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The Descrittione dell'India occidentale, a Sixteenth-Century Source on the Italian Reception of Mesoamerican Material Culture

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# The *Descrittione dell'India occidentale*, a Sixteenth-Century Source on the Italian Reception of Mesoamerican Material Culture

Davide Domenici

**Summary.** This article discusses the *Descrittione dell'India occidentale*, a neglected Italian sixteenth-century anonymous and undated text that describes a set of Mesoamerican artifacts brought from Mexico to Italy by an anonymous priest. The text contains data on Mesoamerican material culture, on its Italian reception, and on its contribution to the formation of an early modern corpus of ethnographic knowledge. Herein I provide an analysis of the text, revealing its connections to other sixteenth-century texts and proposing hypotheses on its date and place of publication as well as on the identity of the author and of the priest whose arrival in Italy is the subject of the text. In the concluding section, I discuss some research lines that can be tackled on the basis of the *Descrittione dell'India occidentale*.

## The Source

The *Descrittione dell'India occidentale chiamata il mondo novo, donde sotto brevità, Intenderai il modo de gli Idoli loro & del lavorar la terra, cose belle e rare, Raccolte da un sacerdote che di là è venuto & le ha portate seco alcune gentilezze fatte di mano de'detti Indiani, suttillissimamente lavorate* is an anonymous and undated eight-page booklet printed in octavo, today preserved in a single extant copy donated in 2003 by Marcel Chatillon to the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris, where it is held with the signature *Ant 16° 238 [Res] : Chatillon*. The booklet is composed of four leaves continuously numbered on the right pages (A, 2, 3, 4), bound by Marcelin Lortic (1852–1928) in red Morocco leather. The pages measure approximately 153 by 103 millimeters. In 1979 the document was presented at the

Vancouver International Congress of Americanists and then discussed in an article containing the transcription of the text and some interesting observations on the document's language, but also plagued by erroneous interpretations, as well as by confusion between the writer of the text and the priest mentioned in it (Massajoli and Mattioni 1983). In 2006 Jean-Paul Duviols published microfilm images of the whole document accompanied by a brief commentary (2006, 149–53). As far as I know, the *Descrittione* was not further commented on until 2016, when I briefly mentioned it in two different articles (Domenici 2016a, 2017).

The *Descrittione* opens with the mention of the arrival in Italy of an anonymous priest (*sacerdote*, also called *religioso*) who had been preaching among Zapotec and Mixtec Indians of Oaxaca (Mexico) and brought to Italy a set of Mesoamerican artifacts, listed in summary form in the first two pages of the document. Then, the text continues with a series of titled paragraphs that provide detailed descriptions of the objects and additional ethnographical information.

The following artifacts are listed in the opening paragraph: a human skull worked into a drinking cup, a musical instrument made out of a human femur, a turquoise mosaic-encrusted idol, three chalcedony idols, two sacrificial knives, some obsidian prismatic blades, a “circumcision” wooden tool provided with obsidian blades, weapons, clothes and sandals, a dried gourd cup, native currencies such as copper hatchets, working tools, and featherworks with Christian imagery. It is noteworthy that the initial list ends with the notation “These are rare things, never seen in Italy, and that will not be seen again,” confirming that the text was written in Italy to describe an Italian event, thus ruling out the possibility of the *Descrittione* being the Italian translation of an original non-Italian text.

Duviols suggested that the text could date back “to the beginning of the sixteenth century,” while Pierleone Massajoli and Piero Mattioni argued that it was written around 1535 (Duviols 2006: 149; Massajoli and Mattioni 1983: 498, 514). Below I will suggest a later date, around the third quarter of the sixteenth century.

The *Descrittione* could have been published in Venice, as suggested by linguistic traits such as the final truncations of infinitive verbs and names (such as *sonar*, *balar*, *andar*, *taglier*) and by regional forms such as *decembrio*, *comadre*, *sinestra*.<sup>1</sup> The hypothesis is further supported by the use of the Venetian form *suro* for “sughero,” or cork, and by the mention of the Italian currency called *bagattino*, a coin in use in northeastern Italy, and especially in Venice, during the sixteenth century. The watermark of the paper is compatible with the hypothesis proposed herein.<sup>2</sup> The Venetian origin of the printed text would not be at all surprising since Venetian printers

were among the most active sixteenth-century Italian publishers of books and texts concerning the discovery of the New World (Horodowich 2005).

### The Multiple Voices of the *Descrittione*

At first sight, the *Descrittione* may seem to be a straightforward description of actual objects. However, a closer reading shows that the text also shares information with published texts of the period, thus revealing its complex, multilayered nature.

Firsthand information clearly appears in the author's descriptions of the artifacts, when he uses formulae such as "as one can see" or "those shown together with the other things."<sup>3</sup> He also seems to rely on the accounts of the priest, as in the case of the skull "cup" and the human femur, said to be body parts of a king captured and sacrificed by the Mixtec king of Tututepec, who used them in annual triumphal celebrations that included anthropophagic practices. In addition, the head is said to be one out of twelve that the religious man had taken from Tututepec's king. The list of Indian idols (the "idol of the dead," the "advice idol," the "goldsmiths' idol," the "midwives' idol"<sup>4</sup> and the "spinners' and weavers' idol") seems to derive from direct observation since it contains various mentions of the idols' constituent materials and looks highly unusual when compared with other, more standard, sixteenth-century European descriptions of Mexican gods.

The description of the objects is complemented by information mostly drawn from the Italian edition of Francisco López de Gómara's *La Conquista del Messico* (Rome 1555) and from the Anonymous Conqueror's *Relatione di alcune cose della Nuova Spagna, & della gran città di Temestitan Messico; fatta per uno gentil'homo del Signor Fernando Cortese*, published in the third volume of Giovan Battista Ramusio's *Navigazioni et viaggi* (Venice 1556). Additional information was apparently drawn—either directly or indirectly—from other sixteenth-century texts, such as those by Peter Martyr, Juan Díaz, Hernán Cortés, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, and Motolinía.<sup>5</sup> The sacrificial knives are said to be crafted with an extremely hard (*durissima*) flint,<sup>6</sup> a feature also stressed by López de Gómara, whose 1555 Italian translation uses the very same *durissima* adjective (López de Gómara 1555: 222). Similarly, the description of heart extraction during human sacrifices and the use of blood to anoint the mouth of the idols has direct parallels in the texts of Francisco López de Gómara (1555: 224) and the Anonymous Conqueror (1556: 307), in their turn repeating information originally derived from Cortés's second letter and also recorded in Peter Martyr's Fourth *Deca* (Martire 2005: 470–71).

The use of obsidian prismatic blades for autosacrificial rituals also echoes the same texts, especially in the listing of body parts involved in bloodletting (López de Gómara 1555: 222v, 223; Anonymous Conqueror 1556: 308).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the allusion to circumcision and its comparison with Jewish ritual practices was probably based on Juan Díaz's *Itinerario de la armata del Re Catholico*, first published in Venice in 1520 (Díaz 1520: 101).<sup>8</sup>

The description of natives' footwear is especially interesting inasmuch as their mention by the author becomes a pretext for showing his knowledge of Indian things. In fact, rather than describing the actual footwear, he wrote about the agave plant and its culinary and industrial uses. His words are revealing: "[the plant] is really useful, for they get from it wine, & vinegar, honey, preserves, clothes, shoes, threads, & with it they also cover their houses, and it makes good fire, it is planted orderly in the fields, as grapes are planted."<sup>9</sup> On the same topic, the Anonymous Conqueror states, "This tree is most useful, for they get from it wine, vinegar, honey, and cooked must. They make of it cloth for men and women, shoes, cordage, beams for houses, and shingles for covering them."<sup>10</sup> The exact sequence of wine, vinegar, honey and preserve/cooked must strongly suggests a direct relationship between the two texts. On the other hand, details such as the comparison of agave with grapes or its use as firewood seem to derive from the Italian edition of López de Gómara's work (in its turn probably based on the original Spanish text of the Anonymous Conqueror)<sup>11</sup>: "Someone calls [it] *maguei* and others *cardon* . . . there are many such trees that are like grapes here, they plant it . . . , the trunk serves as firewood, & the leaves as shingles . . . & that liquor is like cooked must, if they cook it a little, it becomes honey, if they purify it, it is sugar, if they dilute it, it is vinegar, & if they put *ocpactli* in it, it is wine."<sup>12</sup>

Specific details of the description of native weapons, such as the burned points of lances, also reveal the reliance on López de Gómara (1555: 75) who, like the Anonymous Conqueror (1566: 305) and the *Descrittione* itself, devoted a specific paragraph to the general theme of Indian weaponry. Other textual connections with printed works can be identified in the *Descrittione*'s treatment of themes such as native currencies (including cacao and its uses as a beverage)<sup>13</sup> and working tools and metals.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, highly revealing of the *Descrittione*'s direct textual sources is the description of native clothes, specifically of men's mantles: the text states that the Indians "tie it on the shoulder, as gypsies do,"<sup>15</sup> a phrasing almost identical to López de Gómara's "they wear a square mantle, with a knot on the right shoulder, like gypsy women."<sup>16</sup>

In light of these borrowings from contemporaneously published works, the *Descrittione* appears as a text where firsthand information, richer in the initial pages, intermixes and progressively gives way to mostly textually derived information. This trend peaks in the concluding paragraph devoted to native codices where, given that no painted manuscript is mentioned at all in the initial list, the author shows his knowledge of Mesoamerican cultural practices even if it did not bear any direct relationship with the objects brought by the priest.<sup>17</sup>

The text of the *Descrittione* contains no Zapotec or Mixtec terms, only Náhuatl or Arawak words commonly in use in sixteenth-century Mexico. Clearly, the origin of most of these terms was not the voice of the priest but, again, the corpus of published texts. In fact, the author of the *Descrittione* reports terms such as *macana*, *maquei*, *nequem*, *sicol*, *nagua*, *sicara*, and *cacao/cacahuate/cacahuete*, all of them attested, even with slightly different transcriptions, in published works available to a mid-sixteenth-century European reader. The only terms I was unable to find in such a corpus are the Náhuatl words *tilmate* (i.e., *tilmahtli*, or “mantle”) and *guaipil* (i.e., *huipilli*, or “woman’s blouse”).

### Fleeing Identities: Hypotheses on Date, Authorship, and the Identity of the Priest

The aforementioned web of textual relationships provides some clues regarding the dating and authorship of the *Descrittione*, whose obvious dependence on the works of López de Gómara and the Anonymous Conqueror establishes 1556 as a firm *post quem* term for its writing. This date is compatible both with the Italian currencies mentioned in the text (*bagatino*, *giulio*, and *scudo*) and with its typographic traits. Among them, the style of the initial B, probably representing the abduction of Orithyia by Boreas, strongly resembles similar initials that can be found in printed Italian texts of the mid-sixteenth century, such as the *Somma della natural filosofia*, by Alonso de Fuentes, translated into Italian by Alfonso de Ulloa and published in Venice in 1559.<sup>18</sup>

The multiple literary references suggest that the author of the *Descrittione* was someone residing in Italy, most probably in Venice, and knowledgeable about Italian (and maybe Latin and Spanish) books dealing with the New World. Albeit tentatively, I would propose the name of Alfonso de Ulloa (b. 1529–d. 1570) as the author of the *Descrittione* or, at least, as a good representative of the author’s intellectual environment. Son of one Francisco de Ulloa, who had been a member of Cortés’s expedition to Mexico, Alfonso was a Venice-based Spanish intellectual and translator of

Spanish texts on America, Mexico, and the Spanish Empire (Gallina 1955; Rumeu de Armas 1973; Romeo 1971: 54). It is perhaps ironic that Ulloa has also been previously suggested to be the “ghost author,” or Italian translator, of the Anonymous Conqueror (Gómez de Orozco 1953), as well as the possible “ghost author,” rather than mere translator, of Ferdinando Colombo’s *Historie*, published in Venice in 1571 (Nutti 1982; Luzzana Caraci 1989). These hypotheses have been mostly rejected by recent scholarship, but the role attributed to Ulloa in these scholarly debates would, in any case, be a good reason to refrain from adding new speculations about his work. Nevertheless, the period of Ulloa’s literary activity in Venice, as well as his knowledge of Italian and Spanish texts on the New World, make him a perfect candidate as the author of the *Descrittione*. This is further supported by some striking textual similarities between the *Descrittione* and Ulloa’s translation of Ferdinando Colombo. When describing the auto-sacrifice and the breechcloth, the *Descrittione* twice uses the words *luoghi vergognosi* (“shameful places”), while Ulloa’s translation of Colombo, when describing the breechcloths of the Indians on board a Maya canoe, twice uses the form *parti vergognose* (“shameful parts”; Colombo 1571: 200r–200v). Furthermore, when praising the sharpness of obsidian blades, the *Descrittione* says that those *rasoy* (razors) *tagliano non altrimenti che se fossero di fino acciaio* (“they cut no differently than if they were of fine steel”), while Ulloa’s translation, also dealing with obsidian *rasoi*, states that *tagliano come fossero di acciaio* (“they cut as if they were of steel”; Colombo 1571: 200).<sup>19</sup> The possibility that the author of the *Descrittione* was a native Spanish speaker is also compatible with some hispanisms in the Italian text, such as the couple of coordinate adverbs *maravigliosa & delicatissimamente*, where the *-mente* ending of the latter also counts for the former.<sup>20</sup>

If my hypothesis on Alfonso de Ulloa’s authorship is correct, the possible chronological span for the writing of the *Descrittione* would then be 1556–70, the latter year being that of Ulloa’s death.

The priest whose arrival in Italy is the subject of the *Descrittione* is even more difficult to identify. The text informs us that he preached among the Zapotecs and the Mixtecs of Tututepec, the famous and powerful Mixtec kingdom on the Oaxacan coast conquered in 1522 by Pedro de Alvarado (Spores 1993; Woensdregt 1996; Joyce, Workinger, and Hamann 2004; Joyce et al. 2004; Joyce and Levine 2008; Joyce et al. 2008; Joyce 2010: 266–70; Levine 2011; Gómez Montes 2013).

None of the religious men who took part in Alvarado’s expeditions seems to bear any recorded relation with Italy.<sup>21</sup> It is likely that various priests and friars went to Tututepec when it was assigned to Spanish



*encomenderos* such as Pedro de Alvarado, Hernán Cortés, Gonzalo de Salazar, and Tristán de Arellano (Gay 2006: 199), and at least we know that in 1534 Tututepec was given as *encomienda* to Luis de Castilla, who brought an unnamed priest with him (Gerhard 1972: 380–381; Gay 2006: 143; Roulet 2008b: 112, 118). Between 1542–43 and 1564 Pedro de Olmos was *vicario* in Tututepec. He took part in a process against the lords of the neighboring Zapotec pueblo of Coatlán, where he found an “idol” on a mountain, which he destroyed, as well as human bones and sixteen skulls in a nearby cave (Terraciano 2004: 263–64; Roulet 2008b; Tavarez 2011: 51).

The first Dominican missionaries working in the Mixteca de la Costa from 1538 onward were Francisco Marín and Pedro Fernández, later followed by Francisco de Munguía (Burgoa 1989a: 86–88). Afterward, Benito Hernández, dead in 1550, worked in Tututepec and in other Mixtec towns, where he destroyed many idols (Burgoa 1989b, 322–348; Dávila Padilla 1625: 483–84; Gay 2006: 267); as far as I was able to ascertain, none of them ever traveled to Italy.

Among the recorded Dominican voyages to Italy in the first half of the sixteenth century, the ones made by Domingo de Betanzos (1532) and Bernardino de Minaya (1536) are by far the best known. Later voyages to Italy were then made by Juan de Córdova (before 1570), Juan de Olmedo (1569), Hernando de Paz (1570), Pedro de Feria (1574), and Antonio de la Serna (1592–95; 1603–04). Among those men, especially interesting for our purposes is Juan de Córdova (b. 1503–d. 1595), a former soldier who entered the Dominican order in 1543. In 1548 or 1549 he was assigned to the convent of Antequera, and he preached in indigenous communities in Oaxaca, where he learned the Zapotec language; in 1561, in his charge of *definidor*, he also took part in the trial against the Zapotec king Don Juan Cortés Cosijopij. According to Burgoa, Córdova traveled twice to Spain and Rome before 1570 (Burgoa 1989a, 1:223, 2:111). Because on 25 September 1568, when he was over sixty years old, Córdova was named *provincial* of Santiago de México and because, according to Burgoa, he was named as *procurador* and *definidor* for his European travels, it seems likely that both his voyages occurred between 1561 and 1568; in this time period, the most likely occasions for his two voyages would have been the Dominican *capítulos generales* held in 1561 (Avignon) and 1564 (Bologna).<sup>22</sup> Retiring to the monastery of Tlacoahuaya in 1576, Córdova wrote the *Vocabulário de la lengua zapoteca* (1578)<sup>23</sup> and the *Arte en lengua zapoteca* (1578): he died in Antequera in 1595, when he was ninety-two years old.<sup>24</sup>

The dating of Córdova’s two voyages to Italy, probably in 1561–64, is clearly compatible with the time span we proposed for the writing of the

*Descrittione*. Moreover, Córdoba's long experience in Oaxacan indigenous communities would have made him an excellent transmitter of native artifacts and ethnographic information.

On this matter, some interesting insights can be obtained from Córdoba's works. In his *Vocabulário de la lengua zapoteca* (1578), there are Náhuatl words shared with the *Descrittione* such as *neuquen* and *cacao*, as well as entries for "vino de pencas de maguey assadas," "vino del agua del maguey heruido," and for many clothing items, including Náhuatl words such as *xicoli* and *gueipil*, this last being one of the indigenous terms appearing in the *Descrittione* but not in the direct sources of it that I was able to identify. Also interesting is the fact that among the Indian gods mentioned in the *Vocabulario*, probably following the template set by Nebrija (Hamann 2015: 86–91), one can find, among others, the "Dioses del infierno," a "Dios o Diosa de los niños, o de la generación a quien las paridas sacrificaban," and a "Dios de los agujeros," all of them having counterparts among the idols listed in the *Descrittione*. The *Vocabulario* also includes a mention of the sacrifice and eating of war prisoners, as well as different mentions of autosacrifice, one of them including a list of involved body parts: "Sacrificarse, sacarse sangre de alguna parte del cuerpo con lanceta en orejas y en la lengua y en otras partes y muslos." This theme was also repeated in the *Arte en lengua zapoteca* (1578), where it is reported that "offrecían sus sacrificios, y su sangre sacandosela de diversas partes del cuerpo, como de las orejas, del pico de la lengua, de los muslos y de otras partes" (Córdoba 1578: 202), a statement closely resembling the one in the *Descrittione*. Finally, and most interesting, Córdoba's *Vocabulario* has an entry for "Vueso que tañian antiguamente en los bayles," a clear reference to a friction idiophone similar to the one that, according to the *Descrittione*, the priest brought to Italy.<sup>25</sup> Summing up all this evidence, I suggest that the Dominican friar Juan de Córdoba is a likely candidate for the priest who appears in the *Descrittione*. Elsewhere I proposed that Juan de Córdoba could have also brought Codex Vaticanus A to Rome (or taken part in its production in Rome itself), the text of which shares revealing similarities with the *Descrittione* (Domenici 2016b).<sup>26</sup> If my hypothesis is correct, the time span for the writing of the *Descrittione* would be further restricted to 1561–70. Nevertheless, other possibilities also deserve future investigation. Antonio de la Serna, for example, traveled to Venice, where the *Capítulo General* that approved the foundation of the new Dominican province of San Hipólito de Oaxaca was held in 1592. Even if the textual connections linking the *Descrittione* with mid-sixteenth-century texts and the works of Alfonso de Ulloa make me lean toward the name of Juan de Córdoba as the anonymous priest, the possibility of identifying him with

other Dominicans such Antonio de la Serna or Pedro de Feria, and thus of a later dating for the *Descrittione*, cannot be completely ruled out.

### The *Descrittione* as Part of an Early Modern Ethnographic Textual Tradition

The relationship between the *Descrittione* and the texts of the Anonymous Conqueror and Francisco López de Gómara clearly goes beyond mere textual references. As previously mentioned, from the structural point of view, the *Descrittione* is composed of a series of paragraphs, introduced by brief titles, mainly devoted to ethnographic topics. Such a structure can also be found in the Anonymous Conqueror's *Relatione* and in the concluding section of López de Gómara's *La Conquista de México*, where the pace of the historical narrative gives way to a timeless ethnographic description of Aztec culture; significantly, it is from this last part of López de Gómara's work that the *Descrittione* borrowed some of its data. The strict relationship between the texts of López de Gómara and the Anonymous Conqueror is well known, and it seems to me that the *Descrittione* should be considered as part of this same group of cognate texts. Besides providing evidence that could be useful for disentangling their problematic mutual relationships, the *Descrittione* also establishes a link between this group and the other strand of early modern ethnographic inquiry represented by codices Vaticanus A and Telleriano Remensis.

Assuming that my hypothesis about Juan de Córdova is correct, the Dominican friar could have been in Tututepec in the late 1540s or the 1550s. The earliest years of this time span coincide with the presence of Pedro de los Ríos in the neighboring Zapotec area of Coatlán (Huihuogui). After the death of the king Coaxintecuhtli in 1522, the throne of Tututepec was assumed by his son Iztac Quihuantzin (or Iztaccoatzin), who was baptized as Pedro de Alvarado and died in 1547. After Iztac Quihuantzin's death, his wife Ana Sosa acted as *cacica* until around 1564, when her son Melchior de Alvarado took her place as the Tututepec *cacique* (Berlin 1947; Caso and Smith 1966; Caso 1977, 1:148; Roulet 2008a: 41; Smith 1973: 84–88; Spores 1998; Spores and Balkansky 2013: 188).<sup>27</sup> If my dating of the *Descrittione* is correct, the time span of the kingdom of Iztac Quihuantzin is the most adequate to temporally situate the activities of Dominican missionaries who could have confiscated ancient “idols” but at the same time obtained featherworks with Christian iconography.

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Descrittione* is the conjoining of the description of native artifacts with relevant ethnographic information, arguably deriving directly from the priest. This is especially evident in

the case of the first two items on the list, the turquoise mosaic-encrusted skull “cup” and the human bone/musical instrument. In fact, as has already been mentioned, the text provides firsthand information on the cultural practices associated with these objects, such as their derivation from a sacrificed enemy king and their use during triumphal ceremonies. We cannot know who this enemy king was, but it is interesting that the Mixtecs of Tututepec were often at war with the neighbouring Zapotecs of Coatlán, as recorded in the *Relación Geográfica de Coatlán*,<sup>28</sup> and that the process against the lords of Coatlán recorded not only the discovery of skulls in a cave, but also the fact that Don Hernando, lord of Coatlán, would have sent four Spanish(?) skulls to Don Pedro (Iztac Quihuantzin), the Tututepec lord (Roulet 2008b: 121). Probably, even if not directly related with the “skull-cup” brought to Italy, such documentary records testify to the intense ritual uses of human bones in the Tututepec-Coatlán area still employed in the mid-sixteenth century.

Clearly, ethnographic information contained in the *Descrittione* must not be uncritically taken at face value: the mention of anthropophagic rituals, for example, was such a common trope of sixteenth-century colonial discourse that it could easily be an addition made by the author. Even the information arguably deriving directly from the priest could be in some way misleading, as in the case of the rather surprising description of the mosaic-encrusted skull as a drinking cup: no skull-cups are known from ancient Mesoamerica, and its pairing with the friction idiophone strongly suggests that the skull was actually the musical instrument’s soundbox (Domenici 2016a: 89–90). It is noteworthy that Córdova’s *Vocabulario* contains Zapotec expressions for “Vueso que tañian antiguamente en los bayles,” “Ombre que sacrificaua[n] tomado en guerra, o captiuo presentado a señor para sacrificarle” and “Rostro con cabeça dessollada de ombre muerto,” all of them clearly referring to objects and practices similar to those mentioned in the *Descrittione*.

The unusual sequence of idols and gods in the *Descrittione* also suggests that the text was actually referring to physical objects, adding firsthand information on their symbolism and use, such as the interesting notations about the divinatory character of the “advice idol” (the oracular 9 Grass?), the sacrifices to the “idol of the midwives” (9 Reed?), and the huge number of cotton spindles offered by spinners and weavers to their patron goddess (6 Rain?). Again, Córdova’s *Vocabulario* contains Zapotec names for “Dioses del infierno,” “Dios de los agujeros,” and “Dios o Diosa de los niños, o de la generación a quien las paridas sacrificaban,” clearly matching some of the Mixtec idols listed in the *Descrittione*.

As one proceeds through the text, the descriptions of actual objects become sketchier and more obscure, increasingly swamped by ethnographic information deriving from published sources. In some instances, it is difficult to distinguish firsthand information from received knowledge: for example, we observed that the anointment of the idols' mouths with sacrificial blood from hearts was a recurring theme in various texts, including Córdova's works; however, an almost identical practice—the collocation of a child's heart in the mouth of an idol—is described in the document recording the extirpation of idolatry in the Coatlán-Tututepec region in 1544 (Roulet 2008b).

Besides providing information on the uses—real or perceived—of the artifacts, the *Descrittione* can also enrich our still partial knowledge of early modern Italian collections of Mesoamerican artifacts.<sup>29</sup> An interesting case, for example, is that of the friction idiophone: on the basis of its description as a king's "leg bone," I elsewhere identified it with the item that, sequentially owned by the Chigi family, Pope Benedict XIV, the Bolognese Istituto delle Scienze, and the Bologna University Museum, arrived in 1885 at the Pigorini Museum in Rome, where it is still found today (Domenici 2016a).

A last theme I want to stress here is the necessity of understanding the *Descrittione* in the wider framework of early modern missionary—mainly Dominican—records of gifts brought to Europe, a scarcely studied literary genre whose analysis provides insights into the political and theological agendas that underlay missionary gift-giving practices and their textual records (Domenici 2017). In such gift records, confiscation of idolatrous artifacts acts as a way to establish a clear-cut rupture between a non-Christian, pagan, or Jewish *before* and a Christian *after*. In the *Descrittione*, this rupture is best exemplified in the opposition between the idolatrous and anthropophagic rituals—devoted to pagan-like deities, described in the past tense, and materialized in confiscated human trophies and idols—and the Indians' acceptance of the Gospel, materialized by featherworks with Christian imagery.

In conclusion, the *Descrittione* is a paradigmatic example of how the perception of Indian material culture as a proxy for its creators fruitfully intersected with the growing corpus of early modern ethnographic textual records from the New World. Sources like the *Descrittione* are key pieces of information showing how artifacts and words from the New World converged in building early modern ethnographic knowledge, one of the most interesting outcomes of Renaissance Europe's discovery of cultural (and material) otherness.

## Appendix A

### *Transcription of the Italian text of the* Descrittione dell'India occidentale

Descrittione dell'India occidentale chiamata il mondo novo, donde sotto brevità, Intenderai il modo de gli Idoli loro & del lavorar la terra, cose belle e rare, raccolte da un sacerdote che di là e venuto & le ha portate seco alcune gentilezze fatte di mano de' detti Indiani, suttilissimamente lavorate.

Breve dichiarazione de gli idoli, anticaglie, & altri instrumenti di sacrificij, con iquali, gli Indiani dell'India Occidentale (detta il mondo novo) sacrificavano ne' Tempi a' Dei nelle feste loro. Le quali cose sono le medesime che havevano essi Indiani ne' Tempi essendo ancor infedeli, & dopo che si battezzarono, et accettarono il Santo Evangelio di Iesu Christo, pervennero nelle mani d'un Religioso sacerdote, che gli haveva predicato, & insegnato la Dottrina Christiana, & esso le ha portate in queste bande, insieme con molte altre & diverse cose antiche degne di esser viste, accioché vedendole si creda quel che alcuni hanno scritto, & per relationi si ha inteso. Sono dunque le cose che porta questo Religioso le seguenti.

Cioè, una testa d'un Re che fu fatto prigione nella guerra da un altro Re suo nimico, fatta a guisa d'una tazza da bere, lavorato di mosaico con turchine.

Un'osso d'una coscia dell'istesso Re, fatto instrumento da sonar, & balar.

Uno idolo lavorato di turchine di mosaico, insieme con altri idoli di Calcidonia che adoravano quei pagani.

I cortelli di sasso co' quali sacrificavano gli huomini, & i fanciulli nel tempio.

Certi rasoy di porfido negro co'quali circoncidevano al modo degli Hebrei.

Le saette, & altre arme, con che combattevano nella guerra, & i drappi & calzamenti che usavano, la tazza con che bevevano, l'antica moneta che usavano, & gli instrumenti che usavano per lavorare il legname, & la terra.

Oltra le già dette cose si hanno portate alcune imagini de Iddio & de gli Apostoli, fatte di piuma finissima, di diverse sorti di uccelli, lavorate maravigliosa, & delicatissimamente da gli istessi Indiani, per le quali si conosce chiaramente il loro vivissimo & acuto ingegno intorno le arti, & i mestieri humani. Sono cose rare, & mai più viste in Italia, & mai più si vederanno, si per esser di grandissima spesa & fatica, si ancora per che sono di paese molto lintano, la navigazione del qual dura un anno all'andar.

## Della testa

Era usanza de gli Indiani delle provintie di Tututepeque, & Zapotечи, & d'altre provintie del mondo novo, che quando alcun Re o gran Signor era fatto prigionie da un altro in guerra, lo sacrificavano in una festa solenne così vivo nel tempio, & tagliandoli la testa facevano di quella una tazza, lavorata di mosaico di fuori, et ogni anno in quello istesso giorno che si hebbe la vittoria, essi celebravano il triumpho, & il Re vincitore in quella festa beveva nella tazza della testa del detto Re. La qual è una di dodici teste di Regi che il detto Religioso tolse insieme con gli idoli al Re della provintia chiamata Tututepeque nella già detta India del mondo novo.

## Dell'osso della coscia dello istesso Re

Dopo aver sacrificato quel corpo, & fatto della testa una tazza, facevano degli ossi delle coscie certi instrumenti per sonar & balar nel dì del triumpho, & magnavano la carne, & gli interiori insieme col resto abbrucchiavano appresso il tempio. Di questi ossi si ne ha portato uno dello istesso Re di chi era la testa, nella qual cosa si vede quanto fossero vendicativi.

## De gli idoli

Facevano festa ogni anno a tutti i Dei in un giorno solenne (sì come i Christiani usano far nel giorno di ogni santi), & il dì seguente celebravano la festa de' morti, & e havevano per principal idolo de' morti una testa d'un Re, a guisa di mascara, lavorata di mosaico di turchine sì come si potrà vedere.

Un altro idolo havevano nel tempio fatto di suro, lavorato tutto di mosaico con turchine & coral, alqual essi chiamavano l'idolo del consiglio, percioche gli dava risposta alle cose che gli ricercavano.

Havevano ancora un'altro idolo di pietra calcidonia, chiamato l'idolo de gli orefici, al quale onoravano, & facevano festa quelli di questo mestiero.

Della istessa pietra havevano un altro idolo, detto l'idolo delle comadri (ch'era come Lucina, che fingono i poeti esser stata Dea del parto) alqual tutte le donne facevano gran festa & sacrificio, & al tempo del parto lo invocavano.

Un'altro idolo havevano pur di quella pietra, che chiamavano Dio delle filatrici, o donne che filano, & delle tessare, alqual havevano offerto nel tempio grandissima quantità di fusi col filato sottilissimo di bombaso.

## De' cortelli

Usavano sacrificare gli huomini con certi cortelli di pietra fuocaia durissima, & questi havevano nel tempio i sacerdoti, de' quali il detto Religioso ne tolse dua, & sono quelli che si dimostrano con le altre cose. Questi cortelli metteva il sacerdote per le coste sotto la sinistra poppa del sacrificato vivo, & mettendovi la mano dentro gli cavava il cuor, & con quello palpitando imbrattava il viso all'idolo, & questo era il modo del sacrifitio. Hanno due altre sorti di rasoy di porfido negro, cioe con punta, & senza punta, per sacrificarsi loro istessi, salassandosi dalle orecchie, & dalla lingua, & da'luoghi vergognosi. E questi rasoy tagliano non altrimenti che se fossero di fino acciaio. I quali si cavano d'una pietramontagna, con uno ingegno di legno, & saltano d'un colpo, col filo, & con la punta, sono lunghi una spana.

Gli fu tolto insieme con gli idoli un certo ingegno col qual si circoncidevano al modo de gli Hebrei, cioè una tavoletta di ebano, larga due dita e longa una spana, & nella banda di sotto ha un rasoio di porfido negro, & con quella tavoletta sopra un taglier di legno tondo si circoncidevano.

## De' calzamenti overo scarpe

I Calzamenti overo scarpe loro sono d'una pianta, lacual non è semplice ne albero, essi la chiamano Maquei, o Nequem, & è molto utile, Perciochè di quella fanno vino, & aceto, mele, conserva, drappi, scarpe, filo, & medesimamente con quella coprino le case, & fa buon fuoco, si pianta per ordine nelle possessioni come si piantano le vigne.

## Delle arme che hanno

Le arme che gli Indiani hanno sono archi & saette per la guerra, & per la caccia, lequali sono fatte di tal modo che fino alla mità sono di canna, & l'altra mità di Faggio, & hanno le punte di porfido negro, & alcune altre hanno le punte di legno brostolate al fuoco, & con questa sorte di saette fanno gli Indiani più fattione che con l'altra, perciocché si ben hanno la punta di legno passano una tavola grossa due dita, & l'hasta d'una lancia. Medesimamente hanno altre sorti di arme, cioe, certe haste di legno, le punte brostolate al fuoco, & certe mazze di legno che essi chiamano Macana, & ancora certe spade di legno nelle quali sono incassate col betume fortemente certi denti di porfido negro nel taglio, et tagliano con quelle d'un colpo il collo d'un Toro, come se fossero di acciaio.



## Della moneta

Nella provincia di Tututepeque, laqual siede nella costa del mar del Sur, havevano una moneta di rame antiquissima, che in sola questa provintia si espendeva. Questa moneta é longa una spana & tre dita larga, la fattura sua e come il ferro d'una acchietta, & valeva ogni una la quarta parte d'un giulio. Hanno ancora un'altra sorte di moneta, che generalmente si espende in tutte le provintie dell'India Occidental dove si trova, laqual chiamano gli Indiani Cacahuate, & e un certo frutto come le mandole, che producono certi alberi chiamati Cacaos, che nel frutto, & nelle foglie sono simili al lauro, o al melarancio. Questo albero fa certe pigne longhe come i cetrioli, nellequale si genera questo frutto come i pignuoli, & quando e maturo, & perfetto detta pigna rosseggia, Rende frutto due volte all'anno, cioè da mezzo Maggio fino per tutto Giugno, & da mezzo Decembrio fino per tutto Genaro. Vagliano dugento di questi Cacahueti frutti un Giulio, alle volte più o manco, secondo la fertilita di quello anno. Questo dopo ch'è secco non adoperandolo più per moneta lo beveno pestato, bevanda che si stima fra gli indiani come il vino. È mercatantia molto utile, e frequentata fra' mercanti Hispagnuoli, Italiani & Indiani e questo è quello che si suol dir comunemente che si truova una certa sorte di alberi nell'India Occidental, che fa il frutto d'oro e di argento, perciochè con quello si cambia la moneta come si ha detto, & vale un bagatin l'uno. Trovansi molte possessioni, & giardini piantati di questi alberi che rendino de intrata all'anno a' patroni loro a chi diece, & a chi quindici milia scudi, & alle volte ventimilia. È questo un'albero che non fa frutto infino a quatro, over cinque anni, ne' quali primi si alleva con gran fatica, percioche si pianta ne' testi come i melaranci & essendo già d'un'anno si repianta nelle possessione per ordine come stanno piantate le viti nelle vigne, & appresso ogniuno di questi alberi vi si piantano altri alberi ombrosi, cioè olmi, & sambuchi, accioché con l'ombra di quelli si alleva & sustente & si difenda del sole. In questo tempo si lavora la possession tre, & quattro volte, & essendo gia pervenuti all'anno sesto, levano via quei alberi che gli facevano ombra & rimangono soli, & per lo avenir si lavora la possession una volta all'anno e non piu, cioè, che levano via l'erba che nasce fra gli alberi. Dura questo albero dugento anni, & alle volte piu, & sempre rende frutto o poco o assai. È questa una delle maggiori, & più importanti ricchezze che si trovi nell'India.

In un'altra provincia si fanno certe tele picciole tessute di bombaso di diversi colori, larghe, & longhe un palmo che si spendino, & cambiano per moneta. Vinte di quelle vagliono un Giulio, & non servino d'altra cosa che di moneta.

### **Della tazza da bere**

Nascono certi alberi nella costa del Mar del Sur, i quali sono simili a' cotogni, & fanno il frutto grande, & tondo come le zucche, o nocelle de India, ilqual è vuoto dentro. Di questo frutto adunque fanno gli indiani tazze da bere il vino & il cacao. Chiamasi nella lingua loro Sicara. Fa un boccale, o vero due garaffe di vino.

### **Come gli Indiani lavorano la terra & il legname**

Hanno acchiette, & asciole, burilli & altri ingegni di rame, co' quali lavorano il legname, & il terreno, & non havevano cognitione del ferro, quantunque ci siano le vene, & i minerali di cio, ma non lo cavano, ne manco se ne curano, percioche si occupano di cavar l'oro e l'argento, che importa più.

### **I drappi che usano**

I Drappi che si usano in tutte le provintie della India, sono di bombaso, tessuti di diversi colori. Gli huomini portano due veste, cioè, una coperta, che nella loro lingua chiamano Tilmate, laqual si mettono indosso, & la ingroppano all'omero come fanno gli zingani, & l'altra veste è aperta davante, al modo d'un duliman Turchesco, ma senza maniche, che da loro è chiamata Sicol. Oltre di questo portano gli huomini una certa tela di bombaso, longa cinque braccia & larga un palmo, con la qual si coprono i luoghi vergognosi. Le donne portano un'altra coperta cinta di diverse colori, longa infino a' pie, che nella loro lingua chiamano Nagua, sopra questa portano un'altra, ch'è come una camiseta, chiamata da loro Guaipil, & e come quella che portano gli huomini, eccetto pero che questa sorte di veste e serrata davante per l'honesta.

### **De' libri che havevano**

Havevano libri, con certi caratteri & figure, per i quali intendevano i giorni, mesi, settimane, gli anni & i tempi, & i nomi loro. E per questi caratteri havevano notitia, & memoria de' fatti notabili di guerra, delle cose passate, delle historie, delle cantioni, de' lignaggi, de' maritaggi, delle feste che havevano di celebrar & del numero delle persone che dovevano sacrificar, i nomi degli idoli, che in ogni terra havevano particolari & generali, i tributi, & le intrate che a' Signori havevano di pagar, & in somma questi caratteri servivano come a noi servono le lettere ne' libri, per conservar la memoria delle cose che succedino. E per insegnar & intendere queste cose, havevano

scole & maestri, iquali insegnavano a i fanciulli tutto cio. E i maestri, & sacerdoti de' Tempi che questo insegnavano, erano stimati dal popolo in gran veneratione, & massimamente da i discepoli loro. Tutti gli idoli, & anticaglie sopra dette furono tolti a quelli di queste provintie, & i vescovi & i prelati hanno ordinato a tutti i Religiosi & sacerdoti che si affaticano intorno la conversione, in tutte le provintie dell'India, che gli levino via la memoria de gl'Idoli, riti & costumi, che i loro vecchi havevano, & cosi gli hanno ruinato le case, & i Tempi de gli Idoli, & fatto edificar Chiese, mettendovi le campane, & il segno della santa croce, accioche i fanciulli che nascono, & nasceranno, non veggano ne sappiano ne intendano per modo alcuno la idolatria, nella quale gli antichi loro erano sommersi, comandando sotto gravissime pene, che ciò si osservi, & castigando severissimamente quelli i quali che l'opposito facessero, per laqual cosa non è alcuno il qual habbia ardimento (diciamo de gli Indiani) di parlar co' figlioli delle cose de gli Idoli. E così si fa la conversione con amor, & il timor, & vengono ogni di volontieri a domandar il santo battesimo & quelli che l'hanno ricevuto, mostrano esser devotissimi, & buoni Christiani, venendo alle chiese ogni di ad ascoltar la dottrina Christiana, & al divino officio, senza esser chiamati ne sforzati a venire. Et mandano i figliuoli alle schole a che imparino la dottrina Christiana, & a cantar, leggere, & scriver, con le lettere nostre, le quali schole si tengono nelle chiese, et in questo, & in disegnare, et dipinger, et imparar tutti gli altri offitij, & arti di virtu, si occupano tutto l'anno, senza ricever fastidio ne molestia alcuna. Per la qual cosa sia ringratiato, & benedetto il Signore Iddio Salvatore nostro, il qual ne ha dato la gratia di essere servi suoi, non lasciandoci cadere nella Idolatria che quei pagani havevano, liberandoci della morte eterna per la virtu della sua santa morte e passione et del santo Evangelio. Amen.

## Appendix B

### *English Translation of the Descrittione dell'India occidentale*

Description of West India called the new world, where you will succinctly understand the way of their idols & of working the land, beautiful and rare things, gathered by a priest that came from there & brought with him some gentiles' things hand-made by the said Indians, all very subtly worked.

Brief declaration of the idols, antiquities, & other sacrificial tools that the Indians of West India (called the new world) used to sacrifice to the Gods during their feasts in their Temples. These were the things that the Indians had when they still were infidels, & when they were baptized and accepted Jesus Christ's Holy Gospel, these things reached the hands of a Religious priest who had preached and taught them the Christian Doctrine, & he took them here, together with many other & diverse ancient things, worth

seeing, since by seeing them one can trust what others wrote, & we learnt by means of relations. Thus, the things brought by this Religious are the following.

That is, a head of a King that was taken prisoner at war by another enemy King, made into a cup to drink, decorated by turquoise mosaic.

A bone of the thigh of the same King, made as an instrument to play, & dance.

An idol decorated by turquoise mosaic, together with other idols of Chalcedony that those pagans used to adore.

The stone knives which they used to sacrifice men, & children in the temple.

Some black porphyry razors that they used to circumcise as the Jews use to do.

The darts, & other weapons, which they used at war, & the clothes & the shoes they used, the cup to drink, the ancient currency they used, & the tools they used to work the wood, & the land.

Beside said things, some images of God & the Apostles were also brought, made of very fine feathers, of different kinds of birds, marvelously & delicately worked by the same Indians, by means of which we can recognize their very lively & sharp ingenuity in the arts, & human crafts. These are rare things, & never seen in Italy, & that will never be seen again, because they are extremely precious and hard to craft, and because they come from a very distant place, one year of navigation afar.

### **Of the head**

It was a custom of the Indians from the provinces of Tututepeque, & the Zapotecs, & from other provinces of the new world, that when some King or a high Lord was captured by another in war, in a solemn ceremony they sacrificed him alive in the temple, & cutting his head they made it into a cup, decorated with mosaic on the outside, and every year in that same day when they had achieved the victory, they celebrated the triumph, & during the ceremony the victorious King used to drink from the cup of the head of said King. That is one of the twelve heads of Kings that the mentioned Religious man took together with the idols from the King of the province called Tututepeque, in said India of the new world.

### **Of the bone of the thigh of the same King**

After having sacrificed that body, & made the head into a cup, with the bones of the thighs they used to make some instruments to play & dance in

the day of the triumph, & they ate the flesh, & they burned the entrails together with the rest in the temple. Of these bones, one has been taken belonging to the same King of the head, by which one can see how vengeful they were.

### **Of the idols**

Every year they celebrated all the Gods in a solemn day (as the Christians used to do on All Saints Day), & the following day they celebrated the Day of the Dead, & they had as foremost idol of the dead the head of a King, made as a mask, decorated by turquoise mosaic as one can see.

They had another idol in the temple, made of cork, completely covered with turquoise mosaic & coral, which they called the counsel idol, because he gave them responses to the things they asked.

They also had another idol made out of chalcedony stone, called the idol of the goldsmiths, which those of this guild used to honor & celebrate.

Of the same stone they had another idol, called the idol of the midwives (that was as Lucina, which the poets imagine as the Goddess of childbirth), to whom all the women dedicated great celebration & sacrifice, & she was invoked at childbirths.

They had another idol, also of the same stone, which they called God of the spinners, or women who spin, & of the weavers, to whom they offered in the temple great amounts of spindles with a very thin cotton yarn.

### **Of the knives**

They used to sacrifice men with some knives made of flint, very hard, & the priests kept them in the temple; the Religious man took two of these knives, & they are those that are shown together with the other things. The priest used to slide these knives under the left breast of the living victim, & putting the hand inside he took out the heart, & with the palpitating heart he anointed the face of the idol, & this was their way of sacrificing. They have two other kinds of black porphyry razors, with point and with no point, to sacrifice themselves, letting blood from the ears, & from the tongue, & from the shameful parts. And these razors cut as they were of fine steel. They are made out of a rock, with a wooden tool, & and they come off with a single strike, with the cutting edge, & with the point; they are one palm-long.

Together with the idols they also took a certain wooden tool used to circumcise as the Jews used to do, that is an ebony tablet, two fingers-wide and one span-long, & on the lower side it has a black porphyry razor, & with that tablet they used to circumcise over a round wooden board.

### **Of the footwear or shoes**

Their footwear, or shoes, are made with a local plant, which is not a simple tree and they call it Maquei, or Nequem, & it is really useful, for they get from it wine, & vinegar, honey, preserves, clothes, shoes, threads, & with it they also cover their houses, and it makes good fire, it is planted orderly in the fields, as grapes are planted.

### **Of the weapons they have**

The weapons that the Indians possess are bows & darts for the war, & for hunting, which are made in such a way that for half of their length they are made of reed and for the other half of Beechwood, & they have black porphyry points, & some others have the wooden point burned with fire, & with this kind of darts the Indians are more effective than with the former, because despite the wooden point they perforate a two fingers-thick board, & the shaft of a lance. They also have other kinds of weapons, that is, some wooden poles with burned wooden points, & some wooden maces, which they call Macana, & also some wooden swords, on whose cutting edge they strongly attach with bitumen some black porphyry teeth, and with these swords they cut the neck of a bull with a single strike, as they were of steel.

### **Of the currency**

In the Tututepeque province, which is on the South Sea coast, they had a very ancient copper currency, used only in this province. This currency is one span long & three fingers wide, made as the blade of a hatchet, & each of them was worth a quarter of a Giulio. They also have another kind of currency, generally spent in all the provinces of the West Indies where they have it, which is called Cacahuate, & it is a type of fruit such as the almonds, produced by certain trees called Cacaos, with fruits and leaves similar to laurel, or orange. This tree makes pines as long as cucumbers, containing a fruit similar to pine nuts, & when it is ripe, & perfect, the pine gets reddish, it gives fruits twice a year, that is, from the middle of May to the end of June, and from mid-December to the end of January. Two hundreds of these Cacahuete are worth one Giulio, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on the fertility of the year. When it dries out, they do not use it as currency anymore, but they crush it and drink it; this beverage the Indians esteem as wine. It is a very useful commodity, frequently used by Spanish, Italian & Indian merchants; and this is why it is often said that in the West Indies there are trees producing golden and silver fruits, because that fruit is

exchanged with coins as we said, and every fruit is worth one bagattino. There are many plantations, & gardens planted with these trees that provide a yearly-revenue to their masters; sometimes ten, sometimes fifteen thousands scudi, & sometimes twenty thousands. And this tree does not give fruits before four, or five years; and in these first years it is very hard to cultivate, because it is planted in a pot as the oranges, & when it reaches one year it is replanted in the plantation, ordered as grapes in vineyards; and near each tree they plant other shady trees, that is, elms & elders, so that with their shade it grows & sustains & defends itself from the sun rays. In this time they work the plantation three or four times, & in the sixth year, they eradicate the shady trees, and they let them alone; & then they work the plantation no more than once a year, eradicating the grass among the trees. This tree endures two hundred years, & sometimes more, & always gives fruit, sometimes more, sometimes less. And this is one of the main, & most important riches one can find in India.

In another province they make some small cotton clothes in different colors, one palm wide & long, which they spend and change for money. Twenty of them are worth one Giulio, & they only serve as currency.

### **Of the drinking cup**

On the coast of the South Sea grow some trees, similar to quince, & they make a big fruit; & round as a gourd, or Indian nuts, empty inside. With this fruit the Indians make cups for wine & cacao. It is called in their language Sicara. It equals a mug, or two pitchers of wine.

### **How the Indians work the land & wood**

They have hatchets & axes, burins & other copper tools, which they used to work the wood, & the soil, & they had no knowledge of iron, even if there are veins, and its minerals, but they do not mine it, and they even don't care, because they mine gold and silver, that is more important.

### **The clothes they use**

The clothes they use in all the provinces of India are made of cotton, woven in different colors. The men use two garments, that is, a blanket they call Tilmate, that they wear and tie at the humerus as the gypsies use to do, & the other garment is open on the front, as a Turkish duliman, but sleeveless, which they call Sicol. The men also wear a certain cotton cloth, five arms long & one palm wide, which they use to cover their shameful parts. Women wrap around their flanks another blanket, long until the feet, which

in their language they call Nagua; on top of this they wear another thing, which is like a chemise that they call Guaipil, & similar to the one worn by men, but this one is closed on the front for honesty.

### **Of the books they had**

They had books with certain characters & figures, through which they understood days, months, weeks, years & times, & their names. And through these characters they knew and remembered the notable facts of war, past things, songs, lineages, marriages, feasts they had to celebrate, & the number of people they had to sacrifice, the names of the idols, both the specific of each place & the general ones, tributes & revenues that they had to pay to the lords; in sum those characters were useful to them as the letters in our books are useful to us to preserve the memory of the events. And to teach these things they had schools & teachers that taught all this to the children. And teachers and priests of the Temples were esteemed and venerated by the people, and especially by their disciples. All the above said idols and antiquities were taken from these provinces, & the bishops & the prelates ordered all the Religious men & priests working on conversion, in all the provinces of India, to erase the memory of the idols, rites & costumes that their elders had, & so they destroyed their houses, & the Temples of the idols, & they built Churches, with bells, & the sign of the holy cross, so that the newborn children and the future ones will not see and know and understand idolatry, in which their ancestors were submerged, ordering harsh punishments in order to have the law observed, & severely punishing those who should do the opposite; for this reason nobody dares (among the Indians) speaking about idols with the children. And in this way conversion is achieved by way of love and fear, & every day they willfully come to ask for the holy baptism, & those who received it are extremely devout, & good Christians, coming to the churches every day to hear the Christian doctrine, & the divine office, with no need to call or force them. And they send the children to school to learn Christian doctrine, & to sing, read, & write with our letters, and these schools are in the churches, and on these activities, & to draw, and paint, and learn all other crafts, & arts of virtue, they work the whole year, with no bothering or trouble. For this thing, thanks to our Lord and God, our Savior, who blessed us with the grace to be his servants, preventing us from falling into the idolatry of those pagans, freeing us from eternal damnation, through the virtue of his passion and of the Holy Gospel.

Amen



## Notes

I want to express my gratitude to the following individuals: Luciano Formisano commented on philological aspects of the Italian language of the *Descrittione*; Christophe Vellet, in charge of the printed materials of the Bibliothèque Mazarine, provided photos and descriptions of the document's paper watermark; Carlo Poggi provided information on early modern Italian currencies; Rosanna Woensdregt kindly answered my questions on colonial Tututepec; Karin Pallaver, Sergio Botta, and two anonymous readers provided insightful suggestions; Eisa Farinacci revised my English text. I take full responsibility for any errors or misinterpretations.

- 1 The philologist Luciano Formisano kindly provided the following observation on the Italian language of the *Descrittione*: “Even if during the sixteenth century Venetian authors and publishers tried to follow the standard Tuscan Italian, a Venetian origin of the text could be suggested by terms such as *bagattino* and *burillo* (Venetian *borèlo*), a variant of *bulino*. Some phonetic and morphologic traits also seem to point in the same direction: the truncation of the letter “e” in the infinitive desinence, as in *sonar & balar, andar*, etc. (see also *taglier di legno*, with a truncation uncommon in Tuscan Italian); *longhi* for *lunghi*; the suffix *-are* for *-aie* in *tessare*; *magnavano* for *mangiavano*; the assibilation in *camiseta* (‘camicetta,’ with an additional northern trait in the making single of the consonant between vowels); *decembrio* for *dicembre*. More generally northern, but not specifically Venetian, are traits such as the form *acchietta* for *acchetta*; *i* for *gli* (*tutti i Dei*); *vinte* for *venti*; *comadre* for *comare*; *sinestra* for *sinistra*. Finally, quite surprising in a northern Italian text are forms such as *coprino* for *coprono*, *mettino* for *mettono*, *rendino* for *rendono*, and *servino* for *servono*” (Luciano Formisano, personal communication, September 2015).
- 2 The watermark is a circle (diameter 35 mm) divided by a horizontal line in two unequal parts (height 25 and 10 mm); the circle is surmounted by a Latin cross 90 mm long, parallel with chainlines, whose base stands on the outer edge of the smaller part of the circle; the horizontal arms of the cross are located 80 mm from the circle. See the watermarks database at [www.wasserzeichen-online.de](http://www.wasserzeichen-online.de) in the following motif category: geometrical figures – two elements – circle – cross consisting in one line – without additional motif – simple cross – circle with transverse line – dash straight; on the same page, the “period” graph shows how such motifs mostly cluster in the third quarter of the sixteenth century. For the ample chronological and geographical distribution of similar watermarks, including Venice, see Briquet 1923: nn. 2947–63 (especially 2961); Harlfinger and Harlfinger 1974: “cercle” motifs; and Mazzoldi 1990: nn. 644–91.
- 3 “sì come si potrà vedere”; “quelli che si dimostrano con le altre cose” (*Descrittione*: 2r).
- 4 The author of the *Descrittione* compares this “midwives’ idol” with the Roman goddess Lucina. Sergio Botta suggested to me that such a comparison could derive from the author’s reading of St. Augustine. On comparisons between Mexican and Classical gods, see Botta 2010, 2013.
- 5 An exhaustive tracing of the indirect origin of the information contained in the *Descrittione* through the wealth of early colonial texts is well beyond the scope of the present article. I will thus limit my work to showing the most relevant links between the *Descrittione* and its possible immediate sources, especially

López de Gómara and the Anonymous Conqueror. In the following paragraphs, when citing possible direct sources of the *Descrittione*, I will refer to the original Italian editions that could have been consulted by the author of the *Descrittione*; when citing works probably not directly linked to the *Descrittione*, I will refer to more accessible, modern editions.

- 6 “pietra fuocaia durissima” (*Descrittione*: 2r).
- 7 Body parts involved in bloodletting were also listed in the *Carta de la justicia y regimiento de la Rica Villa de la Vera Cruz . . .*, dated 10 July 1519 (Cortés 1985: 21) as well as in Peter Martyr’s Fourth *Deca* (Martire 2005: 502).
- 8 Indian circumcision was also recorded in Peter Martyr’s Fourth *Deca* (Martire 2005: 474, 482).
- 9 “. . . & è molto utile, Percioché di quella fanno vino, & aceto, mele, conserva, drappi, scarpe, filo, & medesimamente con quella coprino le case, & fa buon fuoco, si pianta per ordine nelle possessioni come si piantano le vigne” (*Descrittione*: 2v).
- 10 “Et è di tanta utilità questo albero che di esso fanno vino, & aceto, mele & sapa, fanno veste per vestirsi huomini & donne, ne fanno scarpe, ne fanno corde, legnami per case, et tegoli per coprirle, & aghi per cuscire & serrare le ferite, & altre cose” (Anonymous Conqueror 1566: 306); English translation from Saville 1917: 43–44.
- 11 The authorship of the so-called Anonymous Conqueror’s text and its relationship with López de Gómara’s work have been the object of a long debate: it is usually assumed that López de Gómara had access to the original—and now lost—Spanish text, that according to Carlos María de Bustamante was to be attributed to Francisco de Terrazas. On the other hand, Gómez de Orozco (1953) supposed that the 1556 Italian text of the Anonymous Conqueror is a fabrication by Alfonso de Ulloa, based on López de Gómara’s work. Since ascertaining the relationship between the two texts would require an analysis expanding beyond the scope of the present paper, I adhere here to the currently accepted hypothesis, assuming that the Italian text of the Anonymous Conqueror is the translation of a now lost Spanish original (Warren 1973: 67–68).
- 12 “alcuni [lo] chiamano maguei, & altri cardon . . . ci sonno tanti arbori di questi che sonno la come di qua le vigne, lo piantano . . . il tronco serve di legnamme, & la foglia di tegole . . . & quel liquore è come mosto cotto, se lo cuoceno qualche cosa diventa mele, se lo purificano, è zuccharo, se lo distemperano è aceto, & se gli mettono lo ocpactli, è vino” (López de Gómara 1555: 237). The same sequence of wine, vinegar, honey, and preserve/cooked must/black sugar, as well as the same information on industrial uses of agave, was later repeated, arguably through the mediation of Gómara’s and the Anonymous Conqueror’s texts, by John Chilton (1904 [1589]) and José de Acosta (1590): “About Mexico, and other places in Nova Hispania, there groweth a certeine plant called magueis, which yeeldeth wine, vineger, hony, and blacke sugar, and of the leaves of it dried they make hempe, ropes, shooes which they use, and tiles for their houses: and at the ende of every leafe there groweth a sharpe point like an awle, wherewith they use to bore or pearce thorow any thing” (Chilton 1904 [1589]: 377); “El árbol de la maravilla es el maguey, de que los nuevos o chapetones suelen escribir milagros, de que da agua y vino y aceite y vinagre y miel y arroppe y hilo y aguja y otras cien cosas” (Acosta 1590: 253). The ultimate

- source of all these texts seems to be Motolinía, who, in his *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*, devoted a full chapter to the topic titled “Del árbol o cardo llamado maguey, y de muchas cosas que de él se hacen, así de comer como de beber, calzar y vestir, y de sus propiedades”; in the text, Motolinía mentions *aguamiel, vino, arrope, miel, azúcar, vinagre, hilo, aguja, calzado, teja, leña*, etc., not necessarily in that order and in great detail (Motolinía 1995: 197–99; see also Motolinía 1996: 505–8).
- 13 Tin monies were mentioned in Cortés’s fourth letter (Cortés 1556b: 293). Treatments of cacao as money, fruit, and beverage, as well as its planting practices and the metaphor of “trees producing golden and silver fruits” abound in early colonial sources. Among the possible direct and indirect sources of the *Descrittione*, and as possible origins of the terms *cacaol/cacahuatel/cacahueti*, see Cortés’s second letter (Cortés 1556a: 65); Peter Martyr’s Fifth *Deca* (Martire 2005: 601); Fernández de Oviedo (1556b: 237); López de Gómara (1555: 74r–75v, 234r); Anonymous Conqueror (1556: 306).
  - 14 On working tools, the direct source of the *Descrittione* seems to be López de Gómara: “hanno acette, trivellini, & scopoli di bronzo” (López de Gómara 1555: 218). On the abundance of metals in New Spain, see López de Gómara 1555: 234; Anonymous Conqueror 1556: 304; and Cortés 1556b: 294. On New Spain Indians not mining metals such as iron or copper, see López de Gómara 1555: 234; and Fernández de Oviedo 1556a: 71.
  - 15 “& la ingroppano all’homero come fanno gli zingani” (*Descrittione*: 3v). The comparison is followed by another one mentioning a “Turkish duliman,” a typical instantiation of cultural Otherness in early modern Europe.
  - 16 “vestono un mantello quadro, con un nodo allhomero dritto, come le zingare” (López de Gómara 1555: 217v). For relevant descriptions of native clothes, see Peter Martyr’s Fourth *Deca* (Martire 2005: 458–59, 464–65); and the Anonymous Conqueror (1566: 305); see also Motolinía 1995: 46. The term *sicol* (hispanicization of the Náhuatl *xicolli*) used in the *Descrittione* could derive from Motolinía 1995: 46 (*xicoles*), while *nagua* could derive from Fernández de Oviedo (1556a: 69, actually *naqua*).
  - 17 On Mesoamerican codices, the best-known description was surely the one in Peter Martyr’s Fourth *Deca* (Martire 2005: 500–501); see also López de Gómara 1555: 42, 200.
  - 18 I owe thanks to Carlo Poggi for these observations on the initials of the text.
  - 19 The praising of obsidian blades’ sharpness is quite common in sixteenth-century texts, but the comparison with steel (*acciaio*) is extremely rare, the one with iron being much more common. See, e.g., Lopez de Gómara “è come ferro” (1555: 222v). On the role that the appreciation of obsidian sharpness acquired in early modern European texts, see Domenici 2017.
  - 20 The philologist Lucio Formisano observed that “regarding possible hispanisms, we could mention *espendere* for *spendere*, based on the Spanish *despender* (but *espendere* as a Latinism also appears in Venetian); and *comadre*, identical to the Spanish term but also appearing in northern Italian dialects, as also occurs for the term *camiseta*; similarly, the term *burilli* could be based on the Spanish *buril*, but it could also be a Venetian form. The firmest case seems to be the couple of coordinate adverbs *maravigliosa & delicatissimamente*, where the *–mente* ending of the latter also counts for the former; similar examples appear in ancient Italian, but they decrease in time to resurface as a typical hispanism

in translations and bureaucratic language during the sixteenth century, persisting all along the 17<sup>th</sup> century” (Luciano Formisano, personal communication, September 2015).

- 21 At least four religious took part in the two expeditions that Pedro de Alvarado made to Tututepec; the Mercedarian Bartolomé de Olmedo took part in both of them, while the *clérigo* Juan Díaz and the *diácono* Aguilar were in the first expedition and there was an unnamed one in the second expedition (Gay 2006: 218). Interestingly, Bartolomé de Olmedo, who was the main priest with Alvarado when the Tututepec king offered many precious gifts to the Spanish captain, is said to have spent time with the king, telling him “sweet words” when he was imprisoned before his death (Gay 2006: 190). But Olmedo died in Mexico in 1524, without ever going back to Europe. No voyages to Europe are clearly recorded for any of the others, that is, Díaz and Aguilar. Actually, Torquemada records that someone claimed Díaz went back to Spain; however, he seems to be right in his disagreement with this statement (Torquemada 1615, 3:81–82).
- 22 In 1569, during Juan de Córdova’s *provincialado*, an anonymous report on the Dominican province of Santiago de México, titled *Relación de la fundación, capítulos y elecciones . . .* (Anonymous 1866), was sent to the maestro of the order, Vincenzo Giustiniani. Even if issued anonymously, the report was probably written by Juan de Córdova himself (Méndez 1993: 460–61) or, anyway, under his supervision (Fernández Rodríguez 1994: 128n5). Interestingly, the report mentions that the group of Dominicans that went to the *capítulo general* of 1561 also met the Pope, arguably in Rome.
- 23 J. M. Beristáin de Souza (1947, 1:146) stated that the *Vocabulario* was published in 1571, but J. García Icazbalceta argued that it was most probably in 1578 (1954: 214–15).
- 24 On Juan de Córdova’s biography and bibliography, see Burgoa 1989b, 1:219–24; 1989b, 2:35–36, 106–16, 358; Quétif and Echard 1719–21, 2:307; Nicolás 1783, 679; Bandelier 1913; Jiménez Moreno 1942: 9–12; Beristáin de Souza 1947, 1:146–47; García Icazbalceta 1954: 204, 214–15, 290–96; Esparza 2008: 176–78.
- 25 It is worth noting that when describing Indian sacrifices, the abovementioned *Relación de la fundación . . .* states that upon killing the victims the Indians extracted their hearts and sprinkled their blood on the altars and the idols’ faces (“sacándoles el corazón y rociando con la sangre de ellos los altares y rostros de los ídolos”; Anonymous 1866: 449), thus repeating a theme that we already saw in the *Descrittione*.
- 26 Whether it was painted in New Spain or in Italy (Anders and Jansen 1996: 23), and whether Juan de Córdova brought it from the New World or participated in its production in Italy, Codex Vaticanus A shares various themes with the *Descrittione*, such as the anointing of the idols’ faces with sacrificial blood (fol. 15r), the *mageil/maguei* wine (fols. 20v, 21r, 23v), and body parts involved in autosacrifices and their comparison with Jewish practices (fols. 15r, 21v, 22r). The most interesting correspondences are found in its “ethnographic section” (fols. 54r–61v), the text of which could have been written, in my opinion, by Juan de Córdova. The page on autosacrifice mentions that “they used to let blood from the tongue, the ears, the thighs, the legs, and the shameful parts” (“se sacrificavan della lingua, et dell’orecchie et delle cosse et delle gambe, et delle parti vergognose”), this last locution being almost identical to the one

- occurring both in the *Descrittione* and in Ulloa's translation of Fernando Colombo. The same text goes on comparing Indian ceremonies with Jewish ritual practices, also a theme shared with the *Descrittione*. In the section on Indian clothes (fols. 60r–61r), besides including the term *guapil* (*huipilli*), Codex Vaticanus A says that “they all used drawers, that is, a cotton cloth, one arm long or a bit more, as narrow as one palm . . . and with this *mastil* they covered their shameful parts” (“portavan tutti brache le quali è un panno bombacino d’un braccio o poco più, et molto stretto come d’un palmo, . . . et con questo un mastil . . . coperte le parti vergognose”; fol. 60r), while the *Descrittione* states that “men use a certain cotton cloth, five arms long, and a palm wide, which they use to cover their shameful places” (“portano gli huomini una certa tela di bombaso, longa cinque braccia, & larga un palmo, con la qual si coprino i luoghi vergognosi”; *Descrittione*: 4r). The similarity between the two texts is striking, especially when both refer to the size of the cotton cloth by using the same units of measurement, *braccia* (arms) and *palmi* (palms). The word *mastel* appears in Córdoba's *Vocabulario*, together with such terms as *xicoli* and *güepil*, along with two Zapotec phrases translated as “Arrollar la manta el Indio y atarla del ombro a el sobaco contrario” and “Ponerse el Indio la manta arrollada o paño así desde el hombro al sobaco o lado contrario”; the *Vocabulario* also contains the words *maguey* and *neuquen*.
- 27 Eric Roulet mentions a Tututepec *cacique* called Perico who in 1532 accused Juan Peláez de Berrio, alcalde of Antequera, of stealing jewels (2008a: 181). It is not clear who this Perico is, probably a local noble but not a “king.”
  - 28 “Ellos tenían continuamente guerras con el cacique de Tututepec, contra quien se habían rebelado, y con muchos pueblos suyos; y así, andaban siempre en armas” (Acuña 1986: 84).
  - 29 For a recent summary of the Mesoamerican items in early modern Italian collections, see Domenici and Laurencich Minelli 2014.

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