CHAPTER THREE

REDISCOVERY AND DECIPHERMENT

As the ancient, precoplonial world faded out of sight, an antiquarian interest in that world started to arise. This was especially the case among those of Spanish descent born in New Spain, the criollos, who were looking for hallmarks of their identity in an incipient form of nationalism. The first noticeable scholar is the late 17th century savant Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. The following century saw the important collecting enterprise of the Italian Lorenzo Boturini. Inspired by his compatriot, the philosopher Giambattista Vico, he tried to create a systematic overview of the historical sources by ordering their data in a tripartite scheme of cultural and political evolution. Civilization – like human life – was thought to proceed from a period of youth and formation to one of maturity and apogee, followed by decay and death. Such a view, although not completely unknown in Mesoamerica itself, was projected onto the archeological and historical analysis because of observations made in Europe.¹ Today most archeologists still use the sequence of a Formative or Preclassic Period (± 1500 BC–± 250 AD), a Classic Period (± 250–± 900 AD), and a Postclassic Period (± 900–1521 AD) for easy reference, but without attaching any specific value judgement to these terms. Boturini’s work led to the first monumental synthesis of precolonial history by the exiled Jesuit Francisco Xavier Clavigero, as well as to the first effort to interpret a precolonial religious codex by another Jesuit, José Lino Fábrega.² After these isolated, though important, scholarly contributions of the 18th century, it was the renowned and widely read scholar Alexander von Humboldt who promoted interest in the codices, kept as unfamiliar treasures in different European collections. His own opinion about their contents was colored by prejudices stemming from a Eurocentric perspective:

¹ In Codex Vaticanus A (f 61v) the stages of human life are compared to climbing and descending a mountain (Anders & Jansen 1996: 279–281). For a summary of the ideas of Boturini and Vico, see Matute 1976.
² See the introductory chapters of the commentaries on Codex Yoalli Ehecatl or Borgia (Anders & Jansen & Reyes García 1993) and Codex Tezcatlipoca or Fejérváry-Mayer (Anders & Jansen & Pérez Jiménez 1994).
he concluded that little would be lost for Science if the books of such a primitive people were never deciphered.

Some decades later, between 1831 and 1848, Lord Kingsborough, arguing that the Native American peoples had originated from the ten ‘lost tribes’ of Israel, published a series of the most spectacular manuscripts, though without a scholarly commentary. Among them were the codices Yuta Tnoho (Vindobonensis) Obverse and Reverse, Ñuu Tnoo–Ndisi Nuu (Bodley), and Añute (Selden).

At that time most of their contents had become inaccessible. When the Codex Tonindeye was still in the Convent of San Marco in Florence, for example, the monks could not make any sense of it:

They had already sent it to be examined by a member of the institution known as the Propaganda Fide in Rome. His reply had been ‘that the document was probably intended for the amusement of children, but was so foolish that it could only bore them’. (Nuttall 1902: 2).

First Historical Research in the Region

It was not until the second half of the 19th century that progress was made in the understanding of these pictorial texts. Precisely at the time when the ancient royal dynasties themselves had disappeared completely, local historians started to take an interest in their legacy, to the extent that this tradition was not only salvaged, but reinvented. This emerging interest was inspired by the surge of romantic nationalism. The complex and poorly known history of the Ñuu Dzaui, Beni Zaa and the other peoples of Oaxaca – the State of the first Native American president of Mexico, Benito Juárez – had been extracted from its fragmentary Viceroyal sources by local historians such as Juan B. Carriedo and José Antonio Gay. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries it was Manuel Martínez Gracida (1847–1923), Mariano López Ruiz (1872–1931) and Abraham Castellanos (1868–1918) who undertook to enrich these insufficient data with wider inquiries.

They were in several ways authors of a renaissance movement. In the course of the 19th century most of the former cacique families saw their privileges and possessions drastically reduced and their position taken by newcomers. Martínez Gracida knew several of the last descendants personally and tried to obtain information from them about earlier times.