered subjects. This can be explained partly by their religious beliefs

⁷³ See Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000), 162-196.

⁷⁴ Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Codex Mendoza*, vol. IV “Translation,” (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 7.; and John Bierhorst, trans. *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1992), 24. See also: David Carrasco, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 6.

⁷⁵ Carrasco, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 6.

and practices. The Aztecs believed that the world was created through the self-sacrifice of their gods. For life on earth to continue, the Aztecs had to engage in various forms of sacrifice to appease and nourish the gods. Sacrifice thus became an extremely important aspect of their culture. Animals and plants were regularly sacrificed during ceremonies and festivals,⁷⁶ but it was auto- and heart sacrifice that were the most precious and powerful. So significant was human sacrifice to the Aztec conception of the cosmos and order that nearly every month of the Aztec eighteen-month calendar contained a festival or ceremony that involved blood or heart sacrifice.⁷⁷ The prevalence of sacrifice in Aztec religion also appears in Book Eleven, particularly in conjunction with birds. This topic will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

The Aztecs believed that all aspects of both their daily and religious lives were intimately linked to natural forces, a fact evident in Book Eleven. As historian David Carrasco notes in regards to Nezahualpilli, a Texcocan ruler from the late fifteenth century:

Like all Aztec rulers, he had a cosmological conviction, a deep belief that the nature and destiny of his own life and the lives of his people were intertwined with their many ‘*teteo*,’ the gods who inhabited the lush, close and faraway natural forces.⁷⁸

Animals and the natural world appeared in Aztec culture as aspects of deities, as well as markers of divine space and symbols of portent. The four cardinal directions were thought to be marked by four sacred trees, each containing a bird. Additionally, of the

⁷⁶ Bierhorst, *History and Mythology of the Aztecs*, 23.

⁷⁷ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, vol. 2, “The Ceremonies,” trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1951).

⁷⁸ Carrasco, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 2.

twenty different day signs of the ritual calendar half were animals.⁷⁹ Animals also served as omens and reminders of divine activity. Huitzilopochtli appeared as an eagle to alert the Aztecs to their arrival. The coyote, with a beckoning paw, was thought to be a bad omen by hunters, and anyone who caught a black skimmer took that as a sign that they were about to die. These and other animals such as the ibis, the dove, and *maquizcoatl*, a type of serpent, were perceived of as portents that indicated future events and, consequently the influence of unseen forces on human lives.⁸⁰ These and other connections between animals and Aztec cosmology are found throughout Book Eleven. Their allusions to elements of Aztec culture and religion reinforce Book Eleven's relationship to the European bestiary tradition that associates animals with Christianity. Thus, an understanding of Aztec cosmology enhances and supports an analysis of Book Eleven and its relationship to the European bestiary.

In spite of belonging to the second wave of Franciscans to arrive in New Spain, Sahagún lived out his life and career during a period of time that can still be called the colony's infancy. He worked closely with the indigenous communities and developed a deep respect for their culture and traditions. This respect, and his relationship with the native population, were a great help to Sahagún as he interviewed elders and recorded information for the creation of the *Florentine Codex*. Along with his indigenous aides, Sahagún compiled twelve volumes of information with the express purpose of aiding "the

⁷⁹ Jaques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (New York City: The Macmillan Co., 1962), 110. These signs include the crocodile, snake, deer, rabbit, dog, monkey, ocelot, eagle, and vulture.

⁸⁰ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11., 7, 48, 79. The ibis, if caught, was thought to indicate the death of the lords or a forthcoming war. The dove's song was thought to destroy one's grief. The *maquizcoatl*, if worn, was thought to indicate the wearer's health. If it remained peacefully on the wearer's wrist the person was about to die. If the serpent was restless then no one would die.

workers and the ministers of the Christian faith.”⁸¹ Within the documentation of indigenous flora and fauna found in Book Eleven of this series are numerous instances of indigenous cultural and religious beliefs. Through the European bestiary tradition, Sahagún was able to both respond to the growing interest in the natural world as well as promote the evangelization effort.

⁸¹ De Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, 21.

CHAPTER III

THE JAGUAR

Introduction

In Book Eleven of the *Florentine Codex*, fray Bernardino de Sahagún describes the *ocelutl*, or jaguar as “the ruler of the animals. It is cautious, wise, proud.”⁸² In the entry that follows for the *tlatlauhquj ocelutl*, or ruddy ocelot,⁸³ Sahagún expands greatly on the information found in the jaguar entry. While the majority of the *ocelutl* entry is devoted to the animal’s appearance, the entry for the *tlatlauhquj ocelutl* is primarily concerned with the animal’s interactions with humans and its significance for Mexica spirituality. One of the most enigmatic portions of the *tlatlauhquj ocelutl* entry is as follows: “the conjurors went about carrying its hide – that with them they did daring deeds, that because of them they were feared; that with them they were daring. Truly they went about restored.”⁸⁴ This distinction for the jaguar raises certain questions. How is one to understand the jaguar’s role in Aztec and later colonial society? How does the jaguar illuminate Sahagún’s motivations and intentions for Book Eleven and the *Florentine Codex* as a whole? This chapter examines the numerous manifestations of jaguar symbolism in Mesoamerica, from the animal’s role as a sign of royalty to its material and symbolic roles in warfare, with the purpose of highlighting how Book

⁸² Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, vol. 11, “Earthly Things,” trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1962), 1.

⁸³ It should be noted that Anderson and Dibble also translate *ocelutl* as ocelot, the entry commonly understood to represent the jaguar. In this context I will be utilizing the *ocelutl* as well as the *tlatlauhquj ocelutl* entries, both commonly understood to represent the jaguar, for my discussion of jaguar symbolism in general.

⁸⁴ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 3.

Eleven of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* bridges the gap between pre-Columbian animal symbolism and the European bestiary tradition for the purpose of evangelization.

Book Eleven is not the only place that the jaguar appears in the *Florentine Codex*. The jaguar is mentioned in such varied volumes as "The Gods" (volume one), "The Ceremonies" (volume two), and "The People" (volume ten).⁸⁵ The continued presence of the jaguar in this extensive text highlights a fundamental aspect of pre-Columbian society: the jaguar was pervasive and important. Dating back to at least the time of the Olmec, and in various guises, the jaguar has provided Mesoamerican cultures with a wealth of inspiration for art, folklore, and mythology.

Each period developed its own forms of representation that imbued the jaguar with meaning specific to that culture. Indeed, the sheer number of jaguar representation found in Mesoamerica indicates its important role in societal identification. As Nicholas J. Saunders notes, "the appearance and frequency of jaguar motifs, as with any animal motifs, is not arbitrary, but centered on the symbolic systems which we use the motifs metaphorically to express qualities regarded as significant for a given society."⁸⁶ Thus, comprehending the complexities of the pre-Columbian jaguar is useful and necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the jaguar as a symbol in Book Eleven. It can tell us how Sahagún would have perceived animal symbolism in Mesoamerica and consequently

⁸⁵ In volume one the jaguar is referenced as an attribute (i.e. ocelot skins) for the deities Quetzalcoatl (chapter five) and Yiacatecutli "Lord of the Vanguard" (chapter nineteen). The jaguar appears in volumes two and ten primarily in the context of jaguar warriors, an elite class of Mexica fighters.

⁸⁶ Nicholas J. Saunders, "Predators of Culture: Jaguar Symbolism and Mesoamerican Elites," *World Archaeology* 26/1 Archaeology of Pilgrimage (June, 1994), 104; as well as essays in *The Cult of the Feline: A Conference in Pre-Columbian Iconography*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Trustees for Harvard University, 1970) by Michael D. Coe and George Kubler.

how he was able to appropriate it, through the bestiary tradition, for the purposes of evangelization.

Mesoamerican Jaguar Symbolism

Jaguar symbolism in Mesoamerica has a rich and complex history. The various meanings derived from jaguar imagery encompass a wide range, from spiritual to martial associations. Despite these varied connotations the pre-Columbian understanding of jaguar symbolism was quite fluid. Jaguar imagery and its associations can be thought of as belonging to basic categories that overlap one another and span Mesoamerican history. These categories include associations with the underworld, connections to deities and spirituality, symbols of royalty, and associations with warriors. The lines between these categories are not distinct and any discussion of jaguar symbolism must take into account the multivalent meanings that comprise jaguar imagery.

The Underworld

Of the various connotations of the jaguar in indigenous culture one of the most enigmatic is the jaguar's association with the underworld. As a decidedly terrestrial being, the jaguar seems an odd choice for an indication of the underworld. However, a closer examination of jaguar behavior and habitat, as well as an understanding of the Mesoamerican conception of the underworld helps illuminate the appropriateness of this association.

Jaguars are often found in trees, but have a variable habitat from water to treetop. This mobility provides raw material for the jaguar's supernatural associations.⁸⁷ As both a creature of the earth and sky, the jaguar served as a metaphor for the transcendence

⁸⁷ Ibid., 67-68.

between the boundaries of this world and the underworld. This link to trees and the transcendence of boundaries can be better understood in light of the conception of the World Tree, or *axis mundi*. A prominent Mesoamerican belief, the World Tree was thought to rise out of the center of the earth. Its branches held up the heavens and its roots marked the layers of the underworld. Thus, all trees could be symbolically understood as representations of the World Tree. The jaguar's affinity for trees can then be interpreted as a connection to the World Tree and its cosmic associations.

While this connection between the earth and sky is significant for the jaguar's cosmic associations, the animal's affinity for water is even more pertinent to its underworld connections. The jaguar is one of the few felines who lives and is comfortable near water. They are prodigious swimmers and hunt everything aquatic from fish to crocodiles.⁸⁸ There is a strong conception among pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican cultures that the underworld was a watery realm.⁸⁹ Evidence for this can be found among the Olmec, as seen in La Venta mosaic mask 3, also known as Pavement 3 (figure 5), as well as in Aztec origin myths that recount the universe as being divided into the sky, earth, and sea (representing the heavens, earth, and underworld respectively) by various deities.⁹⁰ The greenstones of Pavement 3 found in La Venta, as well as the

⁸⁸ Elizabeth P. Benson, "The Lord, the Ruler: Jaguar Symbolism in the Americas," in *Icons of Power: Feline Symbolism in the Americas*, ed. Nicholas J. Saunders, 53-76 (London: Routledge, 1998), 67. See also: Michael D. Coe, "Olmec Jaguars and Olmec Kings," in *The Cult of the Feline: A Conference in Pre-Columbian Iconography*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson, 1-12 (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Trustees for Harvard University, 1970), 3.

⁸⁹ Patrizia Granziera, "Concept of the Garden in Pre-Hispanic Mexico," *Garden History* 29/2 (Winter, 2001), 199

⁹⁰ For a more in depth discussion of this understanding and a more detailed retelling of the various components of the origin stories see: Neil Baldwin, *Legends of the Plumed Serpent: Biography of a Mexican God* (New York City: PublicAffairs, 1998) and Diane Ferguson, *Tales of the Plumed Serpent: Aztec, Inca, and Mayan Myths* (London: Collins and Brown, 2000).

blue-green clay found around it have been interpreted as indications that the Olmec conceived of the underworld as a water environment.⁹¹ The jaguar submerging under water and returning is thus a strong metaphor for traversing between the earth and the underworld. In addition to its natural habitat, other physical features of the jaguar provided material for its underworld associations.⁹² The jaguar is easily recognizable by its distinctive spots, small black dots surrounded by black semi- or full circles that create a schematic floral motif. These spots were thought to represent the stars in the night sky. As a nocturnal hunter, the jaguar was further associated with the night, and thus, the afterlife and underworld.⁹³

Many Mesoamerican cultures, including the Olmec, Maya, and the Aztecs, believed that caves were mythical places of origin, living entities from which the first humans emerged. Additionally, they represented portals deep into the underworld, the heart of the earth.⁹⁴ Caves were believed to be entrances to the underworld for two reasons. First, they represent the penetration of the earth, going down into its depths. Second, caves were often associated with springs and subterranean water sources, linking them to the prevailing Mesoamerican belief that the underworld was a watery realm. In

⁹¹ F. Kent Reilly, III, "Mountains of Creation and Underworld Portals: The Ritual Function of Olmec Architecture at La Venta, Tabasco," in *Mesoamerica Architecture as a Cultural Symbol*, ed. Jeff Karl Kowalski, 14-39 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34.

⁹² It should be noted that the Olmec region, in what is today the state of Veracruz in Mexico, contains ample surface water to sustain a jaguar population and the animals are native to the region, see: Nicholas J. Saunders, *People of the Jaguar: The Living Spirit of Ancient America* (London: Souvenir Press, 1989), 44, 70.

⁹³ Granziera, "Concept of the Garden in Pre-Hispanic Mexico," 199-200; see also: David C. Grove, "Olmec Altars and Myths," *Archaeology*, 26/2 (April 1973), 134.

⁹⁴ Grove, "Olmec Altars and Myths," *Archaeology*, 26/2 (April, 1973), 134; see also: Whitney Davis, "So-Called Jaguar-Human Copulation Scenes in Olmec Art," *American Antiquity*, 43/3 (July, 1978), 455.

addition, caves were perceived of as monstrous, feline mouths, linking the jaguar to caves and their mythic associations, including the underworld.⁹⁵

Deities and Cosmic Order

Given the jaguar's close association with the underworld it should come as no surprise that it was also closely linked to deities and various elements of cosmic order and beliefs. Elizabeth P. Benson notes that the jaguar was frequently a symbol associated with gods and sacred structure and that it served prominently as an avatar or companion for deities, particularly powerful ones.⁹⁶ One of the best examples of the jaguar's association with deities is its connection to one of the supreme Aztec deities, Tezcatlipoca, "Smoking Mirror" (figure 6).

As an omniscient and omnipotent deity, Tezcatlipoca was the patron of Aztec royalty and figured prominently in important rituals, most notably the feast of *Toxcatl*, during which a captive warrior was transformed into a *teotl ixiptla*, or god image of Tezcatlipoca, and sacrificed as nourishment for the gods.⁹⁷ In the form of a jaguar Tezcatlipoca was known as Tepeyollotli and his symbolism was based on Aztec mythology and cosmic beliefs. He was a nocturnal deity, and his close connection with

⁹⁵ For a good discussion of the jaguar as a cave mouth in Olmec visual culture see David Grove's essay on La Venta Altar 4. Grove, "Olmec Altars and Myths," (previously cited in this chapter).

⁹⁶ Elizabeth P. Benson, "The Lord, the Ruler: Jaguar Symbolism in the Americas," 53. Additionally scholars such as Michael Coe have also posited that the Olmec "were-jaguar" was, in fact, a representation of an Olmec deity. As cited in George Metcalf and Kent V. Flannery, "An Olmec 'Were-Jaguar' from the Yucatan Peninsula," *American Antiquity*, 32/1 (January, 1967), 110.

⁹⁷ Berandino de Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, trans. Thelma D. Sullivan (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 58-59; see also: David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilizations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 118. See also: Olivier Guilhem, "The Hidden King and the Broken Flutes: Mythical and Royal Dimensions of the Feast of Tezcatlipoca in Toxcatl," in *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún*, ed. Eloise Quiñones Keber, 107-142 (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2002).

the jaguar made him the patron of Aztec sorcerers who utilized the animal's claws, hide, and heart in their ceremonies,⁹⁸ similar to the conjurors found in the *tlaltlauhquj ocelutl* entry in Book Eleven; they "went about carrying its hide – that with them they did daring deeds."⁹⁹

In addition to its association with Tezcatlipoca, the jaguar is also related to other elements of pre-Columbian religious life. Visually this association can be seen in two murals at Teotihuacan (figure 7). Figure 7 shows two highly decorated walls in the Palace of the Jaguars, a residential complex in Teotihuacan located next to the Plaza of the Moon. Here, two jaguars are shown, one on each wall, wearing elaborate feathered headdresses and pouring water into their mouths from decorated vases. These vases and the water they contain have been interpreted as referencing the water deity Tlaloc, thus connecting the jaguar with the deity. At the very least the animals' elaborate headdresses and their un-jaguar-like actions indicate that, for the people of Teotihuacan, the jaguar was a spiritual or supernatural animal. The Palace of the Jaguars' location, next to the Plaza of the Moon, a site of significant importance at Teotihuacan, suggests a level of importance placed on the jaguar. Additionally, as the Palace of the Jaguars was a residential complex the presence of these sacred associations indicates the prominence of the integration of the spiritual into their daily lives.

⁹⁸ Saunders, "Predators of Culture," 109; see also: David Carrasco, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 50.

⁹⁹ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 3.

Tezcatlipoca and jaguars are also associated with the *Leyenda de los Soles* (Legend of the Suns) and related Aztec creation stories.¹⁰⁰ In the age of the First Sun two gods, Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, and Tezcatlipoca, battled against each other. Through their battles the various suns were created and destroyed. Tezcatlipoca was the ruler of the First Sun, the age of the earth. During this time he was attacked by Quetzalcoatl with his staff and knocked into the sea. Tezcatlipoca rose from the sea in the form of a jaguar and travelled into the night sky marking it with his footprint, which, according to legend, can be seen today in the constellation Ursa Major. This mark alerted all of the jaguars on earth and they devoured all of the earth-dwellers. This ended the age of the First Sun, referred to as 4 Jaguar, named for the day it ended.¹⁰¹

In addition, the jaguar also played a role in the creation of the Fifth Sun, the age in which the Aztecs lived. According to the myth, the gods decided that one of them must sacrifice himself by throwing himself into a fire, out of which the sun would be created. When this happened the sun rose in the east, but it did not move across the sky. To solve this problem the gods decided they must all sacrifice themselves. All of the gods then threw themselves in the fire. The eagle and the jaguar followed them. After their sacrifice the sun began moving through the sky.¹⁰² The jaguar's connection to sacrifice is also evident in jaguar *cuahuaxicallis* (figure 8). These large, stone sculptures

¹⁰⁰ See Carmen Aguilera, *Flora y Fauna Mexicana: Mitología y tradiciones* (León: Editorial Evergraficas, S.A., 1985), 15-17.

¹⁰¹ Bierhorst, *History and Mythology of the Aztecs*, 142; see also: Ferguson, *Tales of the Plumed Serpent*, 30-31.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 144-145; see also: Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 40; and Ferguson, *Tales of the Plumed Serpent*, 52.

with basins in their backs were used as vessels for sacrificial hearts and blood. This reinforced the jaguar's role in the continuation of the cosmic order.

Royalty and Warriors

The jaguar's connection to indigenous cosmic beliefs and deities is also closely connected to kingship among pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican societies. The aforementioned Aztec deity, Tezcatlipoca, was closely affiliated with the Aztec *tlatoani*, or ruler.¹⁰³ In fact, it was the *tlatoani* who presided over Tezcatlipoca's main festival, *Toxcatl*.¹⁰⁴

The jaguar's association with royalty can be seen in numerous works from the Olmec to the Aztec. On the long side of La Venta Altar 4 (figure 9), seated inside a hollow niche, is a figure wearing an elaborate, aquiline headdress. This figure has been interpreted by scholars such as David Grove as a representation of an Olmec ruler.¹⁰⁵ The jaguar head carving surrounding the niche on La Venta Altar 4, perceived as a cave mouth and linked to the underworld, as well as the position of the Olmec ruler inside the jaguar's mouth, leaning slightly forward, indicates that the ruler is in a transitional state between the underworld and the earthly world. This suggests that the Olmec ruler served as a link between the living community and their ancestors, and that this role was intimately connected to the liminal aspects of the jaguar.

At Teotihuacan one can find further visual evidence of the jaguar's association with royalty. A fresco on a wall of the Tetitla apartment compound shows an image of a

¹⁰³ Olivier, "The Hidden King and the Broken Flutes," 114-126.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁵ Grove, "Olmec Altars and Myths," 130-131.

jaguar wearing a headdress and lying on top of a small table or altar-like structure (figure 10). This structure has been interpreted as a throne, and, in fact, Olmec, Maya, and Aztec rulers often decorated their thrones with jaguar hides and imagery.¹⁰⁶ In this image the jaguar is shown in the place of the ruler, or as a standard representation of a ruler, thus reinforcing the jaguar's connection to kingship.

The jaguar was also closely linked to Aztec royalty. In addition to the relationship between the jaguar, Tezcatlipoca, and the Aztec *tlatoani*, the feline was directly associated with the ruler in other ways. An attribute of Aztec rulership was the quality of fearlessness linked to eagles and jaguars,¹⁰⁷ and rulers would typically adorn themselves with jaguar capes and wear jaguar insignia into battle.¹⁰⁸

The rulers were not the only members of Aztec society who associated themselves with jaguars, specifically in the context of battle. The most elite and prestigious of Aztec warriors belonged to two orders known as eagles (*cuacuauhtin*) and jaguars (*ocelomeh*). While these two orders were often indistinguishable from one another, and the combined term *cuauhtolocelotl*, or eagle-jaguar,¹⁰⁹ was used to refer to them, they did wear distinctive eagle and jaguar costumes into battle (figures 11 and 12).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Granziera, "Concept of the Garden in Pre-Hispanic Mexico," 199.

¹⁰⁷ Frances Berdan, "Birds and Beasts in Nahuatl Thought," in *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic Mexico in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble*, eds. Eloise Quiñones Keber, et al., PG #s (Lancaster, CA: Labyrinthos, 1994), 154.

¹⁰⁸ Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, 204; see also: Saunders, "Predators of Culture," 108.

¹⁰⁹ Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 45. For a fuller understanding of Aztec warfare and the cult of the warrior in Aztec culture see Hassig's full text, as well as Patricia Anawalt, "Pageantry of Aztec Warfare as Reflected in Military Attire," in *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan*, eds. J. Kathryn Josserand and Karen Dakin, 113-150 (Oxford: BAR International Series 402 (i), 1988), and Nigel Davids, "The Mexica Military Hierarchy as Described by Sahagún," in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth Century Mexico*, eds. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson,

The jaguar's association with rulers and warriors is clear when one considers the jaguar's physical prowess as the most effective hunter in the Americas, free from all natural enemies except man. Coupled with its extensive spiritual and cosmic significance the jaguar's remarkable physical characteristics make it a prime animal to act as a symbol for royalty as well as the military.

The Jaguar in Book Eleven

Upon arrival in Mesoamerica the Spanish conquistadors and friars were confronted with centuries of jaguar symbolism that had produced layers of nuanced meanings for the various groups of indigenous people they encountered. These layers of meaning were not unlike those that the Europeans had formed of other big cats. The jaguar's royal and martial associations were remarkably similar to big cat imagery and symbolism in Europe, particularly the lion who was often found on royal coats of arms and knight's shields. Indeed, even the jaguar's spiritual associations and religious connotations had analogous forms in the European tradition, found primarily within bestiaries.

The typical bestiary contained entries for three types of big cats: the lion, the tiger and the panther. Each of these big cats is noted for its physical strength, speed, and agility, and is related, by the bestiary authors, to moral and Christian teaching. The associations with big cats would have been familiar to well-educated Spanish colonizers,

and Eloise Quiñones Keber, 161-168 (Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies the University at Albany State University of New York, 1988).

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Hill Boone, *The Codex Magliabechiano and the Lost Prototype of the Magliabechiano Group* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 173, 187; see also *Codex Mendoza*: found within the *Codex Mendoza* are also illustrations of the jaguar warrior costumes paid as tribute, Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Codex Mendoza*, vol. III "Facsimile" (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), folio 20r, 21v, 23v, 25r, 29r, 31r, 37r, and 54r.

and particularly the early friars who traveled to New Spain with the hopes of converting the indigenous people.

In Book Eleven, Sahagún utilizes his experience with the European bestiary tradition and pre-Columbian jaguar symbolism for a specific purpose. As a link between Mesoamerican and European animal symbolism, Book Eleven would have educated Sahagún's intended audience of European friars about indigenous iconography, as well as present the indigenous population in a way that was familiar to a European audience. By presenting the indigenous people in this format Sahagún linked them to European traditions, thus, in the eyes of the Europeans, humanized them and reinforced the likelihood of a successful missionary and colonial enterprise.

To understand how this was achieved it is useful to look at the jaguar entry in Book Eleven in comparison to typical bestiary entries for the lion. In Book Eleven the jaguar is described as follows:

It lives in forests and crags of water. It is noble, princely, lord, ruler of animals. It is cautious, wise and proud. It is reserved and well-kept... The conjurers went about carrying its hide...the hide of its forehead and of its chest, and its tail, its nose and its claws and its heart and its fangs, and its snout. They went about their tasks with them...with them they did daring deeds, because of them they were feared, that with them they were daring...Truly they went about restored, conjurers, guardians of tradition, debasers of truth.¹¹¹

A typical bestiary entry for the lion is as follows:

The lion is the mightiest of beasts he will stand up to anybody. He is the prince of all animals. The courage of these creatures is seated in their hearts. The lion has three principal characteristics. First, he loves to rove on the tops of mountains. That way the smell of approaching hunters reaches up to him, and he disguises his spoor with his tail. Second, when he sleeps he seems to keep his eyes open. Third, when a lioness gives birth to her cubs she brings them forth dead and lays them up lifeless for three days, until their father, coming on the third day, breathes

¹¹¹ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 1-3.

in their faces and inspirits them. Just so did the Father Omnipotent raise Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day.¹¹²

In Book Eleven and the bestiary characteristics of the animal are described. In both cases the felines are described as being princely, imbuing them with royal associations.

Conversely, the jaguar is described as being cautious and reserved, while the lion is described as mighty and courageous. The jaguar and the lion are then related to concepts of religion or spirituality for their respective cultures. In Book Eleven the jaguar is directly connected to the conjurers or priests. Due to the presence of the body of the jaguar the conjurers are made daring and are restored. This seems to be directly connected to the jaguar's associations with shamanism and his role in the cosmic order.

In scholarship shamanism is one of the earliest associations for the pre-Columbian jaguar.¹¹³ This is, perhaps, a result of the power and force displayed by the living animal, for the jaguar's hunting prowess and brute strength make it the most powerful land predator in Mesoamerica. The strength portrayed by the jaguar, in combination with the spiritual associations already described, led Nicholas J. Saunders to classify the jaguar as the "supernatural animal *par excellence*."¹¹⁴ As such the jaguar was a prime symbol for shamanism. Shamans served various roles in their respective societies. They acted as supernatural warriors, ritual experts, and intermediaries between the human and the spirit

¹¹² J. Schraeder, "A Medieval Bestiary," 12.

¹¹³ Saunders, "Architecture of Symbolism," 29. On a general level see: Francis F. Berdan, "Birds and Beasts in Nahua Thought," (previously cited in this thesis); David C. Grove, "Olmec Felines in Highland Central Mexico," in *The Cult of the Feline: A Conference on Pre-Columbian Iconography*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson, 153-164 (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Trustees for Harvard University, 1970); Charles Phillips, *The Aztec and Maya World: Everyday Life, Society, and Culture in Ancient Central America and Mexico* (Lorenz Books, 2005); Saunders, "Architecture of Symbolism," (previously cited in this chapter); Saunders, "Predators of Culture," (previously cited in this chapter); Saunders, *People of the Jaguar* (previously cited in this chapter).

¹¹⁴ Saunders, *People of the Jaguar*, 70.

world.¹¹⁵ The jaguar, as a representation of both physical and spiritual power, was an animal that symbolically performed the same functions as a shaman, thus becoming a perfect representation for shamanistic practices. The understanding of a shaman as a human being connected to the spirit world is usually understood through transmutation, also known as *nahuallism*, or the ability for a human to transform into an animal and vice versa. While in theory the shaman could transform into any animal there were particular animals most closely linked to shamanism, the jaguar being the most notable.¹¹⁶

The conjurers in Book Eleven seem to be representative of shamans as they are described carrying around the jaguar's skin, tail, claws, fangs, and snout. Additionally, the conjurers are described as using these items in their daily activities, and in doing so are restored, suggesting that the various parts of the jaguar have mystical properties that can only be unlocked by the conjurers. Aside from restoration, the presence of the jaguar allows the conjurers to do "daring deeds" which further suggests that the jaguar is linked to shamanism through their role as supernatural warriors.

The fact that the jaguar is linked to the restoration of the conjurers provides an interesting link to the bestiary lion who is described as restoring the life of its cubs. The resurrection of the lion cubs in the European bestiary is linked directly to the Resurrection of Christ and thus acts as an educational metaphor for a Christian reader. The lioness is described as giving birth to dead cubs, who remain so for three days. On the third day the lion breathes life into the cubs and raises them from the dead. The

¹¹⁵ Saunders, "Architecture of Symbolism," 30.

¹¹⁶ In "Birds and Beasts in Nahua Thought," (previously cited in this chapter), Frances Berdan notes the owl as another animal associated with shamanistic transformations (154). It is possible that the nocturnal associations of both of these creatures make them particularly suitable for shamanistic associations. Both creatures are also predators providing an additional layer of physical power and prowess that relate nicely to shamanistic practices.

bestiary entry then explicitly connects this to God the Father raising Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day after the Crucifixion. In Book Eleven the restoration of the conjurers is linked to shamanistic practices, but in light of the bestiary lion it could also be linked to the Resurrection as well. This multivalent reading of the text in Book Eleven illustrates James Lockhart's concept of double mistaken identity as the jaguar can be read as representing both indigenous and European conceptions of big cats.

A peculiar portion of the Book Eleven entry for the jaguar is found at the end. The conjurers are described as "debasers of truth." While the negative value judgments that this places on the conjurers seems counterproductive for Sahagún's intentions of promoting indigenous people, it may actually be a way in which Sahagún Christianized them. The information within Book Eleven was obtained through communications with indigenous elders and was intended to represent indigenous beliefs and systems that were in place prior to the conquest. By de-valuing the "conjurer" in Book Eleven, Sahagún and his aides and informants presented this degradation as an indigenous one, thus implying that the indigenous community also had distrust for shaman-like practices. It should not be ignored, however, that in light of this peculiarity, that Book Eleven also describes the conjurers as "guardians of tradition," perhaps speaking to the indigenous conception of duality, in which all things display positive and negative qualities. That being said, the final word on conjurers in Book Eleven is "debasers of truth," which lends a more negative tone.

Not only do the structure and textual content of Book Eleven mimic that of the European bestiary, their images do as well. Figures 1 and 13 are the images of the jaguar and lion that accompany the texts in Book Eleven and the thirteenth century Ashmole

bestiary respectively. The jaguar image from Book Eleven is extremely straightforward. The body of the animal is shown in profile, facing right and it is floating in a space within the text. This image seems to exist simply to show what the jaguar looks like. The jaguar is not shown performing any action that pertains to the text, nor is the seemingly significant portion concerning the conjurers illustrated. On the other hand, the image from the bestiary clearly illustrates portions of the text and seems to highlight crucial points of the narrative.

The bestiary image is divided into three sections, stacked vertically on top of one another. The top scene illustrates a lion, seeming for the purpose of identification. In the second scene a lioness, distinguishable from the male by her blue color, rests with three cubs. In the third and final scene the lion has returned and is aiding in the resurrection of his cubs. While the lion is not shown explicitly breathing life into the cubs, the scenes illustrated place further emphasis on the lion's role as a physical affirmation of Christ's Resurrection.

In general, both Book Eleven and the bestiary the images reinforce the text. In Book Eleven there is a stronger textual emphasis on the jaguar's physical appearance and this is reflected in the images. The bestiary images, on the other hand, illustrate the most crucial parts of the text: those that pertain to the allegory of Christ's Resurrection. Stylistically the images in Book Eleven represent Sahagún's methods and motives. Indigenous artists created the images in a semi-European style. They are thus, part European and part indigenous. Additionally, prior to the Conquest, indigenous writing existed as messages in pictures or glyphs. For the indigenous community images would

have been the means of communicating, however, in the *Florentine Codex*, the text is responsible for conveying meaning and the image becomes secondary.

Concluding Remarks

Mesoamerican jaguar imagery and symbolism underwent numerous incarnations between the time of the Olmec and the mid-sixteenth century. With each new conception the jaguar took on a new layer of meaning. These meanings became fundamentally entwined with pre-Columbian beliefs and religious life. This symbolism permeated throughout Mesoamerica, and during the colonial period European overtones were added creating an even more highly charged symbolism for the jaguar. As a prominent animal in pre-Columbian imagery and a counterpart to European big cats, the jaguar provided Sahagún and his aides an opportunity to relate important cultural information in Book Eleven of the *Florentine Codex*. The jaguar entry in Book Eleven imparted important information concerning indigenous spiritual practices, and through a comparison with the bestiary lion those spiritual practices can be viewed from a Christian context. Thus, a European audience, with knowledge of the bestiary tradition, could read Christian elements within the jaguar entry in Book Eleven. This links the indigenous subject to the European audience, and in turn strengthens the missionary and colonial effort.

CHAPTER IV

THE BIRD

Introduction

Out of the 264 images of animals in Book Eleven, 41 are illustrations of four-legged animals and 148 are birds.¹¹⁷ If these numbers are any indication, birds held particular importance for the indigenous people of New Spain. It is the aim of this chapter to examine avian imagery in Aztec culture to better understand its prominent role in Book Eleven of the *Florentine Codex*, and how Sahagún used avian symbolism to aid in his over-arching mission of evangelization.

Avian imagery and symbolism in Aztec society were ubiquitous. Nearly every facet of their culture, from trade to their perception of the cosmos, was influenced, shaped, or represented by birds. This chapter looks at avian imagery in pre-Conquest Aztec culture as divided into three categories: trade and tribute, royalty and warriors, and deities and cosmic beliefs. This discussion is followed by an examination of three prominent examples from Book Eleven, the eagle, the falcon, and the pelican, and their relationship to both pre-Conquest avian symbolism and the European bestiary tradition. This relationship helps explain how Sahagún was able to promote and aid the evangelization mission. By examining three entries from Book Eleven in the context of their bestiary counterparts one can gain a better understanding of how Sahagún incorporated Aztec animal symbolism in a format and style that would remind his intended audience, European friars, of the European bestiary tradition, and, in their eyes,

¹¹⁷ These numbers indicate a count of individual animals. In some images multiple animals are depicted. In these instances each animal was counted as one illustration.

humanizing the Aztecs.¹¹⁸ Specifically looking at avian entries in Book Eleven is important because, like the jaguar, birds were valuable elements of Nahuatl culture, for both their spiritual and material value. Additionally, the entries for the falcon and the pelican are accompanied by the most prominent examples of sequential narrative images in the volume. This alone indicates that birds were highly important to the Nahuatl and begs further examination.

Pre-Conquest Avian Symbolism

Trade and Tribute

At the height of its power the Aztec Empire oversaw an extensive trade network that moved goods across Mesoamerica. In addition to trade, goods also moved through the empire via a tribute system that demanded certain items from conquered areas, which allowed the Aztecs to acquire a vast array of goods. Conquered areas were required to pay a tribute based on the value and availability of items, as well as to what degree the Aztecs felt the region needed to be punished or oppressed.¹¹⁹ Through this tribute system the Aztecs demanded items ranging from gold and turquoise to animal skins and incense.¹²⁰ Of the items obtained through trade and tribute, feathers were among the

¹¹⁸ According to Franciscan missionary philosophy a person had to be of sound mind and consciously chose to become a Christian. For this reason it was extremely important that the missionaries and the Spanish colonizers believed that the indigenous people were capable of being Christian. Thus, Sahagún's efforts to humanize the indigenous population can also be thought of as a way to promote the probable success of the missionary effort. See: Boruchoff, "Sahagún and the Theology of Missionary Work," (previously cited in this thesis).

¹¹⁹ Berdan and Anawalt, *The Codex Mendoza* (previously cited in this thesis). Volume III presents documentation of all of the tribute information from various communities throughout the Aztec Empire. See also: Amy A. Peterson and A. Townsend Peterson, "Aztec Exploitation of Cloud Forests: Tribute of Liquidambar Resin and Quetzal Feathers," *Global Ecology and Biogeography Letters*, 2/5 (Sept., 1992), 167.

¹²⁰ Peterson, "Aztec Exploitation of Cloud Forests," 167.

most prominent.¹²¹ Feathers came to Tenochtitlan, from all over the empire, in both raw, un-worked forms, as well as manufactured good such as shields and warrior costumes. Historian Frances Berdan notes that while feathers and feather items were paid as tribute from all over the empire, only regions where the desired birds naturally occurred typically gave raw feathers.¹²² The featherwork items from other regions and provinces undoubtedly contained desirable feathers as well, since the feathers used in making costumes, shields, and other accoutrements were never randomly chosen. This suggests that they had to be of a certain quality and appropriate symbolic value,¹²³ and further implies that trade in feathers was active and vigorous outside of the tribute system, and that there was a profound importance placed on feathers and by association the birds that provided them.

Feathers used in manufacture and as tribute items came from various species. Unfortunately, the records concerning the species and quantity of feathers involved are not always extensive or specific. From the evidence available, Amy and A. Townsend Peterson have compiled information on the tribute system as it pertains to birds and feathers. The Petersons have identified the lovely continga, the golden eagle, and the resplendent quetzal as some of the most prominent species from which feather tributes were made.¹²⁴ Frances Berdan also notes the heron, hummingbird, and grackle as

¹²¹ Frances Berdan, "Circulation of Feathers in Mesoamerica," *Colloquios* (2006), 6-7.

¹²² Peterson, "Aztec Exploitation of Cloud Forests," 167.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 164

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

identifiable species utilized for tribute.¹²⁵ Of these species the resplendent quetzal is perhaps the most significant. While the Aztecs placed great value on feathers in general there was a definite hierarchy of importance, with the feathers of the quetzal situated at the top, evident in the use of quetzal feathers as ornamentation for ceremonial purposes.¹²⁶ Many of the ritual sacrifices that occurred throughout the Aztec year required sacrificial victims to be elaborately adorned, corresponding to the lavish accoutrements of the various deities, whom they represented.¹²⁷ For example, in Book One of the *Florentine Codex*, “The Gods,” Sahagún describes Paynal, “He Who Hasteneth,” and the deputy of Huitzilopochtli; Toci, “Our Grandmother;” and Tzapotlan tenan, “Goddess of Zapotlan,” as festooned in quetzal and other precious feathers. Paynal is said to wear a cape of precious feathers and a quetzal feather headdress. Toci is described as wearing a skirt of eagle feathers. Tzapotlan tenan is adorned with a paper crown covered in quetzal feathers.¹²⁸ Quetzalcoatl, “the Plumed Serpent,” is intimately linked to the quetzal by both his name and the “quetzal-pheasant” burden on his back.¹²⁹ As the primary source for ceremonial adornments, as well as attributes of specific deities,

¹²⁵ Frances Berdan, “Circulation of Feathers in Mesoamerica,” *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos: Coloquios* (2006), 7-9. Berdan also discusses the quantities of feathers given in tribute and has approximately calculated the amount of birds required to sustain tribute numbers. Combining the various species, Berdan estimates a minimum of about 1420 birds per annum were needed for tribute. It should be noted that sending feathers as tribute items did not necessitate killing the birds, and in some instances live birds were sent to Tenochtitlan.

¹²⁶ Peterson, “Aztec Exploitation of Cloud Forests,” 167.

¹²⁷ Alessandra Russo, “Plumes of Sacrifice: Transformations in Sixteenth-Century Mexican Feather Art,” *RES*, 42 (Autumn, 2002), 230.

¹²⁸ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 1, 2, 5.

¹²⁹ Quetzalcoatl will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5: The Serpent.

quetzals played a prominent role in Aztec religious life, further reinforcing the importance of avian imagery and symbolism in Aztec culture.¹³⁰

Royalty and Warriors

The importance of birds and their feathers extended beyond their commercial and ceremonial value. Birds came to be associated with particular demographics of society, particularly the elite and warrior classes, who adorned themselves with feathers on important occasions.¹³¹ In addition to utilizing feathers as markers of distinction both the elite and warrior classes developed associations with actual birds. For example, the eagle and the hummingbird represented warriors and martial prowess,¹³² an association discussed later in this chapter.

The Aztec elite also appreciated birds for their entertainment value. Numerous members of the elite built and maintained elaborate pleasure parks and zoos that included birds chosen for their acoustic and visual qualities.¹³³ Prior to the Conquest there were four types of pleasure parks that could be found in power centers throughout the Aztec

¹³⁰ The quetzal feathers are by far the most important in Aztec culture. Curiously, the quetzal bird does not seem to play a prominent role in terms of significant symbolism. In Book Eleven the quetzal is one of the few entries that is not elaborated in some way to suggest symbolic importance. This is somewhat perplexing when one considers that Quetzalcoatl, a prominent Aztec deity, is intimately associated with the quetzal's feathers. It is possible that the quetzal's feathers, as the most splendid in Mesoamerica, were an obvious choice for a feathered serpent deity and the connection goes no further. In regards to why the quetzal itself, unlike other species, was not ascribed greater spiritual significance it is possible that, as a tropical bird limited to a small portion of Mesoamerica (Peterson, "Aztec Exploitation of Cloud Forests," 167) it did not make a large impact as a physical embodiment of a deity or spiritual concept. The connection to or understanding of the quetzal would not have been as profound as a more common bird. The theories presented here are mere conjecture and a larger project is required to address the enigma of the quetzal as both a bird and symbol.

¹³¹ Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, 260-280; see also: Patricia Anawalt, "Pageantry of Aztec Warfare as Reflected in Military Attire," (previously cited in this thesis).

¹³² Berdan, "Circulation of Feathers in Mesoamerica," 4.

¹³³ Paul D. Haemig, "Aztec Emperor Auitzotl and the Great-Tailed Grackle," *Biotropica*, 10/1 (March, 1978), 14.

empire, such as Tenochtitlan: great imperial retreats, urban amusement parks (characterized by exotic animals and birds), horticultural gardens and wooded game reserves.¹³⁴ Of these four types, the urban amusement parks and the wooded game reserves contained animals and were associated with historically and/or spiritually significant sites.¹³⁵ This suggests that, for the Aztecs, animals and birds were intimately tied to mythic and sacred locations, or, in the very least, enhanced these locations in some way. In addition to this connection to the land, it seems that, beginning around 1000 CE, prior to the founding of Tenochtitlan in 1325, and lasting until the early sixteenth century, the Aztecs built urban amusement parks (lush garden spaces where elite members of society relaxed and mingled) to re-create Aztlan, their mythical place of origin.¹³⁶ As a recreation of Aztlan, urban pleasure gardens represented a location with both spiritual and historical significance for the Aztecs. The exotic birds, with their luxurious plumage, found in the zoos and aviaries within Aztec pleasure parks thus served to create an opulent, lush environment and enhance the spiritual identification of the location.

Additionally, urban pleasure gardens, and the animals and birds within them, represented a microcosm of the Aztec empire. Aztec rulers had birds and animals brought to Tenochtitlan from all over Mesoamerica, and those creatures that could not be brought were recreated in gold.¹³⁷ The time and effort it took to gather the exotic bird

¹³⁴ Susan Toby Evans, "Aztec Royal Pleasure Parks: Conspicuous Consumption and Elite Status Rivalry," *Studies in the History of Gardens and Landscapes: an International Quarterly*, 20/3 (July-Sept., 2000), 211.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 211-221.

¹³⁷ Haemig, "Aztec Emperor Auitzotl and the Great-Tailed Grackle," 14.

species and build the elaborate aviaries indicates that the Aztec rulers valued these birds highly. The exotic bird species found in royal pleasure gardens served multiple purposes for the emperor. On the one hand they recreated a spiritual place that linked him to the sacred identity of the Aztecs and his ancestors, reinforcing his position as ruler. On the other hand, these exotic birds symbolized the power and wealth of the emperor. They represented the vast reaches of his empire and his ability to control them.

Deities and Cosmic Order

Perhaps the most important avian associations in Aztec culture are those concerning deities and the Aztec conception of cosmic order. For the Aztecs, like other Mesoamerican cultures, nearly every aspect of their lives was connected to their worldview and perception of the cosmos.¹³⁸ Birds were also linked to cosmic order, and the Aztec pantheon and religious conceptions abound with avian associations. In Book One of the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún discusses the various deities that comprised the Aztec pantheon. Out of the twenty-two deities in this volume, fifteen are described as having some sort of avian attribute.¹³⁹ For example, in Chapter 4, Tlaloc, the rain god, is described as having a crown of heron feathers and in Chapter 15, the god Omacatl is described as wearing an eagle warrior's crown and dress.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 35.

¹³⁹ Book One deities and their feather attributes: Huitzilopochtli (ear-pendant of blue continga feathers); Paynal (cape of precious feathers and quetzal feather headdress); Tlaloc (crown of heron feathers); Quetzalcoatl (quetzal-pheasant burden); Toci (eagle feather skirt); Tzapotla tenan (paper crown with quetzal feathers); Ciuapipiltin (sandals adorned with feathers); Chalchiuhtli ycue (paper cap with quetzal feathers); Ixcoçauhqui (paper crown with blue continga and quetzal feathers); Macuilxochitl (crown of feathers, back piece with quetzal feathers); Omacatl (crown of feathers and an eagle warrior's costume); Ixtlilton (spray of flint knives with quetzal feathers and a burden with red arara feathers); Yiacatecutli (headband with quetzal feathers); and Tezcatzacatl (heron feather headdress).

¹⁴⁰ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 1, 2, 14.

Of all of the deities in the Aztec pantheon, the one with the greatest avian associations is Huitzilopochtli, “Hummingbird on the Left,” the patron deity of the Aztecs.¹⁴¹ He led them from their mythical place of origin, Aztlan, to the place where they would prosper and build a great empire, Tenochtitlan. Huitzilopochtli was a warrior god, leading the Aztecs to also associate the hummingbird with warriors. He was also thought to be the sun on its journey through the sky. The hummingbird also became a symbol for Huitzilopochtli’s associations with the sun, because during the winter these birds enter a torpid state. In the spring it is as if they come back to life, just as the sun is reborn each morning.¹⁴² His other avian avatar, the eagle, also emphasizes Huitzilopochtli’s role as a solar deity. This connection will be explored later in this chapter.

It is necessary to look at Huitzilopochtli in more detail because, as the Aztec patron deity he played an important role in their mytho-historical tradition as well as their religious life. Additionally, he appears in a prominent position within Book Eleven in conjunction with the falcon. Huitzilopochtli’s connection to avian symbolism extends to his origin story. In Book Three of the *Florentine Codex*, “The Origin of the Gods,” Sahagún retells the story of Huitzilopochtli’s birth. His mother, Coatlicue, was performing penance by sweeping on the mountain of Coatepec. As she was sweeping a ball of feathers descended from the sky. Coatlicue tucked the feathers at her waist, and

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁴² Granziera, “Concept of the Garden in Pre-Hispanic Mexico,” 198; see also: Aguilera, *Flora y Fauna Mexicana*, 49.

Huitzilopochtli was miraculously conceived.¹⁴³ Huitzilopochtli's miraculous birth, resulting from a ball of feathers, imbues feathers with otherworldly or divine qualities. Due to his origins, these qualities are shared by Huitzilopochtli, and reinforced by his various connections to avian imagery, such as the hummingbird and the eagle.

Avian symbolism was also connected to the Aztec conception of the cosmos. The Aztecs perceived of the universe as a horizontal disk divided into five sections, four quarters and the *axis mundi* at the center. The *axis mundi*, or vertical plane that bisected the horizontal plane, was comprised of various layers that made up the underworld, the earth, and the heavens. The *axis mundi* was also known as the World Tree. Additionally, the four quarters of the world were marked with four trees. On top of each tree was a bird: the east tree was a quetzal, the north a yellow macaw, the west a blue hummingbird, and the south a white sea bird.¹⁴⁴ In this perception of the universe birds act as markers of cosmic space, thus providing order for the cosmos. This understanding of the World Tree illustrates the close connection between cosmic existence and the terrestrial realm. For the Aztecs almost everything in the terrestrial realm, from rocks to birds, was an avenue for gods and spiritual powers to enter the world.¹⁴⁵

In addition to being connected to cosmic space, birds were also associated with time. The Aztecs had a complex notion of time and temporal order, involving a series of eighteen months with twenty days apiece and five unlucky days at the end of each year.

¹⁴³ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, vol. 3, "The Origin of the Gods," trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City, UT: The School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1950), 1-2.

¹⁴⁴ Granziera, "Concept of the Garden in Pre-Hispanic Mexico," 193.

¹⁴⁵ Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 47.

The Aztecs ordered time with day signs. These signs were used to regulate rites and rituals and to determine the fate of each person.¹⁴⁶ Of the thirteen volatiles that designated day signs, twelve were birds.¹⁴⁷

Birds were also closely linked to the Aztec conception of the soul. In her book, *The Natural History of the Soul in Mexico*, Jill Furst outlines the significant and complex ways in which birds contributed to the sacred life of the *yolia*, the animating force that comprised part of the Aztec conception of the soul,¹⁴⁸ was thought to become a bird after death. She cites the “bird of the heart,” or *Coereba flaveola*, hummingbirds, and other birds with precious feathers as specific vehicles for the departed souls.¹⁴⁹

It is important to note that the aforementioned avian conceptions of and value placed on birds and feathers continued into the colonial period. For example, featherwork, a prominent pre-Columbian art form, was celebrated during the colonial period, appropriated to create Christian scenes, such as the *Mass of St. Gregory* from 1550 (figure 14). The continuation of the importance of birds into the sixteenth century indicates that the cultural significance relayed in Book Eleven was still relevant for the indigenous community.

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 108.

¹⁴⁷ Berdan, “Birds and Beasts in Nahua Thought,” 154.

¹⁴⁸ The Aztecs perceived of the body as containing three elements that each served in a similar capacity as the Western conception of the soul: the *tonalli*, the *teyolia*, and the *ihiyotl*. Each of these Elements resided in a different part of the body and represented a specific type of life or animating force. See: Jill Leslie McKeever Furst, *The Natural History of the Soul in Ancient Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale and the University Press, 1995), 14-16, and Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 53.

¹⁴⁹ Furst, *The Natural History of the Soul*, 23-25. For a complete discussion of the soul and its connection to birds and natural history among the Nahuas see Furst 23-41.

Case Studies

The Eagle

As with those for the jaguar, the avian entries in Book Eleven are not an exact match to the European bestiary tradition, yet they are similarly organized. Both illustrate important cultural elements of their respective societies. By comparing analogous birds from Book Eleven and the bestiaries one can understand how Sahagûn and his indigenous aides conveyed Mesoamerican cultural beliefs in a Europeanized manner, and how that both aided the missionary effort as well as represented the culture of colonial New Spain.

One of the most prominent examples, for both pre-Columbian and European culture, is the eagle. In Book Eleven the eagle (*quauhlli*) entry is as follows:

The eagle is yellow-billed...the legs are yellow...the claws are curved, hooks. The eyes are like coals of fire...The eagle is fearless, a brave one; it can gaze into, it can face the sun. It is brave, daring, a screamer, a wing-beater.¹⁵⁰

In comparison, a typical European bestiary entry for an eagle reads:

The eagle is noted for its wonderful eyes which can see at a great distance... When an eagle reaches old age, its eyes begin to dim and its feathers to wilt...it flies aloft and straight into the sun. When its feathers are singed and its eyes burned from approaching the sun, the eagle dives into the cool fountain [three times] and there its eyes are washed clean, its feathers restored, and its youth regained.¹⁵¹

Like Book Eleven, the bestiary entry for the eagle relates similar behavior and associations. In the bestiary the eagle flies into the sun, then dives into a fountain and is rejuvenated. In this context the eagle is an allegorical representation of the Resurrection of Christ, as he becomes singed by the sun and is then rejuvenated by diving three times

¹⁵⁰ Sahagûn, *Historia general*, vol. 11., 40.

¹⁵¹ Randall, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Cloisters Bestiary*, 57; see also: T. J. Elliott, *A Medieval Bestiary* (Boston: Godine, 1971), 5-7. In this book Elliott presents the text from a Middle English bestiary, B. M. Arundel 292. This text provides a lengthy allegory relating the eagle to Christian teaching as well as the "Good Christian."

into a fountain, marking the three days Christ lay in the tomb. In both Book Eleven and the bestiary, the eagle is related to the sun and a prominent figure in each culture's religious beliefs. What is more, to anyone familiar with Aztec culture, the eagle in Book Eleven is easily connected to Huitzilopochtli through his solar associations. However, to a foreigner, like a young Franciscan missionary, the entry is highly reminiscent of the bestiary entry for the eagle. In this way the Aztec eagle, and all it stands for, becomes linked to the European eagle and all of its social and religious implications. This link created parallels between the indigenous population and the European friars by presenting an element of Aztec culture that could easily be interpreted in a European, Christian context. Thus, Christ and Huitzilopochtli are connected through the eagle and its solar associations.¹⁵²

In addition to his solar associations, Huitzilopochtli was also a warrior deity, brave and fearless like the eagle. The courageousness of the eagle in Book Eleven also alludes to an elite class of Aztec fighters known as eagle warriors,¹⁵³ as we have seen one of the two most prestigious classes of Aztec fighters. These eagle warriors were linked to an important element of the Aztec religious system: human sacrifice. Sacrificial victims for religious ceremonies were obtained through *xochiyaoyotl*, or "Flowery Wars," fought between the Aztecs and their neighbors for the sole purpose of gathering slaves for

¹⁵² For further reading on the solar associations of Christ and Huitzilopochtli and their importance for the spiritual conquest see: Louise M. Burkhart, "The Solar Christ in Nahuatl Doctrinal Texts of Early Colonial Mexico," *Ethnohistory* 35/3 (Summer, 1988), 234-256.

¹⁵³ See: Patricia Anawalt, "Pageantry of Aztec Warfare as Reflected in Military Attire," (previously cited in this thesis); David Carrasco, "Give Me Some Skin: The Charisma of the Aztec Warrior," *History of Religions*, 35/1, Mesoamerican Religions. A Special Issue on the Occasion of the Seventeenth International Congress of the History of Religions (Aug., 1995), 1-26; Nigel Davies, "The Mexica Military Hierarchy as Described by Sahagún," (previously cited in this thesis); and Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare* (previously cited in this thesis).

sacrifice.¹⁵⁴ The eagle and jaguar warriors were the primary combatants during the *xochiyaoyotl* and their positions and prestige were dependent on their ability to obtain captives for slavery and sacrifice.

In addition to their connection to the obtaining of sacrificial victims, eagles were linked to the act of human sacrifice. During the feast of *Tlacaxipeualiztli*, “The Feast of the Flaying Men,” in honor of Xipe Totec, “Our Lord of the Flayed One,” sacrificial victims were dressed as *teotl ixiplta*, living representations of the deity, and sacrificed on a gladiatorial stone by having their hearts torn from their chests. The blood from the victims poured into *cuauhuaxicallis*, “eagle vessels.” Their hearts, referred to as “precious-eagle-cactus-fruit,” were then raised in offering to the sun and placed into *cuauhuaxicallis*, some of which were sculpted to resemble eagles (figure 15).¹⁵⁵ This sacrificial ceremony underscores the eagle’s association with the sun and thus to Huitzilopochtli.

Corresponding images in Book Eleven and the bestiary highlight the comparison between the two. Figure 16 shows the image of the eagle from Book Eleven and figure 17 shows an image of an eagle from an English bestiary (MS Douce 88), housed at the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. The images are remarkably similar. Both birds are shown in a realistic manner with their heads in profile, facing towards the right, and their wings spread majestically. While there is no visual evidence to suggest that these images are meant to illustrate the texts exactly, the bestiary eagle could be interpreted as flying up towards the sun to be rejuvenated. The image from Book Eleven,

¹⁵⁴ Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control*, 119-121.

¹⁵⁵ Carrasco, “Give Me Some Skin,” 4-5.

however, does not seem to relate to any specific moment from the text. Instead, it appears to merely represent what the eagle looks like, as was the case with the jaguar.

What is engaging about the Book Eleven image of the eagle is its stylistic similarity to the bestiary eagle. In Book Eleven, the eagle is presented in a way akin to iconic European symbols, such as the Imperial Roman eagle and the Hapsburg heraldic eagle.¹⁵⁶ In Book Eleven, the eagle's stance and presence, for a European audience, evoke similar associations as the bestiary eagle. Thus this image achieves visually what the entry in Book Eleven achieves textually. The eagle from Book Eleven represents multiple identities and associations that can be interpreted differently by different audiences. For the indigenous aides who created the Book Eleven eagle it could have represented solely Huitzilopochtli and his various attributes. For the European missionary the eagle maintained Christian connotations, but more importantly, Christian connotations in an indigenous context. This combination of associations, like the ambiguity of the text, presented the Aztecs as possessing cultural values that were plausibly analogous to those possessed by the Europeans.

The Falcon

The eagle is a particularly telling example of Book Eleven's connection to the European Bestiary tradition. That said, one of the most enigmatic and challenging examples, the falcon, provides interesting evidence of the collaborative nature of Book Eleven's production and how Sahagún and his aides navigated more complex territory. The falcon in Book Eleven is particularly intriguing because it does not follow the model

¹⁵⁶ It should be noted that the eagle in Europe was also a potent symbol outside the religious sphere. Since the time of Imperial Rome the eagle served as an important attribute of royalty and imperial power throughout Europe.

of the eagle example in that it does not have an identical bestiary counterpart. Its closest equivalent is its relative, the hawk. In Book Eleven the entry for the falcon is as follows:

It is called a falcon. It has a yellow bill, its feathers are all dark grey. When it hunts [it does so] only with its talons. It at once clutches [the victim] by the breast; then it pierces its throat. It drinks its blood, consumes it all...It eats three times a day; first, before the sun has risen, second, at midday; third, when the sun has set. And this falcon gives life to Huitzilopochtli because, they said, these falcons, when they eat three times a day, as it were to give drink to the sun.¹⁵⁷

A typical bestiary describes the hawk in this way:

The hawk is a bird with a small body but of great courage. It is very swift in flight and is noted for the rapaciousness with which it seizes its prey in its talons. It is often called a thief and a ravisher.

The hawk trains its children to be capable thieves...It brings them no food, but beats them with its wings and forces them out into the world. The hawk does not wish them to be spoiled and to grow up worthless, for it dreads inactivity and debauchery. The young hawks must therefore grow strong and seek their own prey.¹⁵⁸

The falcon presents an enigma. Just as in the eagle example, the falcon and the hawk entries present physical characteristics or descriptions and then relate the bird and its behavior to a spiritual concept or moralizing message. In the bestiary the hawk is described as grabbing its prey with its talons, just as the falcon in Book Eleven is said to only hunt with its talons and grab its victims out of the sky. The hawk is then described as reviling debauchery and worthlessness, suggesting that the moral message conveyed is that the reader should follow its example and be swift, decisive, and self-reliant.

However, the hawk is also described as a thief, a characteristic that does not support a moral reading of the entry.

¹⁵⁷ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 43-44.

¹⁵⁸ Randall, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Cloisters Bestiary*, 51.

The falcon entry in Book Eleven is equally perplexing but for different reasons. The entry is relatively straightforward and, in fact, follows the bestiary pattern more closely than any other entry in Book Eleven. The falcon is physically described followed by distinct behavior; it eats only three specific times of day. This behavior is then connected to the passing of the sun and the falcon is then explicitly mentioned as the “nourisher” of Huitzilopochtli. This is intriguing because it is the only place in the chapters concerning fauna in Book Eleven that a deity is specifically mentioned.

The falcon in Book Eleven, moreover, is accompanied by the most puzzling and engaging images in the entire volume, three narrative illustrations (figures 2, 3, and 4). Unlike the eagle from Book Eleven, the images of the falcon correspond directly to the text. Figure 2 shows the falcon hunting and capturing its prey with its talons. Feathers fall from around the victim as the falcon “plucks out the birds feathers.”¹⁵⁹ Figure 3 shows the falcon’s habitat, “it nests in the openings of the crags.”¹⁶⁰ However, figure 4 is by far the most intriguing of the falcon illustrations. In this image the falcon is shown aloft, his wings spread behind him. On the ground is a tall male figure with clawed hands and feet and the head of a hummingbird, identifiable by its long, tapered beak. The figure’s right arm is raised and in his right hand is a stylized representation of a human heart. It is not clear whether the figure is handing the heart up to the falcon or the falcon has just given the heart to the figure, although, based on the text it seems that the falcon is presenting the heart to the figure. The male figure in figure 4 represents Huitzilopochtli, distinguished by his hummingbird head, being nourished by a human heart from the

¹⁵⁹ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 44.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

falcon. The text from the entry describes the falcon as giving life to Huitzilopochtli because they eat three times a day and the blood they consume gives “drink to the sun.”¹⁶¹ Figure 4 then, in conjunction with the text, can be interpreted as a metaphor for a prominent element of Aztec spiritual life: the human heart sacrifice that provided nourishment for the gods.¹⁶² In Book Eleven, Huitzilopochtli represents the sun through his identification as a solar deity. The falcon, by giving him a heart from presumably a sacrificial victim, feeds Huitzilopochtli/the sun, thereby maintaining the cosmos.

The falcon as an allegory for human sacrifice can be found in other portions of the texts and images as well. In Book Eleven the falcon’s prey are other birds. It is described as grabbing its victims out of the air, clutching them so they cannot fly and plucking out their feathers.¹⁶³ Even though falcons in nature have multiple food sources, most of them are ground dwellers, Book Eleven limits their diet to creatures they resemble. In this respect the falcon resembles the Aztec warriors who engaged in “flowery wars” against their fellow man for the purpose of capturing sacrificial victims.¹⁶⁴ The falcon’s consumption of just the blood of its prey also seems to be an allusion to the importance of a blood sacrifice in the Aztec religion.

The presence of Huitzilopochtli and a human heart in figure 4 is somewhat surprising. Huitzilopochtli is mentioned in the text, but the heart is not. Also, the representation of Huitzilopochtli is strange in that he is shown half human and half avian. In a volume primarily concerned with animals Sahagún and his aides could have shown a

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 185-190.

¹⁶³ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 44.

¹⁶⁴ Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 198-199.

hummingbird, a common avatar of Huitzilopochtli. Instead the choice was made to include a hybrid creature, neither fully man nor fully bird. In this image Huitzilopochtli has the head of a hummingbird, the talons of an eagle, and the body of a man. It is possible that they intended to represent a *teotl ixiptla*, or deity impersonator. If this is the case it may be that Sahagún, or the aides themselves, were attempting to undermine the existence or importance of Huitzilopochtli, by depicting him as only a human in costume.

Additionally, this peculiar entry, unlike that of the eagle, is not easily interpreted in the context of Sahagún's European audience. The explicit mention of Huitzilopochtli in the falcon entry and his appearance in the illustration indicate his importance, perhaps over all other Aztec deities as no other deity is explicitly mentioned in Book Eleven. This could have been done to underscore his importance for the European missionaries, so they could be particularly vigilant in their work. Furthermore, in this entry Huitzilopochtli is somewhat demonized in a European context. While the textual entry only notes that the falcon nourishes him, the illustration shows Huitzilopochtli receiving, from the falcon, a human heart, suggesting that he consumes it. This, coupled with his monster-like appearance, can be interpreted as a means of demonizing Huitzilopochtli. This was an effective strategy because as the patron deity of the Aztecs he was the friar's greatest barrier to conversion. It was important the he be deposed in order for Christianity to take hold in New Spain. In addition, as Book Eleven was produced, in part, by indigenous aides and interviews with native elders indicating a possible eruption of Nahua agency in the text and illustrations, the possible negative associations of Huitzilopochtli can be interpreted as originating from the indigenous people themselves, suggesting to the European friars that the indigenous communities may have had a

distrust of their own deities and that the time was ripe for conversion. In this way, the falcon entry, in conjunction with its illustrations, can be viewed as a means by which Book Eleven humanizes the Aztecs in the eyes of a European audience. This humanization provided the European missionary with evidence that the indigenous population was not without a soul to save, but instead wayward human beings to be brought into the fold.

The Pelican

The pelican serves as a final point of comparison between avian imagery in Book Eleven and the European bestiary. The pelican is a prominent bestiary animal with strong Christian associations, and the comparison further highlights Sahagún's intentions for the volume and the nature of the images found within the document.

In Book Eleven the pelican is described as follows:

It is the ruler, the leader of all water birds...the head of the pelican is rather large, black...its breast, its back are all white, its tail is not long...it lives in the middle of the water, and it is said that it is the heart of the lagoon...Also, it sinks people. To sink them it summons the wind, it sings, it cries out. It sinks them when they try to catch it...For this pelican, after four days, sits awaiting the Water Folk...For if they fail to catch it in four days by sunset...The Water Folk thus know it is a sign that they will die, for they who have failed to catch it have been tried...within is a precious green stone...if not...various precious feathers...or only a piece of charcoal, this becomes a sign that the hunter will die. But for him who finds...a precious greenstone or feather...he will prosper.¹⁶⁵

A typical bestiary entry for the pelican is as follows:

The pelican is a bird that lives near the fastness of the desert beside the Nile River. All the food that the pelican eats it cleanses in the water...

The pelican loves her children too much. When they grow large in the nest they flap their wings in the faces of their parents and peck at them. In pecking back the mother kills her children. For three days she mourns them. Then with her

¹⁶⁵ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 29-30.

beak she opens her own breast so that her life-blood can flow over the infants. This restores them to life.

The sacrifice of the pelican is similar to that of Christ, who created mankind in his own image and witnessed mankind's evil ways. For this reason he ascended to the cross, where his side was pierced, and the blood and water that flowed from it was for the salvation of mankind.¹⁶⁶

The accounts of both Book Eleven and the bestiary begin by presenting observed, physical characteristics. This description is then followed by an interpretation of behavior that ascribes to the pelican divine and/or spiritual associations. In the case of the bestiary, the pelican, who sacrifices her children and then brings them back to life after three days, is connected directly to the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This entry was a means of both educating the medieval audience about the sacrificial nature of Christ, as well as suggesting that the audience contemplate the presence of God and Christ in the natural world. This text, like the previous examples, shows how the medieval author and audience were able to conceptualize a world, real or imagined, in which everything was intimately connected to divine teaching and the Word of God.

There are a few key differences between the bestiary text and the text found in Book Eleven. First, in Book Eleven, there is a stronger emphasis on the physical description of the pelican. Second, there is a clearer connection between the pelican and humanity in Book Eleven. Here one can see a direct interplay between the Water Folk and the pelican. It is through this connection that the text in Book Eleven can be seen as analogous to the bestiary entry, for in this connection one can find similar divine associations. According to the text from Book Eleven the pelican seems to be related to omens and judgment. Its ability to call on the winds and destroy the Water Folk is highly

¹⁶⁶ Randall, *A Cloisters Bestiary*, 45.

reminiscent of an omnipotent being laying down a punishment. Like the bestiary pelican who kills her young for pecking at her, the pelican from Book Eleven destroys those that would harm it. In addition to its ability to control certain natural forces, the pelican in Book Eleven is also connected with soothsaying, a prominent aspect of Aztec spirituality. The Aztecs were avid readers of the stars and sought auspicious signs for everything from the naming of their children to waging war.¹⁶⁷ In Book Eleven, if the pelican is not caught by the end of the fourth day the hunters take this as a sign that they will die. If the pelican is caught the contents of its stomach indicate the fate of the hunters. Like the bestiary, the text in Book Eleven relates a mindset that connects animals with divine forces and a worldview in which the natural world is intimately connected to the spiritual world.

The images that accompany the pelican entries in Book Eleven and the bestiary reinforce the texts, as well as highlight crucial parts of the narrative. In Book Eleven three images, in a sequential narrative, accompany the pelican entry. This is significant for its rarity in Book Eleven. Only the falcon and the pelican are given this attention. In the case of the falcon it is likely that its connection to both Christ and Huitzilopochtli prompted Sahagún and his aides to give it more attention. For the pelican, its strong Christian connection and prominent role in bestiary texts may have spurred Sahagún to ensure that it received ample attention.

The first image (figure 18) is a straightforward rendering of the pelican standing in the water. This image combines a detached, taxonomic representation with minimal scenery. In the second image (figure 19), the pelican has been caught by the Water Folk.

¹⁶⁷ Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 108.

Two men hold the pelican down in their boat as they disembowel it to discover their fate. The boat is floating in the water, a small portion of land in the foreground and reeds in the background provide a foundation that cements this image more firmly in a realistic space. The final image (figure 20) that accompanies the pelican shows a group of Water Folk inside an architectural space, consuming portions of the pelican.

In the pelican image from the thirteenth century Ashmole bestiary (MS Ashmole 1511, figure 21), the image appears just above the text. It is divided into three scenes, each contained within a decorative border and illustrating one portion of the pelican narrative. The first scene shows the pelican being pecked by her young. In the second scene the pelican kills her young, and in the final scene the pelican pierces her breast and revives them. In this image the scenes relate to the symbolic elements of the pelican. In contrast, the first image from Book Eleven shows only what the pelican looks like. This correlates with Book Eleven's larger textual focus on the appearance of the pelican. Like the bestiary, the other pelican images in Book Eleven illustrate the portions of the text that have the most significant spiritual connection. In the second image the Water Folk are attempting to determine their fate, and in the final scene the Water Folk consume the pelican.

One of the most striking differences between the bestiary images and those from Book Eleven is the appearance of people.¹⁶⁸ In the bestiary the animals are the principle players. In Book Eleven there is a focus on the interaction between humanity and the animals, as seen in the example of the pelican. This distinction leads to a particular interpretation of the pelican in Book Eleven and its relationship to Aztec spirituality. In

¹⁶⁸ This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

the bestiary example the pelican, like God the Father, sacrifices its child, and like Jesus the Son of God, sacrifices itself for the sake of others. In Book Eleven the killing and eating of the pelican by the Water Folk is reminiscent of the ritual sacrifice and cannibalism practiced by the Aztecs. Aztec ritual cannibalism involved the consumption of small portions of sacrificial victims during ceremonial feasts.¹⁶⁹ The pelican in Book Eleven relates these concepts near the end of the entry: “And thus is the flesh of the pelican eaten: all the Water Folk assemble. They eat it only as a choice food; only a very little is offered one. For verily it is the heart of the water.”¹⁷⁰ This suggests that the killing of the pelican was particularly significant, more than would be the case for an average food source. In the text, all of the Water Folk gather together as if at a special banquet, and as is the case with ritual cannibalism, they eat only a small portion of the pelican.

Concluding Remarks

Birds in Book Eleven account for approximately fifty-six percent of the total animals depicted in the volume. In consideration of their indigenous importance this is not surprising. As will be shown with the serpent, the emphasis placed on avian images in Book Eleven allows for interpretations that illustrate the visual bilingualism found within the volume and how it may have served evangelization. In the aforementioned examples, Sahagún and his aides linked indigenous avian symbolism to European avian imagery, leaving a European audience with the impression that the Aztecs were culturally

¹⁶⁹ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 2, 69.

¹⁷⁰ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 30.

linked, in some way, to the Europeans, reinforcing the possibility that they could become true Catholics.

CHAPTER V

THE SERPENT

Introduction

It is of average size...only an arm...it is given the name *quetzalcoatl* because the flesh on its back is just like precious feathers...As soon as it appears, it bites one, it strikes one. And he whom it strikes dies suddenly...And in order to bite one, first it flies, quite high up; well up it goes; and it just descends upon whom or what it bites. Wherever it goes it flies. And when it bites one, it also dies at the same time, it is said because all at once its poison, its venom, is used up.¹⁷¹

Thus concludes the only mention of Quetzalcoatl in the entirety of Book Eleven of the *Florentine Codex*. The limited mention of Quetzalcoatl in this volume is somewhat surprising, as he has been described, much more recently, as “the most powerful figure in all the mythology of Mexico.”¹⁷² However, his short entry in Book Eleven fails to mention Quetzalcoatl as a deity at all and his only fantastical quality, his ability to fly, is understated. His entry is but one of thirty-six serpent entries found in Book Eleven, most containing descriptions that ascribe moral or religious significance to the various reptiles. What is perhaps most intriguing about these serpents is how they seem to violate Western European conceptions of snakes. In the previous chapters, Sahagún was able to utilize pre-Columbian conceptions of the animals and birds to not only humanize the Aztecs, but also apply Christianizing undertones to the symbolic meanings of their fauna. The serpent entries do not seem to follow this model. How then, is one to understand the serpent in the context of Book Eleven and its relationship to both pre-Columbian and European animal imagery and symbolism? To answer this question one must first look at the serpent in the pre-Columbian tradition. In other words, one must ask in what ways is

¹⁷¹ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 85.

¹⁷² Neil Baldwin, *Legends of the Plumed Serpent*, 9.

the potent sacred force that allows Book Eleven's Quetzalcoatl to fly prefigured in earlier serpent ideology?

The Serpent in Mesoamerica

Like representations of felines and birds, serpent imagery and meaning proliferated throughout Mesoamerica, both geographically and temporally. While the serpent itself holds specific mythic symbolism, it is unquestionably the feathered or plumed serpent, called Quetzalcoatl by Nahuatl speakers like the Aztecs, that claims the most widespread representations and cosmic significance. Dating as far back as the Olmec Era, the earliest image of a plumed serpent, La Venta Monument 19 (900-500 BCE)¹⁷³ (figure 22), shows the figure of an Olmec man in ceremonial dress with a large serpent rising above him. Atop the serpent's head are two stylized plumes. As Saburo Sugiyama notes, images like these "constitute a symbolic complex conflating mythologies as well as political histories."¹⁷⁴ To fully understand this complex it is useful to look at what the serpent, on its own, meant to pre-Columbian cultures, and how that symbolism, combined with avian imagery and Mesoamerican mytho-history, created the commanding figure of Quetzalcoatl we know today.

Among Mesoamerican cultures the serpent was generally associated with rain and blood, and thus was an important metaphor for fertility.¹⁷⁵ Reptilian associations with creation were also common. Numerous Mesoamerican societies conceived of the world

¹⁷³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷⁴ Saburo Sugiyama, "Teotihuacan as an Origin for Post-Classic Feathered Serpent Symbolism," in *Mesoamerica's Classical Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, eds. David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions, 117-143 (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 117.

¹⁷⁵ Patrizia Granziera, "Concept of the Garden in Pre-Hispanic Mexico," 198.

as existing on the back of a giant reptile floating in a primordial liquid. A serpent-dragon lived in the cosmic space, providing a vertical compliment to the horizontal earth bearer, when the gods divided his body into thirteen heavens, the earth, and nine levels of the underworld.¹⁷⁶ The serpent's close connection to the ground and earth, as well as the fact that many species live primarily in watery domains, made the serpent a prime metaphor for the surface of the earth and cosmic space.¹⁷⁷ This metaphor becomes even more apparent when one considers the appearance of serpents as they swim through the water, with only the upper portion of their backs visible, creating what could be interpreted as a small patch of earth floating through the water.

The serpent also appears in other settings in Mesoamerican cosmic stories. In one tale from the Mixtec, a Mesoamerican group separate from but geographically close to the Aztecs, the serpent plays a crucial role. According to the legend, "The Rabbit Who Fell From Heaven," as retold by Diane Ferguson in her book, *Tales of the Plumed Serpent: Aztec, Inca, and Mayan Myths*, the rabbit, unhappy with his size, approached the Creator to make him bigger. The creator agreed, if the rabbit could bring him the skins of a jaguar, a monkey, a lizard, and a snake. After acquiring the first three items, the rabbit approached a snake in the forest. The rabbit crept close to the snake and pretended to be asleep. When the snake prepared to strike, the rabbit pounced and bit the snake in his eyes. The rabbit then skinned the snake and brought the requested items to the Creator. The Creator, impressed with the rabbit's feats, grew afraid of what the rabbit could

¹⁷⁶ José López Portillo, *Quetzalcoatl in Myth, Archaeology and Art* (New York City: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1982), 27; see also: John Kaufman, "The Other Quetzalcoatl," in *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial Mexico in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble*, eds. Eloise Quiñones Keber, Susan Schroeder, and Frederick Hicks, 163-171 (Lancaster, CA: Labyrinthos, 1994), 168.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 198. See also: Aguilera, *Flora y Fauna Mexicana*, 73-74.

accomplish if he were larger and decided to break his promise. He threw the rabbit down to earth. By bracing his fall with his front feet the rabbit stubbed them and, according to the Mixtecs, this is why the rabbit has short front legs, and his eyes have never lost their surprised expression.¹⁷⁸ This Mixtec fable anthropomorphizes animals to explain certain characteristics of both man and animal. While this story focuses primarily on the rabbit and how he came to have short front legs and wide eyes, the presence of the snake illustrates one of the ways the serpent was incorporated into various aspects of Mesoamerican culture. Additionally, this story provides a pre-contact precedent for using animals to relay cultural and/or mytho-historical information, thus linking pre-contact traditions to Book Eleven and the *Florentine Codex*.

The serpent also appears in Mexica legend as one component of the signal (an eagle atop a cactus with a serpent in its beak) that the migrating Aztecs has reached their place of destiny, an island in Lake Texcoco.¹⁷⁹ In another account of the legend it is said that upon arriving at Lake Texcoco the Aztec priests entered the water for a ceremonial bath. During this bath, the *chalchiuhquacuilli*, or “priest of the precious stone,” proclaimed, “This is the place of the serpent’s anger, the humming of the water-mosquito, the flight of the wild duck, the murmur of the white rushes.”¹⁸⁰ While these accounts do not reveal any obvious or particular associations with the serpent they do convey the belief

¹⁷⁸ Ferguson, *Tales of the Plumed Serpent*, 102-104. See also: Andrés Henestrosa, *Los hombres que dispersó la danza* (Havana: Casa de las Americas, 1980).

¹⁷⁹ Wayne Elzey, “A Hill on a Land Surrounded by Water: An Aztec Story of Origin and Destiny,” *History of Religions*, 31/2 (Nov., 1991), 116-118. In this essay Elzey presents a detailed account of both the mythical and historical tales of the Aztecs’ settlement in Tenochtitlan as well as their time in power in Central Mexico. See also: Ferguson, *Tales of the Plumed Serpent*, 129-130.

¹⁸⁰ Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, 1-4.

that snakes were divine symbols charged with devotional significance. According to these accounts, in the eyes of the Aztecs, serpents acted as markers of sacred space.

In addition to being divine symbols, serpents were also intimately connected with numerous Aztec deities. According to Book One, “The Gods,” of the *Florentine Codex*, four deities are explicitly described as having serpentine associations. Huitzilopochtli is described as appearing in the guise of a fire serpent. The goddess Cihuacoatl’s name translates as “Snake Woman,” and the goddesses Chicomecoatl and Coatlicue, “Seven Snake” and “Snakes-her-Skirt,” respectively, are adorned with their namesake.¹⁸¹ While Sahagún’s Book One does not elaborate on the symbolic connection between these various deities and the serpent it seems clear that they were not arbitrarily attached to just any deity. In the Spanish text that accompanied Book One, Sahagún expands on the serpent guise of Huitzilopochtli. He claims that Huitzilopochtli was another Hercules who had for his emblem the head of a “ferocious dragon, which emitted fire from its mouth.”¹⁸² This description, though heavily influenced by Sahagún’s European background, indicates a strong connection between a powerful serpent and the god Huitzilopochtli, reinforcing his role as a supreme deity. Moreover, this example illustrates how Sahagún linked pre-contact traditions to Western culture, by applying a Greco-Roman identity and fantastical European imagery to an Aztec deity, both of which emphasize his importance to Aztec culture while at the same time diminishing his legitimacy to a Catholic audience. This connection suggests a willingness on the part of Sahagún, and perhaps his aides as well, to find and emphasize parallels in indigenous and

¹⁸¹ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 1, 15.

¹⁸² As quoted in: Carols de Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, 25.

European culture. The presence of connections like these elsewhere in the *Florentine Codex* reinforces the cultural similarities found in Book Eleven.

In addition to Huitzilopochtli, the goddess Coatlicue is intimately tied to serpent imagery. Her connection to the serpent is apparent in both visual representations of her and myths in which she plays a key role. One of the most iconic sculptures associated with the Aztecs is the monolithic Coatlicue statue from the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City (figure 23).¹⁸³ This sculpture, well over life-size, is characterized by the two large serpents that join to create her head and face. She wears a skirt comprised of interwoven snakes and serpents rise out of her arms and descend between her legs. This monstrous representation of Coatlicue, as one of the most well recognized examples of Aztec visual culture, places serpents in the forefront of contemporary associations with the Aztecs as well as indicates the strong, divine associations ascribed to the pre-Columbian serpent.¹⁸⁴

Coatlicue also appears in the origin story of Huitzilopochtli. In Book Three, “The Origin of the Gods,” of the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún tells how Coatlicue was sweeping on the mountain of Coatepec, “Serpent Mountain,” when a ball of feathers fell from the sky. She placed the feathers at her waist and miraculously conceived Huitzilopochtli. Angered by their mother’s conception, Coatlicue’s daughter, Coyolxauhqui and her 400 brothers, the centzonuitznaua, decided to attack Coatlicue. As they approached

¹⁸³ For further reading on the Coatlicue sculpture see: Cecelia Klein, “A New Interpretation of the Aztec Statue Called Coatlicue, ‘Snakes-Her-Skirt’,” *Ethnohistory*, 55/2 (Spring, 2008).

¹⁸⁴ Chicomecoatl and Coatlicue were earth goddess, making the serpent, a creature closely linked to the earth’s surface, an appropriate attribute. Chicomecoatl was also the most prominent maize goddess (Granziera, “Concept of the Garden in Pre-Hispanic Mexico, 199). It is possible that the serpent’s periodic skin shedding was reminiscent of corn husks and their removal, reinforcing the link between Chicomecoatl and the serpent.

Huitzilopochtli sprang from Coatlicue and killed the centzonuitznaua and dismembered Coyolxauhqui, and threw the parts of her body down the side of Coatepec.¹⁸⁵

The sanctity of Coatepec, “Serpent Mountain,” in the mytho-history of the Aztecs transfers sacred significance to the serpent as well. The serpent becomes a visual reminder of the location of important, divine events.¹⁸⁶ The serpent, as a signifier of these events, was so important that the Aztecs utilized serpent imagery on their most important structure, the Templo Mayor, in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan. The Templo Mayor (figure 24) was a twin pyramid with a double staircase that housed the temples of Tlaloc, the storm god, and Huitzilopochtli. The Huitzilopochtli side of the Templo Mayor was a simulacrum of Coatepec. On the top of the right side was a temple dedicated to the Aztec’s patron deity and the staircase rising upwards toward the temple was lined with serpent balustrades and base (figure 25).¹⁸⁷ The serpent balustrades on the Templo Mayor not only reinforce its association with the mythic Coatepec, they also enhance the symbolic associations with Tlaloc. As a creature that both resembles and lives in flowing water, the serpent’s aqueous associations make him an appropriate

¹⁸⁵Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 3, 1-6.

¹⁸⁶ Saburo Sugiyama also notes that representations of feathered serpents appear at sacred places and in many ways define sacred space at many Mesoamerican sites. Sugiyama, “Teotihuacan as an Origin for Post-Classic Feathered Serpent Symbolism,” 119.

¹⁸⁷ For a fuller discussion of the ways the Templo Mayor represents Coatepec and aids in the symbolic recreation of the Huitzilopochtli origin story see: Eduard Matos Moctezuma, “Symbolism of the Templo Mayor,” in *The Aztec Templo Mayor: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 8th and 9th October 1983*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone, 185-209 (Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, 1987); see also: Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, “From Teotihuacan to Tenochtitlan: Their Great Temples,” in *Mesoamerica’s Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, eds. David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions, 185-194 (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 188-189.

symbol for the storm god. In fact, he often holds a snake that symbolizes lightening and rainstorms.¹⁸⁸

The most well known pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican deity associated with the serpent is Quetzalcoatl. In Book One of the *Florentine Codex*, Quetzalcoatl is described as “the wind, the guide and road-sweeper of the rain gods...and when...it became dark and the wind blew in many directions, and it thundered; then it was said: ‘[Quetzalcoatl] is wrathful.’”¹⁸⁹ This description links Quetzalcoatl to serpent imagery through his role as a storm god, similar to Tlaloc. However, Quetzalcoatl’s strongest serpentine associations result from his name and imagery. Quetzalcoatl, from the Nahuatl words *quetzal*, a highly prized, tropical bird, and *coatl*, serpent, literally translates to feathered or plumed serpent. Described by various scholars as representing spirit and matter, political and military power, fertility, and Venus as the Morning Star, the feathered serpent became a powerful image in various Mesoamerican cultures.¹⁹⁰

One of the feathered serpent’s most prominent appearances comes from Teotihuacan, a site in central Mexico named by the Aztecs who believed it to be the mythical location where the gods originated. The Feathered Serpent Pyramid at Teotihuacan (figure 26), in addition to holding great significance for the Aztecs, is also

¹⁸⁸ Granziera, “Concept of the Garden in Pre-Hispanic Mexico,” 199.

¹⁸⁹ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 1, 3.

¹⁹⁰ See: Alfredo Lopez Austin and Leonardo Lopez Lujan, “The Myth and Reality of Zuyua: the Feathered Serpent and Mesoamerican Transformations from the Classic to the Post-Classic,” in *Mesoamerica’s Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, eds David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions, 21-84 (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 24; Portillo, *Quetzalcoatl in Myth, Archaeology, and Art*, 11; Sugiyama, “Teotihuacan as an Origin for Post-Classic Feathered Serpent Symbolism,” 119-122; and Karl Taube, “The Turquoise Hearth: Fire, Self-Sacrifice, and the Central Mexican Cult of War,” in *Mesoamerica’s Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, eds. David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions, 269-340 (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 270.

thought to be related to the War Serpent. According to Karl Taube the sculptures on this structure have serpentine, feline, and butterfly traits that he links to Mesoamerican warfare.¹⁹¹

Additionally, Quetzalcoatl is among the creator deities of the Aztec pantheon. In conjunction with Ometeotl, “The Giver of Life,” and Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, and Xipe Totec, Quetzalcoatl was responsible for creating the world and everything living on it, as well as the sacred calendar and fire.¹⁹² According to the *Leyenda de los Soles*, the First Sun was called 4 Jaguar and it ended when Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca battled for control and jaguars descended on the people and devoured them.¹⁹³ The Second Sun, 4 Wind, was ruled by Quetzalcoatl until his defeat by Tezcatlipoca. The Third Sun, 4 Rain, was ruled by Tlaloc until Quetzalcoatl brought forth rains of fire and blackened the sky.¹⁹⁴ The Fifth Sun, 4 Movement, unlike the previous suns, arose out of divine cooperation. Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca transformed into great trees that kept the sky from falling and supported the heavens.¹⁹⁵ Additionally, the gods decided that one of their numbers must be sacrificed in order to create the sun. After the sacrifice the sun rose, but it did not move through the sky as it

¹⁹¹ Taube, “The Turquoise Hearth,” 281-282. Taube also goes on to say that the War Serpent could actually be interpreted as a supernatural caterpillar that perfectly embodies the theme of transformation and rebirth that are a central theme in the Mesoamerican cult of war (285).

¹⁹² Ferguson, *Tale of the Plumed Serpent*, 30.

¹⁹³ Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 37.

¹⁹⁴ Ferguson, *Tale of the Plumed Serpent*, 30-32. See also: Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 37-39.

¹⁹⁵ Doris Heyden, “Trees and Wood in Life and Death,” in *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial Mexico in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble*, eds. Eloise Quiñones Keber, Susan Schroeder, and Frederick Hicks, 143-152 (Lancaster, CA: Labyrinthos, 1994), 143.

should. To remedy this problem the gods decided that they must all be sacrificed to revive the sun and start it on its cycle.¹⁹⁶

While Quetzalcoatl's role in the creation of the Fifth Sun does not seem to mark him as particular among the various deities, in Aztec mythology his role is much more nuanced. According to Aztec mytho-history, a god of wind, Quetzalcoatl, lived near Tollan. There he built four palaces in different colors, each one marking a cardinal direction, and filled them with flowers, feathers, and mosaics. It is in this mythical Kingdom at Tula, one the Aztecs viewed as the archetypal kingdom,¹⁹⁷ that Quetzalcoatl molded the first human beings in his own image.¹⁹⁸ According to Aztec legend, at the end of the Fourth Sun, Quetzalcoatl descended into the underworld to gather the bones of the ancestors from the previous Suns. At the ninth level of the underworld, Mictlan, Quetzalcoatl encountered Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl, the Lord and Lady of the Underworld. In order to obtain the bones, the rulers of Mictlan tested Quetzalcoatl. When he passed the test he was allowed to gather the bones. As he was leaving Mictlan, he was startled by a flock of quail and fell, dropping and breaking all the bones. He reached Tomoanchan, an Aztec paradise, where he gave the bones to the Serpent Woman, Cihuacoatl. She ground them into a paste, poured blood over them, and humanity was created.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 39-40.

¹⁹⁷ Baldwin, *Legends of the Plumed Serpent*, 31.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁹⁹ Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 48-50.

The Serpent in Book Eleven

Sahagún and his aides in Book Eleven, embedded in more seemingly naturalistic descriptions, evoked the myriad cosmic qualities of the serpent in Mesoamerica.

Amongst the thirty-six serpent entries in “Earthly Things,” of the *Florentine Codex* can be found associations with omens, fertility, royalty, and even destruction and ruin. The first serpent entry, *acoatl*, *tlilcoatl* recounts the seductive nature of the serpent.

By it, he whom it hunts is dulled; he becomes just as if drunk. Then it attracts him with its breath. The same man goes toward the poisonous [serpent] – he goes violently dragged, struggling from side to side like a drunkard. He enters the mouth of the poisonous [serpent]. It carries him off; it drowns him.²⁰⁰

In this entry Sahagún has described a serpent not unlike the deceptive serpent found in the Book of Genesis from the Old Testament:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say you shall not eat from any tree in the Garden?” The woman said...“God said, ‘you shall not eat the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “you will not die...you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”...[the Lord came and said to the woman] “What is it that you have done?” The woman said, “the serpent tricked me.”...the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you among animals and wild creatures.”²⁰¹

In both of these texts, the serpent lures the unsuspecting human to its demise. While the negative associations found in the *acoatl* entry have pre-Columbian origins, they likely were not restricted to the negative connotations that are most obvious to the Western reader. Indigenous worldview was marked by the concept of duality; nothing in the

²⁰⁰ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 71.

²⁰¹ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1993), 9, Genesis 3:1-14.

universe was all or mostly one thing or another.²⁰² Sahagún, however, most assuredly recognized the connection between *acoatl* and the Biblical serpent. *Acoatl*, as presented by Sahagún, not only has parallels to the serpent from Genesis, and through these parallels, connects the indigenous people to Western, Christian traditions. By presenting the indigenous serpent as diabolical Sahagún lends a Christianizing element to Book Eleven's text. This element brings the indigenous person culturally closer, in perception, to the European friar, thus providing him with evidence supporting the possible continued success of conversion.

Omens

Possible Christian overtones, so suggestive in the *acoatl* entry, are not as apparent in subsequent entries for snakes in Sahagún's text. Later entries are couched in more positive or neutral language than that of *acoatl*. For example, *maquizcoatl*, the "bracelet snake," was regarded as a "serpent of omen,"²⁰³ foretelling both positive and negative outcomes.

Then one who saw it made an armlet of it for himself. It was said that if he were about to die it would very peaceably be content on his arm...But it is said that no one would die when he made of it an armlet for himself [and] it was not content on his arm; it was not enough, as if it were not long [enough]; it is a little serpent. So they called it a serpent of omen...Hence, those who go stirring up trouble, who gossip, are named *maquizcoatl*; because it is as if he spoke falsely, was a tale-bearer, like an evil omen.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 44. Carrasco notes that a major pattern of the Aztec universe included cosmic duality, indicated, in part, by pairs of gods. Also, López Austin notes that opposites are conceived as polar and complementary pairs (Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, trans. Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 52); see also, Serge Gruzinski, *Painting the Conquest*, 61-63.

²⁰³ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 79.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

This entry is a prime example of the indigenous concept of duality. *Maquizcoatl* serves as an omen for both the life and death of man. However, the decidedly contrary undertones of the *maquizcoatl* entry do indicate that there may have been an underlying attempt to verbally paint the indigenous population in a favorable way for Sahagún's intended audience. While *maquizcoatl* is related to omens or fortune telling, something European audiences would have viewed as distasteful or diabolical, he is also likened to gossipers who are described negatively and lacking morals. In this way, *maquizcoatl* maintains both negative and positive associations, indicating that the indigenous population may have also looked at *maquizcoatl* negatively. He is also described somewhat more fantastically (from a strictly naturalistic standpoint) as follows: "This snake has a head at each end, and also a mouth at each end."²⁰⁵ In addition, this particular serpent also has distinct pre-Columbian cosmic associations. Particularly connected to the Preclassic and Classic Maya, the two-headed serpent often indicated kingly rank and appeared on headdresses, belts, and the ceremonial double-headed serpent bar.²⁰⁶ The two-headed serpent, thought to arch over the earth, was also thought to be a passageway for planets and stars.²⁰⁷

Fertility

The serpent's connection to fertility is easily seen in the entry for *maçacoatl*.

"They who are given much to women, in order to produce semen, just scrape and drink it

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Precolumbian Flora and Fauna: Continuity of Plant and Animal Themes in Mesoamerican Art* (San Diego, CA: Mingei International Museum Exhibition Documentary Publication, 1990), 36.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

[in water]...He who drinks too much continually erects his virile member and constantly ejects his semen, and dies of lasciviousness."²⁰⁸ In this entry the serpent is used to enhance male virility, thus reinforcing its associations with fertility. However, the text also chastises those who would use the serpent too much. In this way Sahagún has incorporated pre-Columbian serpentine beliefs into his admonishment of perceived indigenous promiscuity. Sixteenth century mendicant orders in New Spain were highly concerned with perceived vices amongst the indigenous population, including drunkenness and lasciviousness. By admonishing promiscuity in this text the disapproval comes from the indigenous population as well as Sahagún. On one level, Book Eleven represents a negative, indigenous perception of promiscuity as it is recorded in a text documenting Aztec culture and beliefs. On the other hand, Sahagún, as overseer of the project, would have had influence over the material included. This requires one to interpret meaning through an understanding of Sahagún as well as an understanding of Aztec culture.

Royalty

In another entry in Book Eleven, the serpent is connected directly to royalty. The entry for *coapetlatl* states:

Serpents are assembled...into a reed mat, on which is a serpent seat...Whoever sees it, if ingenious, if advised, has no fear; he quickly seats himself on it...He rides upon the seat; he goes making the serpent seat his seat...When he did this two things came to mind. First, it is said it was his omen that already he would die or something dangerous would befall him. Second, it was said that he would then merit, then attain lordship, rulership as a reward. It was said he would be a lord, he would become a ruler; this is because he had quickly seated himself upon the serpent mat.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 80.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

In this entry, the snake mat serves as a marker of royalty and it has a particular connection to rulership through Aztec legend. In a passage quoted by David Carrasco in *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, the ruler is described as being deserving of the mat, or throne, linking the concept of the mat to royal lineage.²¹⁰ Additionally, this same passage credits the Toltec god/ruler, Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl, with breathing life into the line of rulers.²¹¹ Moreover, this figure encompasses the major elements of the Quetzalcoatl myth. He is both a creator deity and the paragon of leadership. As a deity he is Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, but as the ruler of the Toltecs he is Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl. According to one sixteenth century account (*Relación de la genealogia y linaje de los señores que han señoreado esta tierra de la Nueva España, despues que le acuerdan haber gentes en estas partes* in the *Libro de oro y tesoro indice*) Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl was a kind, benevolent ruler who allowed no human sacrifice during his reign. The gods Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca demanded this sacrifice and when Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl refused he was forced to flee Tollan. His people so loved him that they followed him into exile and settled in Tlapallan.²¹² From there Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl is said to have disappeared over the water, promising his people he would return.²¹³ This mytho-historical account links serpents to royalty through the identification of Quetzalcoatl. As the leader of Tollan, Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl

²¹⁰ Cited in Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 132.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² H. B. Nicholson, *Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl: The Once and Future Lord of the Toltecs* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2001), 9-10.

²¹³ David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 30.

encompassed “everything good and wise in this world,” making him a model for later Aztec rulers.²¹⁴

In addition, Quetzalcoatl was a divine king closely linked to the priesthood. According to an Aztec legend recounted by Neil Baldwin in his book, *Legends of the Plumed Serpent: Biography of a Mexican God*, Quetzalcoatl is described as being extremely pious.

He pierced his earlobes, calves, tongue, and penis with long, thin reeds; pulled knotted string through the wounds, drawing blood; and then dripping it onto leaves of lime coated paper burned with copal in tribute to the life-force.²¹⁵

In this quote Quetzalcoatl is described as practicing auto-sacrifice or blood letting, a sacrifice to the gods that was required of all later Aztec rulers. Baldwin goes on to describe how the priests would imitate this practice.²¹⁶ Quetzalcoatl’s divinity is also closely linked to the city of Cholollan, today known as Cholula. Here a temple was erected to Quetzalcoatl and he was worshipped as a creator deity, a wind god, and the Morning Star.²¹⁷ Cholollan, because of its strong associations with Quetzalcoatl, was an important pilgrimage site and linked to Tollan, the city ruled by Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl. As an important pilgrimage destination of the pre-contact period, people traveled from all over the Valley of Mexico to Cholollan to pay homage to Quetzalcoatl, suggesting his universal importance throughout Mesoamerica.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Baldwin, *Legends of the Plumed Serpent*, 34.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 63-103

²¹⁷ Ibid., 31-32.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 137-138.

The numerous and powerful associations with Quetzalcoatl make his entry in Book Eleven perplexing. As previously shown, Quetzalcoatl is described as destructive. He is the bringer of death, he strikes quickly and his victims die suddenly. Also, when Quetzalcoatl strikes and kills a victim, Quetzalcoatl dies as well.²¹⁹ This unfavorable description of Quetzalcoatl is not unique to Book Eleven. In Book One of the *Florentine Codex*, Quetzalcoatl is described as a wind god, one who prepared the way for the rain gods. However, at the end of the first paragraph of his entry in Book One he is described as destructive and wrathful.²²⁰ In comparison, Tlaloc, a storm god in a related category to Quetzalcoatl, is described in Book One as life-giving. “He scattered the rain like seed...He caused to sprout, to blossom, to leaf out, to bloom, to ripen, the trees, the plants, our food.”²²¹ On the surface it seems odd that Quetzalcoatl would be so demonized in the context of a document meant to represent indigenous belief. But one must remember that Sahagún had to accomplish at least two objectives with the *Florentine Codex*. First, he had to document indigenous culture, and second, he had to evangelize and educate. In this context, the demonization of Quetzalcoatl can be understood in relation to both pre-Columbian, indigenous traditions and European traditions. On the one hand, Sahagún could not ignore the multivalent pre-Columbian serpent imagery, and many of the examples from Book Eleven cited here illustrate how numerous meanings were incorporated into the *Florentine Codex*. On the other hand, Sahagún was also working out of, and writing for an audience indoctrinated into, a

²¹⁹ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 85.

²²⁰ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 1, 3.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

Western European tradition that had a history of demonizing the serpent. What is more, the Spanish conquistadors and colonizers had demonized Quetzalcoatl since their arrival. It is uncertain to what degree Sahagún's aides participated in the demonization of Quetzalcoatl, but what is certain is that the negative undertones surrounding Quetzalcoatl in Books One and Eleven appear to have some indigenous roots, if only because the entries were based on interviews with members of the indigenous community and recorded by indigenous aides. It is important to remember that both Sahagún's informants and aides were members of communities that had already been converted. This is significant, because in the eyes of a European audience it would appear that the indigenous people of New Spain had similar associations with the serpent, thus conceptually linking them to the European friars. This conceptual link served to further Christianize the indigenous people in the minds of the European friars, making the sustainability of indigenous Catholicism seem possible.

For a better understanding of this conceptual link, and how Sahagún's depiction of Quetzalcoatl is related to European, Christian understandings of the serpent, it is helpful to look at the serpent's appearance in the bestiary. A typical bestiary entry for the serpent is as follows:

There are three facts to be noted about snakes. First, that when they grow old and blind they can renew their youth...They find a suitable crevice and crawl through it, pulling off their old skins and shedding their old age with it. Secondly, a snake does not carry its poison with it when it goes to drink water...Thirdly, a snake lives in mortal fear of a naked man.²²²

This passage is particularly revealing in light of Genesis 3:1-15. In this Biblical passage the serpent tricks Adam and Eve into eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and

²²² Randall, Jr., *A Cloisters Bestiary*, 43.

Evil. Upon eating the fruit, Adam and Eve realize they are naked and clothe themselves, before being thrown out of the Garden. The bestiary passage suggests that the snake fears a naked man because he represents humanity prior to the fall and closer to God. This fear also links the real-world serpent more closely to the demon serpent of the Bible. Quetzalcoatl's entry in Book Eleven is also linked to Genesis. Like the Biblical serpent that destroyed humanity to his own detriment, Quetzalcoatl also brings destruction at his own expense. In Genesis the serpent tricks Adam and Eve and causes them to be expelled from the Garden. However, God also punishes the serpent saying: "cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures, upon your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life."²²³ Quetzalcoatl, in Book Eleven, strikes and kills his victims, but in so doing ends his own life. This particular characteristic of the Quetzalcoatl entry serves two purposes. First, it allows Sahagún to link Quetzalcoatl to the Biblical serpent. Second, it emphasizes Quetzalcoatl's mortality, undermining his divine associations.²²⁴ These two associations link Quetzalcoatl to the negative European conception of the serpent, providing further evidence for the European readers of Book Eleven that the indigenous people of Mesoamerica were not so far removed from themselves and therefore redeemable. The more Sahagún was able to emphasize this point the more likely his superiors were to believe in the success of the conversion effort in New Spain, something Sahagún had invested the majority of his adult life to accomplishing.

²²³ Meeks, *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, 9. Genesis 3:14.

²²⁴ It is true that numerous Aztec deities sacrificed themselves during the creation of the Fifth Sun, however, these deities are privileged with immortality. Even though they sacrificed themselves they still continued to rule over various aspects of Aztec life. See, Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs* (previously cited in this thesis).

Serpent Imagery in Book Eleven

The textual comparisons between the serpent in Book Eleven and the bestiary present compelling evidence for the ways Sahagún and his aides bridged indigenous and European animal symbolism. What are even more compelling are the serpent images in Book Eleven and their bestiary counterparts. Thirty-five of the 264 animal images in Book Eleven are related to serpents. While not an overwhelming number, the images that appear in conjunction with the serpent entries present one of the most unique visual comparisons between Book Eleven and the European bestiary: the presence of humans. Throughout the images of animals in Book Eleven, humans appear a total of nineteen times and ten of those appearances occur with serpent entries.²²⁵ While there are humans in other images in Book Eleven, such as in conjunction with the pelican, the overwhelming majority are with serpents. In comparison, humans are not prominent fixtures in European bestiaries, but they most often appear in conjunction with serpents. In figure 27, an image from a thirteenth century English bestiary (MS Harley 4751), a serpent can be seen on the left half of the image. His head is pressed to the ground and his body rises up and then undulates back toward his head, where he has placed his tail in a small circle that indicates his ear. Across from the serpent on the right of the image, is a man holding a piece of paper in his left hand and raising his right toward the serpent. This figure corresponds to the snake charmer found in the bestiary entry for the asp:

²²⁵ Humans appear in images: (27) capturing monkeys, (84,85) capturing the *atotlin* (pelican) and eating the *atollin*, (87) hunting the *acitli*, (94) capturing the *acuillachtli*, (186) *ateponaztli*, (187) hunting birds, (199) catching turtles, (232, 233) habits of the *acoyotl**, (234) capture of the *acoyotl**, (238) *acoatl* capturing people*, (247) capturing the *tecutlacoçauhqui* with club and powdered tobacco*, (250) *chiauitl**, (251) treatment of *chiauitl* bite*, (355) *maquizcoatl**, (262) *coapetlatl**, (273) *cincoatl**, and (277) *Quetzalcoatl**. * indicates a serpent entry.

Now it is said that when an asp realizes it is being enchanted by a musical snake charmer, who summons it with his own particular incantations to get out of its hole, the asp, unwilling to come out, presses one ear to the ground and closes the other ear by sticking its tail in it.²²⁶

This particular entry, with the presence of the snake charmer, makes an intriguing comparison to the serpent images in Book Eleven. One of the four images that accompany the *acoatl* entry in Book Eleven reverses the scenario found in the bestiary image.²²⁷ In figure 28, the *acoatl* is shown hunting humans. He is inside a small pond and is rearing up, balancing on the lower portion of his body. Across from the *acoatl*, standing on dry land is a fisherman, identifiable by his sack full of fish. Unlike the majority of the animal images found in Book Eleven, the *acoatl* and his future victim, appear in a realistic, definable setting, even more so than the bestiary example. In both the bestiary and the *acoatl* images there is a hunter and the hunted. In the bestiary, the snake charmer attempts to capture the asp, who eludes him by covering his ears. In Book Eleven, the *acoatl* prepares to strike the fisherman, whose stance suggests he will not be an easy catch. This reversal of predator and prey in the bestiary and Book Eleven images is intriguing when one considers the previous comparisons between the European and pre-Columbian conceptions of the serpent. In the bestiary, the snake charmer lures the asp. In this instance it is the snake charmer, not the asp, that appears to be the malicious one. From this entry the serpent conveys a moral message of steadfastness. The snake charmer represents those who would lead one astray with beautiful false words. The asp,

²²⁶ Schrader, *A Medieval Bestiary*, 47.

²²⁷ It should be noted that these four images are not a sequential narrative. The first two merely illustrate the *acoatl* and the third shows the *acoatl* catching fish, but they do not indicate that one should follow another, etc.

in his resistance, reminds readers not to be fooled and remain faithful.²²⁸ This connotation for a bestiary serpent is surprising considering the negative, serpentine associations found elsewhere in the bestiary and European tradition. On the other hand, in Book Eleven the *acoatl* is like the snake charmer, attracting his human prey with his breath.²²⁹ The *acoatl*, as previously demonstrated, is more reminiscent of the serpent found in the Christian Biblical tradition. It is possible that Sahagún chose to emphasize this connection, and the presence of the fisherman in the *acoatl* image reinforces the ability of the serpent to control man, thus linking it more directly to the Biblical serpent who deceived Adam and Eve.

The images that accompany the *maquizcoatl* and the *coapetlatl* entries also contain human figures. Figure 29 shows the *maquizcoatl* slithering on the ground at the feet of a man. This man has his right hand lifted toward the *maquizcoatl* and is speaking to it, indicated by the speech scroll emanating from his mouth. In figure 30, a man, presumably a ruler, is seated on the *coapetlatl*. These two images, as well as that for the *acoatl*, indicate an interaction between serpents and humanity in the Aztec tradition. While the bestiary image also alludes to human-animal interaction in the European tradition, there is a much stronger connection in Book Eleven. What is particularly engaging is the fact that over half of the human appearances in Book Eleven occur with serpents. Based on the previous example of the *acoatl* this could be a result of a desire to link indigenous conceptions of the serpent to the Biblical serpent. However, this

²²⁸ Another possible interpretation would be that the asp represents those who reject Christ (by staying in his hole and ignoring the snake charmer) and the snake charmer represents those spreading the Word of God. While this interpretation is more in keeping with the typical negative associations with serpents, it seems unlikely because of the equally negative associations with snake charming and other Eastern magic held by the Western Europeans.

²²⁹ Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 11, 71.

interpretation does not hold in relation to the images for the *maquizcoatl* and the *coapetlatl*. In these images the serpents are not threatening humanity, but are instead in man's service. Instances like these do not directly link Book Eleven to European traditions, however by considering the syncretic nature of Book Eleven one can provide an interpretation for the presence of man in these images. As a representation of both European and Aztec traditions, Book Eleven can be interpreted in multiple ways, as has been shown with the jaguar and birds. In an example of Cecelia Klein's visual bilingualism and James Lockhart's double mistaken identity theories, different audiences can decipher the images of the *maquizcoatl* and the *coapetlatl* in varying ways. For an indigenous audience the interactions between the serpents and humans represent the integrated nature of humanity and the natural world central to their cosmic beliefs. From a European clerical standpoint these images seem to represent a dominion over the natural world, a dominion reminiscent of that appointed to humanity by God. This particular interpretation presents the indigenous population in a European context, thus linking the images found in conjunction with the serpent entries to other Book Eleven images that Europeanize the indigenous population in some way.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the serpent entries in Book Eleven of the *Florentine Codex* synthesize varied indigenous and European associations. In comparison with the European bestiary, they present compelling interpretations of indigenous culture, from the perspective of the European friars. These interpretations illuminate how Sahagún and his aides created a document that bridged their two cultures. The result of this negotiation of serpent imagery is a text that, to the European eye, Christianizes the

indigenous people of New Spain. While the interpretations provided here are by no means the only ones possible, they do represent examples of how Book Eleven can be viewed as an indigenous Christianized document designed and organized for a specific clerical purpose.

CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE

In late March of 2010 an exhibition opened at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, California entitled, “The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire.” Conceived as an opportunity to create a dialogue between the Getty Villa’s permanent collection of Greek, Roman, and Etruscan antiquities and masterworks of Aztec sculpture and colonial Novohispanic documents, the exhibit juxtaposed the Aztec and Greco-Roman pantheons. This juxtaposition, while seemingly unique, presented the Aztec pantheon in a context that Sahagún had already explored in the *Florentine Codex*. This was made clear in the symposium, “Altera Roma: Art and Empire from the Aztecs to New Spain,” that accompanied the exhibition. Scholars such as Thomas B. F. Cummins, Alessandra Russo, and Elizabeth Hill Boone discussed Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex* within the context of Roman antiquity. Boone’s presentation, “The Friars’ Predicament: How to Know Aztec Ideology,” was notable in that she acknowledged the various textual precedents for Sahagún’s document, particularly European encyclopedias. Similar to Walden Browne’s call for greater recognition of the medieval influences on Sahagún’s work, the symposium and exhibition at the Getty Villa challenged scholars to approach Sahagún’s corpus from a more nuanced perspective that allows for his identity as a sixteenth century friar as well as the various influences on his work.

Like the work presented at the symposium, this thesis calls for greater recognition of the *Florentine Codex* as a document designed to reinforce the missionary effort in New Spain through education. As Walden Browne claimed, and this thesis shows, those scholars who approach Sahagún from the context of medieval traditions are on firmer

ground.²³⁰ Medieval traditions, specifically the bestiary, illuminate the presence of Book Eleven within the *Florentine Codex* as a whole and highlight the various ways in which Sahagún underscored his evangelistic goals. As can be seen in the previous chapters concerning felines, birds, and serpents, the textual similarities between Book Eleven and the European bestiary tradition are undeniable. In these examples, as well as others like them, Sahagún and his aides presented indigenous cultural information in a format that would have been easily understood by an audience of European friars and priests. Additionally, the entries in Book Eleven examined in this thesis also serve to Christianize the Aztecs as they contain indigenous cultural concepts that have analogous Christian forms. Additionally, by examining Book Eleven in light of the medieval bestiary tradition it becomes clear, in both the similarities and the differences, that Sahagún was a product of his sixteenth century, Renaissance environment. The comparisons presented in this thesis show that while Sahagún utilized a bestiary format he was still mindful of the concerns of his time period. Ultimately interested in evangelization, Sahagún conveyed moral and religious messages through the entries in Book Eleven, but at the same time his focus on the categorization of the animal world speaks to the increased focus on documentation characteristic of the sixteenth century. For this reason, Sahagún should be understood in the context of his environment and as a product of the traditions that formed that environment, such as the medieval bestiary.

Through a careful examination of the textual and visual entries in Book Eleven, this thesis has shown how Sahagún explored animal imagery in both the Aztec and European traditions, and presented it in a manner that emphasized this similarity. In so

²³⁰ Browne, *Sahagún and the Transition to Modernity*, 91.

doing, he was able to champion the Aztecs and more importantly further the continued success of conversion. By structuring Book Eleven as a European bestiary, Sahagún suggested that the indigenous people of New Spain were more acceptable and approachable to Europeans. In this way the *Florentine Codex* not only documents the convergence of two cultures, but is also a product of it.

As the recent Getty symposium suggests, the *Florentine Codex* is a complex document with a myriad of influences to discern and examine, the European bestiary tradition being one of many. Moreover, to do justice to any one of these influences requires highly detailed analyses and exploration. In the preceding pages, this thesis has provided the foundation for a more complete investigation of Book Eleven and its role within the *Florentine Codex*. As a unique volume among Sahagún's work, Book Eleven's focus on animal imagery in Aztec and Novohispanic culture can provide even greater insights into the pre- and post-contact periods, especially the role of indigenous agency in the creation of the codex. One way in which this can be explored is through a more complete investigation of the presence of people in Book Eleven in comparison to the European bestiary tradition. Additionally, the unique appearances of figures such as Huitzilopochtli in conjunction with the falcon (figures 2, 3, and 4) must be further examined for their relation to Book Eleven and the ways in which they can illuminate the convergence of indigenous and Aztec culture. Book Eleven is a rich volume, and its relationship to the European bestiary tradition must not be overlooked or underestimated.

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