

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Eight Deer “Jaguar Claw” is the epic saga of an eleventh-century Mixtec king from southern Mexico. More is known of the life of this great lord than any other person who lived in the Americas before the arrival of the Spanish. Even the biographies of figures such as the Mexica ruler, Montezuma, the Inca king, Atahualpa, or Native American heroines Pocahontas and Hiawatha seem a bare outline next to that of Eight Deer. The bulk of the historical information on these figures comes from Europeans, whose focus is on their subject’s actions in the context of European discovery, conquest and colonization. In the case of Eight Deer, who lived four hundred years before Columbus sailed to the New World, we have a detailed portrait of his life, his family, his ambitions, his flaws and his tragic end. The reason we know so much about him is that ancient Mixtec scribes wrote about him in many of their surviving books.

The Eight Deer Saga is part of a literary tradition that developed independently of anything in the Old World. In addition to the drama of Eight Deer’s life, it illustrates approaches to reading, bookmaking and poetics that is distinctly Mesoamerican, as well as norms, values, symbols and politics of the noble houses of Postclassic Mexico. It has been our experience that few persons apart from specialists are familiar with the books of Ancient Mesoamerica. In world literature the indigenous societies of Mexico and Guatemala are represented by Colonial-era texts like the Popol Vuh, which has been translated three times into English. Yet the Popol Vuh lacks a narrative structure that is easy to follow: The work is full of sub-stories and asides, and assumes a great deal of knowledge on the part of the reader, making it somewhat opaque, even for specialists. Moreover, the version we have is several times removed from its original pre-columbian text since all the translations are based on a manuscript written several hundred years after the Conquest. In contrast, this project focuses on three original books composed by indigenous authors living over five hundred years ago, unmediated by Spanish Colonialism. By translating the Eight Deer saga, which covers most of one side of the Codex Nuttall, and is supplemented by accounts in two other Mixtec books, Codex Bodley and Codex Colombino, we will be able to present a coherent narrative that embodies a distinctive Mesoamerican literary tradition and the society and culture of the eleventh-century Mixteca. Following the broad guidelines of the Bridging Cultures Initiative our aim in this project is to gather together the relevant texts that treat the life of Eight Deer; reproduce and annotate the original, illuminated texts; and provide an English reading of the Eight Deer Saga. These will be accompanied by a scholarly introduction to Mixtec history, writing and literature, with access to an on-line workbook for those interested in learning how to read a Mixtec codex. This will allow readers to create interpretations of their own rooted, in the methods and techniques of both indigenous and non-indigenous scholars and writers.

By translating this remarkable saga we will make a much-needed contribution from the Americas to the canon of epic literature. The Mixtec codices portray a world of kings and queens that is at once beautiful and inspiring, but also brutal. These books were sacred and conveyed devotional messages. They illustrate the spirit of valor and ideals of the time, speaking too things such as kinship and loyalty, but also hubris, ambition and deceit.