

ARNOLD J. BAUER



THE SEARCH FOR THE CODEX CARDONA

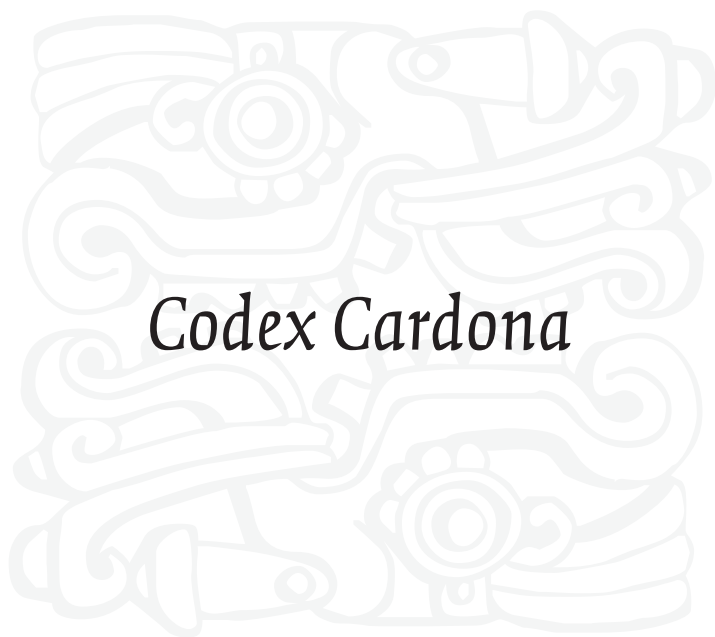


ON THE TRAIL OF A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MEXICAN TREASURE

The Search for the Codex Cardona



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Arnold J. Bauer

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS Durham and London 2009

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Printed in the
United States of America
on acid-free paper ©

Designed by Jennifer Hill
Typeset in Quadraat by
Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
appear on the last printed page of this book.

For
David and Elaine
and
“Alex”

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PREFACE



The search for the Codex Cardona is a true story, grounded in fact and based on interviews, letters, telephone conversations, and e-mail exchanges. I am mindful that human memory is unstable and almost nothing we are told remains the same when retold. Except for three people whose identities I believe prudent to conceal, I use the real names of the experts who wrote learned evaluations of the Codex, the names of the book dealers, museum curators, friends, relatives, and colleagues who enter into the narrative.

On the rare occasions where I did not participate in a conversation or setting that figures in the book, I present the context based on informed imagination and my knowledge of the setting. These infrequent moments are pointed out as such and should be obvious to the reader. The speculation about who might have produced or owned a falsified Codex Cardona is just that: speculation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of the people who submitted to my queries and interviews, and I want to express my thanks to a long list of friends and relatives who listened, usually patiently, as I bored on during dinner parties and interminable afternoon coffees about the early stages of this story. Danielle Greenwood, Rebecca Bauer and Quentin Jennings, Kathy Polkinghorn, Richard Schwab, Jo Burr and Ted Margadant, Nancy and Don Price, Dick Curley and Nancy Bramberg, Gloria and Edward Neumeier, Benjamin Orlove, William Farnan, Louis Segal, Gerald and María Elena Foucher, and Carlos Hurtado Ruiz-Tagle were particularly enthusiastic and helpful.

I want to express my profound gratitude to two particularly valuable companions in this project, my dear colleague Charles Walker, who read several drafts of the work, offering wise counsel—saving me from myself—and Andrés Reséndez, who read the drafts, led me to useful sources and people, and accompanied me on an unforgettable day in Mexico City.

Above all, without the persistence, acute judgment, and relentless support of Valerie Millholland, senior editor at Duke University Press, this book would not have been published. A list of conversations, e-mails, and other personal communications appears in the bibliography.

The Search for the Codex Cardona



CHAPTER ONE

The Crocker Lab

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken

JOHN KEATS,
“On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”



From the outside that afternoon, the Crocker Laboratory looked like a huge, windowless concrete oven, but inside it was cool. Three men bent over a steel bench on which the item we had come to see was opened out. They were anthropologists and linguists from Stanford University, specialists in pre-Columbian and colonial Mexico. Close by in the air-conditioned lab stood a gentleman wearing dark, baggy pants, a rumpled shirt, and a loosened, gaudy tie. An empty fiber box was propped up against the wall.

Richard Schwab introduced me to Mr. Schwarz — Thomas F. Schwarz — a rare book and manuscript dealer: “Mr. Schwarz, this is my colleague; I hope it’s all right with you if he has a peek as well.”

Schwarz offered a soft handshake and a glancing, furtive look. As he hovered and darted among the three professors, they carefully turned the oversized pages with the help of a broad wooden paddle, pausing to examine details through a hand-held magnifying glass. What they had before them was an ancient Mexican “painted book,” described by Schwarz as the “Codex Cardona.” I stepped back from the table. Surprise was an inadequate term; I was astonished. Schwarz pointed out that there were “four hundred and twenty-seven pages, over three hundred painted illustrations, and two extraordinary maps.” These he unfolded from a package inside the hard pasteboard cover of the codex and set them aside.

No one in the room, not even the specialists, had ever heard of a book called the Codex Cardona. There was no mention of this cultural treasure in any of the voluminous literature on early Mexico. The Stanford professors had searched catalogs, archives, and library holdings in Mexico, the United States, and Europe. Incredibly, this remarkable sixteenth-century manuscript seemed to have entered the modern world, brought to the Crocker Laboratory by Thomas Schwarz, in a fiber box tied with canvas straps. But, as we shall see, and what I didn't know then, the Codex Cardona came with lots of baggage that no one knew about on that summer day.

There are several pre-Hispanic and early colonial documents and codices, including jewels such as the Telleriano-Remensis and the Codex Mendoza now held in Paris and Oxford, and fragments of other rare pre-Columbian and postconquest documents in libraries and museums in Rome, Florence, Mexico City, and the Vatican, to name a few. But the Codex Cardona, with many more pages than any of these and hundreds of illustrations, not to mention the oversized, foldout maps, was truly dazzling. As Schwarz carefully leafed through the pages, which crackled a bit to the touch, the Stanford professors spoke to each other quietly, pointing out this and that detail.

In part similar to the *Tira de la peregrinación*, of which I'd seen a reproduction in Mexico's grand Museum of Anthropology and History several years ago, the Codex Cardona began by tracking the chronology of the Mexica—or Nahuas—from their hazy twelfth-century beginnings to the founding of Tenochtitlán a hundred years later. According to a typewritten inventory that Schwarz handed around, the codex then dealt with the catastrophic conquest by the Spaniards from 1519 to 1521, continuing with sketches, text, and paintings of early Mexico, down to the time the codex was actually produced—or said to have been produced—between 1550 and 1556. The scribes and painters worked under the direction of one Captain Alonzo Cardona y Villaviciosa, a crown official, whose own orders had come directly from the first viceroy of Mexico, don Antonio de Mendoza.

The Mexica or Nahuas—commonly known since the eighteenth century as the Aztecs—settled in the high intermontane Valley of Mexico in the early fourteenth century and still occupied a large swathe of it in the years after the Spanish conquest. Their descendants, of course, still live there today, a good part of one of the planet's largest cities. The painted illustrations in the Codex Cardona were accompanied by explanatory text, written, perhaps

by Catholic clergy — Franciscans and Dominicans most likely — in the nearly indecipherable sixteenth-century script that to the layperson looks as much like Arabic as Spanish.

As Schwarz patiently lifted the pages, one could see that on nearly every one, native artists had traced with quill and brush, in still-vivid blue, vermillion, and green paint, and rust-colored and black inks, the details of daily life and descriptions of flora and fauna. The pictures showed tools and plants, birds and feathers, gods and sacrifice, the ways of farming and irrigation, family life, and women's dress. Several drawings of corpses in cotton shrouds offered confirmation of the widespread death caused by the European invaders' deadly pathogens. There was one page, touching in its simplicity, showing the conqueror, Hernán Cortés himself, carrying one corner of his deceased wife's coffin. Three or four folios showed two different native women seated in European chairs. One was described as having written a native account of the conquest, another as having gathered weapons for an uprising, frustrated by the Spanish occupiers and severely repressed.

I felt like an outsider to Schwarz's presentation, but he didn't seem to mind my uninvited presence. The Stanford professors, absorbed in the show, didn't seem to notice my presence, or perhaps thought it bad manners to object. Schwab stayed discreetly back while I had a good look at several pages and illustrations. When I expressed admiration, Schwarz, to my utter astonishment, reached over the Codex, tore a fingernail-sized piece off the corner of one folio, and handed it to me. Stunned, I put it in my pocket.

Finally Schwarz produced the maps, two double foldout elephant folios. One was a rust-colored street-by-street map of the great lacustrine metropolis of Tenochtitlán just then being rebuilt as Mexico City; another showed the streets and named the first Spanish settlers of the now elegant suburb of Coyoacán.

"A treasure of incalculable value in itself," Schwarz pointed out, referring to the Tenochtitlán map.

"There's nothing like it," one of the professors said, nodding to his colleague, "except for the Santa Cruz one in Uppsala."

It was hard not to be enthralled by the presence of the codex; yet the overall feeling that arose from those exotic pages as I watched Schwarz leaf through the book was a kind of inescapable melancholy or resignation, as if the native artists, working under the orders of Captain Cardona, had projected backward into the chronicle the gloom of their recent defeat. Or

maybe the Aztecs' own ineluctable sense of tragedy was itself the cause of their demise.

In any case, the Stanford anthropologists were undoubtedly persuaded not only that the Codex Cardona would alter the ethnohistory of early Mexico but that its presence at Stanford would translate into grants and more graduate students, international conferences, new careers, not to mention a large publicity splash. The Codex Cardona, brought into public view centuries after being created, would make the brilliant centerpiece in an already imposing collection of rare books and incunabula. Such treasures, they must have thought, came along once in a lifetime. From what I'd seen, it was almost as if the Aztec illustrators had drawn up this spectacular document to describe those distant years when their own world was fast disappearing and a new one being built, sealed the roll of pages in a huge bottle, and tossed it into the sea. Now, nearly four and a half centuries later, it had washed up on a distant shore. On exactly whose shore, Mr. Schwarz was not telling.

The Crocker Laboratory had agreed to examine the Codex Cardona by means of PIXE (particle-induced x-ray emission) analyses of its paper and ink to determine whether the codex was an authentic mid-sixteenth-century work, a later copy, or an elaborate fraud produced after 1945, as one radiocarbon test suggested. An unnamed owner was offering the codex for sale to Stanford University's Special Collections Library for between six and seven million dollars. Doubts, however, had been raised about the book's authenticity and, consequently, about its provenance.

My colleague Richard Schwab, the man who introduced me to the Codex Cardona, was a historical sleuth who had spent the better part of a diligent career tracking down pirated and fraudulent versions of the eighteenth-century French *Encyclopédie*, about which he wrote articles in obscure scholarly journals.

A few years ago, a University of California physicist had developed a method for evaluating the makeup of inks and dyes in old documents and comparing them with others of known provenance to determine their authenticity, and he had enlisted Schwab's historical expertise to complement the process. This appealed to my friend's subversive nature and renewed his interest in history.

Schwab and his physicist colleague carried out their examinations without manhandling or clipping off pieces of the items they examined. Their

technique, in addition to being noninvasive and high-tech, added a new dimension to conventional dating techniques. Libraries and book dealers brought copies of the Gutenberg Bible to the Crocker Laboratory, and there was talk about having a shot at the Shroud of Turin. They had also gotten immersed in the flap over the so-called Vinland map, ending up on the wrong side of an intense debate about the titanium content in the ink.¹ It turned out that the map, sold to Yale University in 1964 as a genuine fifteenth-century artifact, had in fact been drawn with ink manufactured after 1923. Nevertheless the Crocker Lab's reputation for other work, discussed in scientific journals as well as in *Time* magazine, remained intact, so that buyers for universities' special collections departments and prestigious museums, more wary than ever of fraud and forgers after the Vinland map scandal, had little hesitation in paying for the lab's services.

By the time we left the cool concrete-and-steel lab, the wind had dropped off, and a flat, dead heat pressed against the earth. I was knocked out by what I'd seen.

"It's really fascinating, don't you think?" Schwab said in his conspiratorial tone. "It's spectacular. I never knew the Aztecs were so pornographic."

I hadn't seen any evidence of that, and I wondered what he meant.

"Do you think the lab will be able to tell if it's the real thing?" I asked.

"It's hard to know. We can say something about the makeup of the inks and paints, but any forger worth his salt would figure out a way to make them the way they did back then. We'd really need samples from other documents, contemporary with the Cardona, to compare the inks and paint. Did you understand that there's a rather dubious radiocarbon date suggesting a post-1945 origin?"

We stopped under a row of cork trees.

"Look, I've got to go. Thanks for asking me along; if you hadn't, this thing would have just come and gone, and I'd never have seen it."

I was off to meet Alexandra (Alex), my new love, at the nursery; she wanted to pick up two Cécile Brunners for the trellis.

"I'll let you know what happens," Schwab said. "I think Schwarz is taking the book back down to Stanford tomorrow."

I woke early the next day and went to the university library to begin researching Mexican codices. In a never-ending search for new projects, I had already begun to think that I might write something about the Codex Cardona and the dramatic world it described: the surprise appearance in