IDENTIFYING A FORGED MAYA MANUSCRIPT IN UNESCO’S WORLD DIGITAL LIBRARY

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Abstract

Among the original holdings of the recently opened World Digital Library was a Spanish manuscript on the Maya that supposedly dates to 1548 (initially available at http://www.wdl.org/en/item/2961). It was given the title El modo de cómo hacían la pintura los indígenas (“How the Indians Made Their Paintings”) and contained an explanation of Maya glyphs and deities. Detailed analysis shows that the Pintura manuscript is a fake that belongs to the Canek group of forged manuscripts. It is written in the same hand as the Canek forgeries and shares the same stylistic characteristics with this group. Its drawings copy illustrations from the third English or the second Spanish edition of Sylvanus Morley’s The Ancient Maya, and from the Madrid Codex. The World Digital Library aims to make significant primary materials from all UNESCO member countries available on the Internet. Forgeries like the Pintura manuscript undermine the trustworthiness and eminence of this project. While the Pintura manuscript was removed from the World Digital Library in August 2009, researchers may find useful the holistic approach that allowed identifying it as a forgery. A historical document is here examined from six angles. What are its physical makeup, its penmanship, and its linguistic properties? Authentic documents should have a traceable history of documentation (here termed a “pedigree”) and their content should be consistent with well-established sources and with culture- and time-specific conventions.

In April 2009, the World Digital Library opened its digital portal (www.wdl.org). The library makes “available on the Internet, free of charge and in multilingual format, significant primary materials from countries and cultures around the world” (World Digital Library 2009a). Among its original holdings was an early Colonial period manuscript on the Maya that is cited here as the “Pintura manuscript.” Its Spanish text explains Maya culture and contains drawings of Maya deities and, mostly, calendrical glyphs. A friar supposedly wrote the Pintura manuscript in A.D. 1548 in northern Yucatan (World Digital Library 2009b). Spaniards had conquered this part of the Maya area only a few years earlier and were still struggling to control it (Chamberlain 1948). Few similarly-early Spanish documents treat Maya culture in detail. The Pintura manuscript therefore promised sensational insights, were it not a forgery.

The following analysis was submitted on May 25, 2009 for publication, only a few weeks after the publication of the Pintura manuscript. Preliminary assessments appeared online and in print (Eberl and Prem 2009a, 2009b). The manuscript remained available online throughout the summer of 2009 but was taken offline around August 21, 2009. While it is no longer available for study and should no longer be considered relevant as a historical source, the Pintura manuscript exemplifies the ways in which forged historical documents can be identified.

AUTHENTICATING HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

The first and most fundamental step in the analysis of documents is to prove that they are authentic; that is, that they were composed at the time, at the place, and by the author stated. Forensic scientists have developed an arsenal of tools and techniques to identify forged documents (Ellen 1997; Nickell 1996). They focus on modern documents and on methods that can be used in a court of law. As potential legal evidence, every document is suspicious and its authenticity has to be proven. Scholars often regard historical documents, on the other hand, as genuine unless proven otherwise (Pitt 1972:47). A more critical stance is warranted.

Historical documents have been forged in both ancient and modern times. The boundary between genuine and fake can be fluid for historical documents. The títulos primordiales or “primordial titles” provide, for example, histories and land boundary descriptions of Colonial period indigenous communities in Mesoamerica (Horn 2006). They emerged during Late Colonial times when escalating land disputes forced indigenous communities to defend their land claims in Spanish courts. The títulos primordiales “typically claim to date from the sixteenth century, although their vocabulary, orthography, script, and paper indicate a later date of composition” (Horn 2006). Many títulos primordiales, especially a subgroup known as Tchialoyan manuscripts (Noguez 2006), claim to be of sixteenth-century origin but were produced in Late Colonial times and are therefore not authentic. The ability to identify such non-authentic documents is important for scholars in order to avoid misunderstanding and misinformation. Their study can also be redeeming. For example, scholars appreciate the títulos primordiales as unique sources on how natives perceived the conquest and on the social and intellectual context of their production (e.g., Lockhart 1991:39–64).

In the holistic approach presented here, a historical document is examined from six angles in order to authenticate it (Barber and