

Stephen A. Colston

Fray Diego Durán and the Localistic Orientation of his "Historia"*

El dominico Diego Durán escribió una crónica sobre la historia y el sistema ritual religioso de los mexicas la cual ocupa un lugar de importancia secundaria solamente después de las obras de su contemporáneo franciscano, Bernardino de Sahagún. El Codex Durán comprende tres *tratados* separados: el "Calendario Antiguo", el "Libro de los Ritos" y la "Historia". La "Historia" fue el último tratado que se completó y está basada en una crónica nahuatl ahora perdida la cual Durán llamó "historia mexicana". Mientras que Durán deseaba escribir una historia bastante extensa de varias de las ciudades estados anteriores a la conquista, la extensión de su cubrimiento histórico fue restringida en general a su fuente principal, o sea, la historia de México Tenochtitlan. Se ofrecen varias razones del por qué de la rígida adhesión de Fray Diego hacia esta etnocéntrica crónica nahuatl. Una de estas razones es que la "historia mexicana", como fuente histórica detallada y de confianza, pudo haber facilitado su labor de recopilación de una historia anterior a la Conquista. Las otras razones son de naturaleza doctrinal, y, probablemente, explican su confianza en la "historia mexicana": a) como fuente que exalta los logros de los mexicas, pudo haberle servido para ilustrar la benevolencia natural de los indios; b) como fuente que docu-

* An earlier draft of this paper was read at the XLII^e Congrès International des Américanistes, Paris, September, 1976.



menta el cuerpo político tan bien ordenado de los mexicas, pudo haberle ayudado a demostrar su racionalidad; y c) como fuente crónica de muchos de estos sucesos que el creía habían dado forma a las creencias religiosas de los indios, pudo haberle podido proporcionar los datos necesarios para componer una introducción a un contexto histórico para el “Calendario Antiguo” y el “Libro de los Ritos”, tratados que él pensaba servirían juntos como una especie de “manual de campo” para sus compañeros frailes para profundizar sus esfuerzos proselitistas.

In the final quarter of the sixteenth century, Diego Durán (1537?, 1588?) compiled an account of the history and religious-ritual system of the natives of late pre-Hispanic Central Mexico that is one of the richest resources for the study of Mesoamerica’s past. The Dominican friar’s comprehensive reconstruction of Mexica culture is contained in his only known extant work, the “Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la Tierra Firme”. This chronicle is composed of three *tratados*: 1) the “Libro de los Ritos” (completed in c. 1576); 2) the “Calendario Antiguo” (completed in 1579); and 3) the “Historia” (completed in 1581).

Far and away, the lengthiest of the three *tratados* is the “Historia”, a detailed history of the Mexica from their entry into the Valley of Mexico to the end of the Spanish Conquest. Early in the “Historia”, Durán noted to his reader that the skills of any historian would be taxed in writing a detailed history of one people, much less a history of the numerous communities which flourished in New Spain before the Conquest. The chronicler then explained that since Tenochtitlan was the most powerful center – “la principal fuente” – to which so many other provinces and “kingdoms” (*reinos*) bowed, his wish was to present a history emphasizing the Mexica (Durán 1967, II: 27 f.).¹ But he did not hope to achieve this emphasis at the complete exclusion of other communities’ histories. As the “Historia” neared completion, Durán voiced some frustration over his inability to write more fully of the histories of the other communities, and he attributed his restricted coverage to the limited scope of his principal source. Durán noted that the major source he employed for the “Historia”, a Nahuatl history, regrettably lost, which he referred to

1 The 1967 Porrúa edition of the Codex Durán was utilized for this study. In this edition, the “Libro de los Ritos” appears in volume I, pages 1 – 210, the “Calendario Antiguo” in volume I, pages 211 – 293, and the “Historia” comprises the entirety of volume II.

variously as the "historia" and "historia mexicana", only treated affairs relating directly to Tenochtitlan (II: 385, 473). The ethnocentrism of these sources, he lamented, "ha atado las manos" (II: 473).

Durán's extensive reliance upon this localistic "historia mexicana", a practice which he was to acknowledge prohibited him from rendering a more panoramic historical vista of Central Mexico, has yet to be adequately explained. While in the face of existing data it is doubtful that any explanation could be definitively advanced, needing consideration are several plausible motives for Durán's utilization of this native chronicle that was to have such a profound effect on the structure and content of his own historical treatise (Colston 1973: 97 – 116; 1973a).

Not surprisingly, Durán intended his "Historia" to be a reliable account (II: 18) and, while he consulted a considerable number of sources in researching this work, he held the "historia mexicana" to be his most credible source for the pre-Cortesian past (Colston 1973: 97 – 103, 138, 207 f.).

In addition to his high regard for the information contained in the "historia mexicana", explanations for Durán's use of this Nahuatl chronicle can be found in his goals of authorship. Bernal (1967: xxxi – xxxii) has suggested that Durán wrote the "Historia" to illustrate, by showing the natives in a favorable light through a rehearsal of their great deeds, the "innate goodness" of these people. In a few words, Durán balanced the largely unflattering picture of the natives he painted in the "Libro de los Ritos" and "Calendario Antiguo" with an altogether different canvas created from his remarks in the "Historia"; the cowardly, brutish pagans depicted in the former two works frequently yield in the "Historia" to valiant warriors and builders of a civilization whose fame he had hoped to preserve through his writing (II: 99).

But Durán attempted this balance to show more than an "innate goodness". Rather, by illustrating the glories and achievements of the native past, Durán sought to demonstrate the natives' rationality, and in so doing was echoing the general tenor of the ideological school of which he was a part, and its great Dominican head master, Bartolomé de las Casas. Fray Diego noted that he had argued with other Spaniards who asserted that the natives were irrational beings in that they lived as beasts with no apparent harmony or order. He explained that these opinions could be discounted by an analysis of native history that clearly would show in his judgement that "no ha habido gente en el mundo, ni nación que con tanto concierto y orden y policía viviese en su infidelidad, como esta nación" (I: 187) and who were, axiomatically, rational.

Durán's defense of the natives' rationality may, then, offer some explanation for his heavy reliance upon the "historia mexicana". This native

chronicle, judging from his remarks, spared little space not only in extolling Mexica glory, but in recounting in considerable detail a highly structured and well regulated body politic. Durán, in fact, was so deeply impressed by the social and political order the natives had once attained that he was to suggest to his reader (I: 112, 116, 187) that some emulation of the native example could serve as a panacea for several of the maladies which plagued his “infelices y desdichados tiempos” (II: 575).

There is another possible explanation for Durán’s extensive utilization of the “historia mexicana”, one that may have been inextricably connected with his primary motive of authorship, as stated in the prologue to the “Libro de los Ritos”: he was occasioned to write to familiarize his clerical brothers with the manifestations of native idolatry and thereby assist them in the eradication of extant pagan practices (I: 3 – 6). In this *prólogo*, Durán stated that his native contemporaries were reluctant to abandon the religion of their ancestors. This obstinacy was partially explainable in his estimation by their fear of breaking with the religious heritage of their past, a timidity that could in no small part be attributed to “el gobierno que tenían – aunque en parte era muy político y bien concertado – pero en parte era tiránico y temeroso y lleno de sombras y de castigos y muerte” (I: 5).² Fray Diego, then, saw the religious practices of the natives of his day to have been shaped by certain forces emanating from the pre-Contact period.

It thus appears altogether reasonable to assume that Durán might have considered a rehearsal of this native history to serve his reader as an indispensable background for the “Libro de los Ritos” and “Calendario Antiguo”, the two treatises which were acknowledged by him to be products of pragmatic, doctrinal motives. Durán made several references in the “Historia” (II: 416, 463, 464) indicating that he had planned that *tratado*, although the last completed, to appear at the beginning of his chronicle.³ While the “Historia”, due to its strict historical orientation, could be considered as standing apart from the “Libro de los Ritos” and “Calendario Antiguo”, Durán’s design was instead to have his historical discourse

2 In addition to this timidity of his native contemporaries, which he was to discuss on other occasions (I: 4; II: 531), Durán also saw them to be base, superstitious and obstinate (I: 4, 10; II: 561), and offered these elements of the native character, together with the ineffectual proselytising efforts of the missionaries (I: 40, 58, 92, 161), as his explanations for the persistence of idolatry.

3 The “Historia” was correctly placed before the “Libro de los Ritos” and “Calendario Antiguo” when the Codex Durán was bound during the last century; the 1967 edition of the Codex Durán follows a chronological order of the treatises, with the “Historia” appearing last.

serve as a prelude to and presumably framework for his works on the native pantheon and calendar.

The creation of such a context for the “Libro de los Ritos” and “Calendario Antiguo” may, then, offer some insight into Durán’s practice of so closely following the Nahuatl text of the “historica mexicana”. This native source constituted a mine of data, providing numerous detailed accounts of the political-military evolution of Tenochtitlan which Durán was frequently to embellish with his parenthetical remarks. His reader could thus have been guided to the conclusion that the maturity of this polity was attained at a high cost, and the currency was minted in the oppression of the human spirit: “Los cuales siempre fueron valerosos y esforzados en todas las guerras y entradas que hicieron, y ellos fueron los que ennoblecieron a México y sujetaron gran parte de la tierra, aunque tiránicamente ...” (II: 82).

The “historia mexicana” that was to chronicle with such remarkable detail the evolution of one of the partners of the “Triple Alliance” would have been, thus, well suited to Durán’s objectives of exalting on the one hand the great achievements of the natives’ past, and thereby illustrating their rationality, and, on the other providing an appropriate context for his discourse on the native religious-ritual system. But in addition to the extensive accounts recorded in the “historia mexicana”, its particular localistic orientation, that of Tenochtitlan, may have increased its desirability for Durán. Tenochtitlan, more than a partner, was the paramount military power of the “Alliance”, and because of this preeminent position, its history may have best illustrated for Durán those negative forces from the past which were to have such deleterious effects on the character and religious beliefs of his native contemporaries. The “historia mexicana”, forming a vast store of materials documenting the maturity of this “principal fuente”, could, then, illuminate for Durán not only the most positive characteristics of the native past, as he believed it would, but the most negative as well. It was in fact this duality Durán saw in Mexica history — that natives who had attained such an advanced cultural level could be so brutal in the exercise of statecraft and religion — that emerges as a characteristic feature of his writing (Bernal 1964: xxxii; García Martínez 1966: 41; Colston 1973: 200 f., 210).

But while the pronounced localism of the “historia mexicana” appears to have supported Durán in fulfilling his primary, doctrinal aims, his frustration over this very localism was doubtlessly earnestly expressed. Durán would utilize history to serve doctrinal purposes, but nonetheless believed that the history of pre-Conquest Central Mexico had a value in itself and that its preservation would be a worthy task (I: 226). There is little wonder, then, at Durán’s displeasure over the limited historical

scope of the "historia mexicana" which he noted had tied his hands. But while he may have considered the study of the native past to be a self-justifying activity, there were few contemporary churchmen who saw the rescuing of this history as something other than as an instrument for propagating Christianity (Dibble 1982: 11; López Austin 1974: 115). Durán makes a statement in the "Historia" (II: 575) that suggests that those who had instructed him to compile a history of events following the Conquest had similarly commissioned him to write the "Historia".⁴ Viewed in this fashion, Durán would have channeled the orientation of his historical treatise in such a manner as to be in line with the pragmatic, doctrinal goals of his superiors.⁵

One can speculate that had he not been commissioned by his superior prelates, a somewhat fuller expression of his historical interests may have become manifested in the "Historia". It seems likely that Durán would have continued to focus his attention on the "historia mexicana" since, due to its detailed descriptions, purported reliability, and particular localistic orientation, it would have served both his doctrinal and historical interests. But he may have utilized it less extensively than he did and, through a greater reliance on sources chronicling the histories of localities other than Tenochtitlan, attained a greater geographical coverage in his narrative. Whether principally from his own initiative or others, it is clear that Durán's historical interests were largely subordinated to his doctrinal aims.

There are statements in the "Libro de los Ritos" and "Calendario Antiguo" (e. g., I: 174, 257, 293) in which Durán explained that he could have expanded his narration considerably on certain topics but limited himself to that which was germane to his fundamental motive of authorship. This procedure may have been employed for the "Historia" as well. It would seem that Durán would have presented a more balanced history of

4 "Y porque de aquí adelante me obligan a hacer otro tratado de las cosas pasadas, desde este punto hasta estos infelices y desdichados tiempos ..." (II: 575).

It would seem entirely fitting that the Dominicans, recognizing Durán's skills as a *nahuatlato*, would have commissioned him, as the Franciscans had Sahagún, to compile a work on the customs and history of the natives.

5 The influence of these prelates in such matters was substantial. In 1576, when Durán was completing his first treatise, a *regula* of the Dominican Order in Mexico was promulgated which forbade any member from studying "los negs [negocios] de los yndios tocantes a sus ydolos y supersticiones" without first receiving the approval of the *padre provincial* (Actas, 1540-89, fol. 123a). It would seem unlikely, then, that Durán would have obtained permission to write the "Historia" (which contains a wealth of data on the natives' religious-ritual system) had this treatise not been seen by his superiors as a tool which, when forged, would further proselytizing efforts.

pre-contact Central Mexico in his "Historia", as he once expressed the desire to do, had his orientation been essentially historical rather than devotional. But there is more to suggest that this *tratado* was penned from evangelical motives. Certainly Durán did not utilize the "historia mexicana" as rigorously as he did because other sources were unavailable to him. He had consulted several native chronicles which were, as the "historia mexicana", localistic in nature, namely, a Relation of Azcaputzalco (II: 372), a Relation of Cuyuacan (II: 373), and a Relation of Tezcucó (II: 476), and it seems likely he had access to others.⁶

The "Historia" can, thus, be interpreted as having been conceived by Durán principally to serve the doctrinal goals of demonstrating the natives' rationality and advancing proselytism. Given these objectives, some explanations for Durán's reliance on the "historia mexicana" have been offered. Durán's own historical interests clearly exceeded the restricted spatial coverage of the "historia mexicana", and for this he was to reveal some displeasure. But this very restricted scope could have served other, and more fundamental, purposes for Durán and, for those which have been suggested, he relied upon this chronicle to such an extent that he was to remark that "mi intento no ha sido sino traducir el mexicano en nuestra lengua castellana" (II: 158), and thus incorporated the contents, and localistic orientation, of that treatise into his "Historia".

6 The localistic features of the native Central Mexican historical tradition, and particularly the effects of localism on the differing reconstruction of events and chronologies in the native annals, have been examined by Nicholson (1971: 64 – 70).

REFERENCES

Actas

1540 – 1589 “Actas Provinciales de la Provincia de Santiago de México del Orden de los Predicadores.” Manuscript in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Bernal, Ignacio

1964 “Introduction.” In Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas (trans. and eds.): *The Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain by Fray Diego Durán*, pp. xxi – xxxii, New York: Orion Press.

Colston, Stephen A.

1973 *Fray Diego Durán's "Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la Terra Firme": A Historiographical Analysis*. Ph. D. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

1973a “The ‘Historia Mexicana’ and Durán’s *Historia*.” In *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, 62. 35 – 42, Paris.

Dibble, Charles, E.

1982 “Sahagún’s *Historia*.” In Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson (trans. and eds.): Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex: a General History of the Things of New Spain*, Part 1, pp. 9 – 23, Santa Fe, New Mexico: The School of American Research and the University of Utah Press.

Durán, Diego

1967 *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la Tierra Firme*. Ed. by A. M. Garibay K., 2 vols., México: Editorial Porrúa.

García Martínez, Bernardo

1966 “La *Historia* de Durán.” In *Historia Mexicana*, 16.1: 30 – 47, México.

López Austin, Alfredo

1974 “The Research Method of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: The Questionnaires.” In Munro S. Edmonson (ed.): *Sixteenth-Century Mexico. The Work of Sahagún*, pp. 111 – 149, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Nicholson, H. B.

1971 “Pre-Hispanic Central Mexican Historiography.” In *Investigaciones contemporáneas sobre historia de México de la Tercera Reunión de Historiadores Mexicanos y Norteamericanos*, pp. 38 – 81, Austin: University of Texas Press.