



Figure 1. Fragment of the Chiepetlan 1 canvas. A battle between an Aztec tiger-knight and a Tlapanec warrior in eastern Guerrero.

The Codices of Guerrero And Their Stories of Power

Gerardo Gutiérrez*

In 1461 an Aztec noble left Mexico-Tenochtitlan for the rugged eastern mountains of what is today Guerrero. His mission was to settle a conflict between the Aztecs and the ruler of Tlapa-Tlachinollan, a rich and powerful kingdom strategically located on the main trade route between the Pacific coast and Central Mexico. The ruler of Tlapa-Tlachinollan, Lord Rain, controlled trade between the two regions whose mountains were rich in gold and gemstones.

Since 1447 the Aztecs had tried—with little success—to conquer the kingdom (see figure 1), but this time they had a better idea. The Aztec ambassador proposed a deal to Lord

Rain: the Aztec attacks would stop and there would be peace between Aztecs and Tlapanecs and Lord Rain would be recognized as the *tlacatectli* (imperial governor) of the entire region (see figure 2). In return he would only have to show obedience to Tenochtitlan and pay tribute. The Aztecs had just recently defeated the neighboring Mixtec kingdom of Coixtlahuaca, and Lord Rain understood the growing strength of their empire and the risks in continuing a war of attrition with them, so he accepted their proposal.

Lord Rain became an important Aztec ally in southern Mesoamerica and both the Aztec empire and his Tlapanec kingdom benefited from the agreement. Nevertheless, the deal disrupted the internal politics of his kingdom and eventually Lord Rain faced civil war led by nobles of other prestigious families. Lord

* Archaeologist and ethnohistorian. Researcher at the Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS).



Figure 2. Meeting between the Mexica ambassador and the Lord Rain, ruler of Tlapa-Tlachinollan. Azoyú Codex 2.

Rain survived an assassination attempt and war broke out (see figure 3). The kingdoms of eastern Guerrero organized into two groups: those who supported Tlapa-Tlachinollan and those who supported a coalition formed by the kingdoms of Yoallan and Cuitlapan.

The forces of Tlapa-Tlachinollan headed to Atlamajalcingo del Monte, where they fought against the enemy troops (see figure 4). Tlapa-Tlachinollan won the battle and then its warriors decided to attack the capitals of Yoallan and Cuitlapan. Many prisoners were taken, bound with ropes and brought before Lord Rain, who

was waiting in the town of Tlaxco, between Atlamajalcingo del Monte and Yoallan (see figure 5). A warrior named Bird captured Lord Chalchihuitl (whose name meant jade stone), the ruler of the kingdom of Yoallan (see figure 6), who was assassinated together with his son and daughter, a child of only three, on the Mount of Sacrifices (see figure 7). After this, Lady Serpent Skirt, the wife of Lord Rain, was sent as ambassadress to the kingdom of Cuitlapan to arrange for the surrender of Lord Fish-Feather, a descendent of the Tlahuiscalera (dawn) line, previous supreme rulers of the mountains of



Figure 3. Assassination attempt on Lord Rain by the warriors of Yoallan (Iqualita) and Cuitlapan (Teocuitlapan). Azoyú Codex 2.



Figure 4. Battle near Atlamajalcingo del Monte, between the armies of Tlapa-Tlachinollan and Yoallan-Cuitlapan. Twenty Corn Cob Palimpsest.

eastern Guerrero (see figure 8). So it was that Lord Rain crushed the rebellion and went on ruling for another 20 years or so, using shrewd policies and his strategic alliance with the Aztecs to consolidate power for his family and line.

The story of Lord Rain is a key example of pre-Hispanic native politics, warfare and diplomacy, no different from similar histories of imperial states the world over. The events of Lord Rain's life plus another story are described on pictorial documents that have been recovered in indigenous villages in the state of Guerrero.

Guerrero's indigenous communities had a rich pre-Hispanic and colonial tradition in painted historical codices. This is shown in the more than 60 documents found in the area. The history of how they were discovered and published is just as interesting as the very stories they tell. Alexander von Humboldt was the first well known figure to reproduce one of Guerrero's codices, in 1808, now known as the Humboldt Codex, Fragment 1. This codex lists the tribute obligations of the Tlapa-Tlachinollan kingdom to the Mexica *calpixque*. We do not know how this document came into Humboldt's possession, but he must have acquired it during his stay in Mexico City in 1803. The codex was incomplete, and many years later other parts of it surfaced in a small town in Guerrero.

In 1940, Francisco Rodríguez, a topographer employed by the Agrarian Commission, was

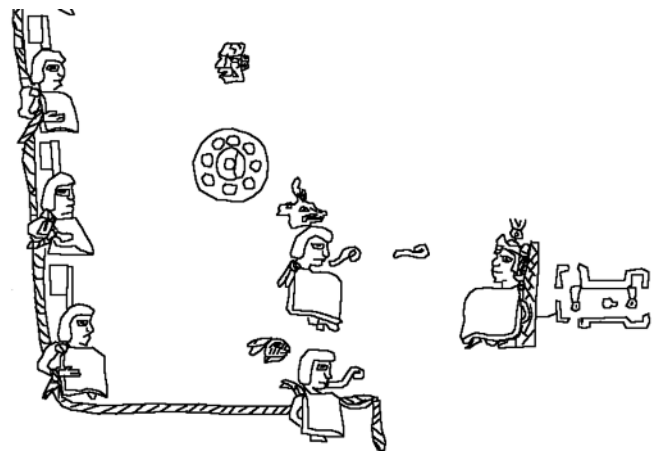


Figure 5. Handing over prisoners to Lord Rain. Twenty Corn Cob Palimpsest.

given a couple of sheets of an old pictorial document kept by local authorities in the community of Azoyú on the Pacific coast. Rodríguez told researchers at the National Anthropology Museum of his find, and the director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, Alfonso Caso, became interested in the documents and made the arrangements for the National Library of Anthropology and History to eventually acquire them. In all, two historical codices and a genealogical canvas were brought in from Azoyú, known as the Tlapanec Codices of Azoyú (Azoyú Codex 1, Azoyú Codex 2 and the Tlapa-Azoyú Genealogical Canvas). These documents, together with others, contain part of the political history of eastern Guerrero. Some of the narratives cover periods of 265 years (from A.D. 1300 to A.D. 1565) and when



Figure 6. Capture of the Lord Chalchihuitl, ruler of Yoallan, by the warrior Bird. Twenty Corn Cob Palimpsest.

interpreted, they show the fundamental concern of ancient Guerrero rulers for leaving a record of their political and military feats, which validated their right to govern their people and territories. Given that most of these documents were painted during the first decades after the European conquest, almost all of them have the objective of explaining to the Spanish the rights their ancestors had acquired in order to ensure that the Spanish bureaucracy respected the prerogatives of the colonial *caciques* and the land belonging to the towns and peoples.

A great deal is still to be studied about Guerrero's pictorial documents and in the future, they will undoubtedly provide us with welcome news about the history of the indigenous peoples who inhabited the state and their process of mestization. ■■■



Figure 7. Shrouds of Lord Chalchihuitl, ruler of Yoallan, and his children. Azoyú Codex 1.



Figure 8. Meeting between the wife of Lord Rain and the lord of Cuitlapan to negotiate peace between Tlapa-Tlachinollan and Yoallan-Cuitlapan.