

# The pre-Hispanic writers

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This topic is not new; indeed it is very old. It is one that has been written about for centuries by men of learning, both Mexican and foreign. On the subject of the existence of books, of libraries, of an ancient alphabet, evidence has come down to us from the first days of the Spaniards' arrival in this land.

Halfway to the great Tenochtitlan, when the Spanish soldiers were still unaware of the world that would unfold before their eyes, Bernal Díaz—that ever-reliable chronicler—in describing a temple states that besides the idols and sacrificial stone, there were certain books, bound in folds like Castilian collars, made of paper manufactured by the Indians.

These books were not like those known to the soldier and so he was unable to relate their contents. They were books in the indigenous style; that is, they were codices, and were painted rather than written—because in that world the writer was also a painter. Anyone wishing more complete information on this episode can refer to the masterly work of Angel María Garibay K., *A history of Náhuatl literature*, and thus satisfy their curiosity.

The Indian peoples had no alphabet, but had already made much progress toward syllabic phonetics. Their system of writing was an ingenious combination of hieroglyphics, phonetics and ideograms. It would not be rash to suggest that this system may, on occasion, have been as effective as the written word.

In the indigenous languages, moreover, words for paper, reading, writing, singing, library and book-lover abound. These words, when approached in a scientific manner, free from prejudices, have

established the certainty in our time that literary activity was an everyday matter among the indigenous peoples. In many aspects, literature and writing had developed to such an extent, and such a level of refinement, that they not only did not lag behind the European production of that time but were frequently ahead of it.

In pre-Hispanic Mexico, for example, besides the poets who made up what today would be called a “college”—being at the service of the state, charged with the sole duty of writing poetry—there were also itinerant poets, those in the service of a great lord, whose exclusive function was to write. This situation strongly contrasts with the present day, since today it is not unusual to find poets occupied in tasks which are quite foreign to their calling.

The status of artist brought with it certain benefits, as it should in every civilized and learned society. Only warriors enjoyed greater status.

The ancient sculptures, codices, pillars, together with the multitude of figurines representing painter-writers, described by archeologists as “scribes”—perhaps to associate them with illustrious cultures such as that of ancient Egypt—have been victims of a certain prejudice, according to which



*Amoxicuillo or amoxtlacuilo (book writer).*

it is bizarre to speak of writers in the pre-Hispanic world.

These figures demonstrate the importance of writers in that remarkable world. Let us call to mind three depictions of this tradition: the Zapotec, the Maya and that of the Kingsborough codex. The first, seated, facing forward with a text on his chest; the second, lavishly dressed, recording the score in a ceremonial ball game; and the third clearly showing the status given to the writer's profession.

In this third representation, the *amoxicuillo*, *amoxtlacuilo* or *tlacuilo*—the writer of texts was referred to by three names in the Aztec language—is shown carrying out his duties. Seated upon a stone, he is viewed in profile, the brush in the left hand and the colored ink pot in front of him. His beard is full and his hair is shoulder-length. His ear is decorated with an enormous green stone, or *chalchihuitl*, which was the most precious of stones; he wears a hat, reminding one of a house, decorated with a plume made of multi-colored feathers. The *mactatl* is decorated with a yellow band. The stone supporting his bench is an escutcheon or stone page and is beautifully engraved. Such was the writer, and such the atmosphere in which he carried out his divine office ✕

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