

## DELTOS

Vol 33, No 51 (2023)

# Deltos

DELTAOS JOURNAL FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE  
Athens • June 2023 • Volume 33 • Issue 51 • ISSN 2945-1205



# Δελτος

*Deltos* ΠΕΡΙΟΔΙΚΟ ΤΗΣ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ ΤΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΙΚΗΣ  
Αθήναι • Ιούνιος 2023 • Τόμος 33 • Τεύχος 51

### The De La Cruz – Badiano codex. A new facsimile edition

*Carlos Viesca, Mariablanca Ramos R. de Viesca*

doi: [10.12681/dj.38110](https://doi.org/10.12681/dj.38110)

Copyright © 2024, Carlos Viesca, Mariablanca Ramos R. de Viesca



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

# The De La Cruz – Badiano codex. A new facsimile edition

Carlos Viesca y T.<sup>1</sup>, Mariáblanca Ramos R. de Viesca<sup>2</sup>



The front page of the 2022 edition of the Estudios Sobre el Códice De la Cruz-Badiano Codex, Universidad Nacional Autónoma De México, Facultad De Medicina, ISBN 978-607-30-6402-6

In December last year, the Faculty of Medicine of the National University of Mexico (UNAM), published a high-quality facsimile edition of the *Libellus de Medicinalibus Indorum Herbis*, known as *Codex de la Cruz – Badianus* after the names of its author and Latin translator respectively. In this paper, elaborated comments on this edition are presented with four examples of the lavish illuminations and their English translations.

After its discovery at the Vatican Library, the *Libellus* has seen several editions. The first edition was by

William Gates, published twice in 1938 and 1939 in Baltimore. A year later, in 1940, Emily Walcott Emmart prepared a facsimile edition at Johns Hopkins. In 1952, Francisco Guerra produced a modest edition without colours in Xochimilco. The next edition, released in 1964 in Mexico by the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, was splendid. It came in three formats: a facsimile with the same characteristics and paper as the original manuscript, accompanied by a book of studies; a one-volume leather-bound facsimile with the studies; and a one-volume cloth-bound edition.

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of History and Philosophy of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)

In 1991, this edition was reproduced in two volumes. In 2005, a selected 20 plates and a new introductory study were published in both a large-format leather presentation and a booklet form. The INAH codex collection featured a CD with the manuscript and a booklet. Another edition focused on the illustrations and updated botanical information appeared in two issues of the journal *Arqueología Mexicana*. In 2017, the Pharmaceutical Mexican Association presented a beautiful facsimile edition, and in 2021, another edition was printed in Germany, bearing the seal of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. This current edition offers some new elements supplementing the previous ones. First a facsimile with very fine reproduction obtained directly from the original. Second, a reproduction of the Garibay translation with the images ahead. Third, a new set of studies actualizing the knowledge we have now on this book coordinated by Martha Eugenia Rodríguez and Nuria Galland.

The Codex manuscript was written from May to July 1552 by Martin de la Cruz, an Aztec physician responsible for the healthcare of indigenous children of noble families, at the Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco College, in the Indian part of Mexico City. Lacking formal education in the European sense and not understanding Latin, de la Cruz enlisted the help of Juan Badiano, a professor of grammar and rhetoric at the same institution and a descendant of the native rulers of Xochimilco, to translate the text according to his account.

The motive was a request from Antonio de Mendoza, the former Viceroy of New Spain and Peru, conveyed by his son Francisco, to the Franciscan friars overseeing the College, to compile a book containing illustrations of Mexican medicinal plants. This was because the Mendoza family had cultivation fields of *zarzaparrilla* (*Smilax mexicana*) and sought a monopoly on its exportation to Europe. The friars at the College aimed to seek financial support for improving their facilities, so the ultimate goal was to present the resulting work, known as the *Libellus*, as a gift to Emperor Charles V.

The *Libellus* was delivered to prince Philip, later known as Philip II, in May 1553. It remained in Spain until 1626, when Cardinal Barberini transported it to Rome, where it stayed in the cardinal library until 1902. At that time, the entire library was incorporated into the Vatican Library. In 1929, researchers discovered the *Libellus*, and it began its new academic journey. In 1991, the Pope presented it as a gift to Mexico. Since then, it has been housed in the library of the National

Institute of Anthropology and History.

The manuscript is divided into thirteen chapters, a symbolic number representing the celestial floors, or heavens, in Mexican Prehispanic cultures. It contains plants and recipes for specific diseases, enabling the identification of ailments and providing access to Nahuatl (Aztec) medicine definitions and causal concepts. The chapters follow the customary order found in medical books of that era, progressing from head to foot. However, in the eighth chapter, once the fatigue experienced by common people in their legs and feet is addressed, attention turns to the fatigue endured by “those administering the Republic” –i.e. rulers. This section prescribes plants with cardiotonic and psychotropic effects, indicating a unique type of fatigue linked directly to thought and mental activities. In doing so, the authors subtly introduce their belief that the mind and mental activities reside in the heart, without arousing suspicion from the friars and Spanish people.

In Chapter 9, we encounter diseases linked to the humors and their indigenous counterpart, *Aláhuac*. One particularly intriguing ailment is known as *nigrissanguinis*, which manifests as melancholy and represents a fusion of Aztec prehispanic medicine with the classical Hippocratic-Galenic tradition. The text discusses the symptoms of black bile disease and includes quotations that recall Avicenna’s recommendations regarding the treatment of these patients, although the remedies primarily derive from Aztec pharmacopeia. Moving forward, this chapter delves into fevers (continuous, acute, and intermittent), haemorrhoids, and joint diseases—all connected to substances produced by the body but accumulated and/or localised in various parts thereof.

Chapter 10 commences with mental disorders, beginning with epilepsy referred to as *morbiscomitialis* in accordance with Roman tradition. Remedies for this condition include the application of blood from thieves. Another section explores remedies for *Aberiticamens*, drawing from the pseudo-Hippocratic letter that recounts Democritus’ consultation and Hippocrates’ diagnosis of *hyperphilosophein* as the cause of his ailment. The inhabitants of Abdera were deemed truly insane. Once again, the prescription encompasses plants with cardiotonic properties, precious stones, and bezoars obtained from birds. Additionally, a disease named *micropsychie* is introduced, which entails pathological fear. Certain illnesses stem directly from ancient Mexican beliefs, such as remedies to ensure safe river crossings, protection against thunderbolt injuries,

and treatment for those affected by whirlwinds. The first two are associated with Tlaloc, the ancient rain and water deity, while the latter is linked to Ehécatl/Quetzalcóatl, the god of winds.

Chapters 11 and 12 address women's and children's health, covering various topics such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum remedies, including preparations to induce contractions and abdominal lotions, as well as breast tumours. The only specific pathology discussed is high fevers in young children, known as *adustio*.

The last chapter focuses on the indications of imminent death, providing a concise overview of clinical signs and remedies to prevent a fatal outcome. It mentions certain plants traditionally associated with the sun and stones from the crops of birds, including eagles, swallows, cocks, and doves. Furthermore, it highlights the significance of native species such as quecholtotl, tlapaltotl, and nochtotl, all believed to possess qualities related to survival and supernatural strength.

The *Libellus*, consisting of thirteen chapters, metaphorically recalls the thirteen heavens and mirrors a world view embodied within the human form. It symbolises the interconnectedness between pregnancy, birth, and death, signifying the cyclical relationship between life and death with occult significance. Not only is it the earliest medical publication authored in the New World, but it also serves as a remarkable testament to the exchange of ideas between native American and European medicinal traditions.

In the following two pages are shown four examples of plant illuminations in the 2022 edition of the Codex, and beside the same plants sketched in black and white with the English translation of the accompanying original Latin text. From the William Gates 1939 Translation and Commentary of the The de la Cruz – Badiano Aztec Herbal, The Maya Society, Baltimore.

---

**Corresponding author:**

Carlos Viesca  
e-mail: [cviesca@frontstage.org](mailto:cviesca@frontstage.org)

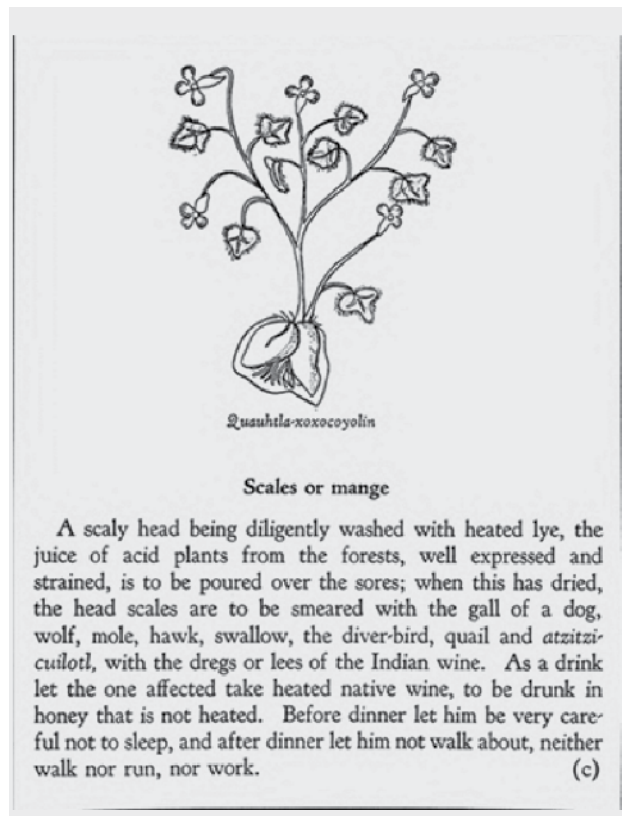


Figure 1a-b.

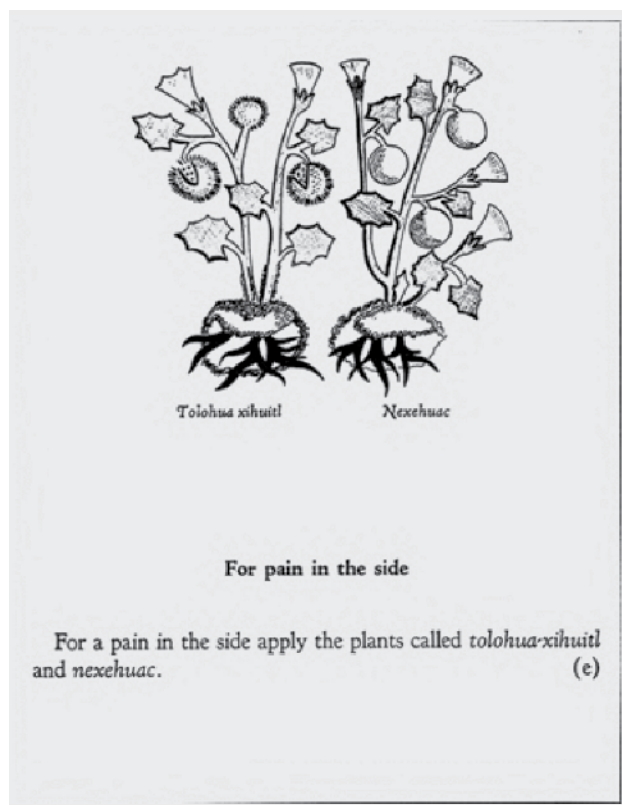


Figure 2a-b.

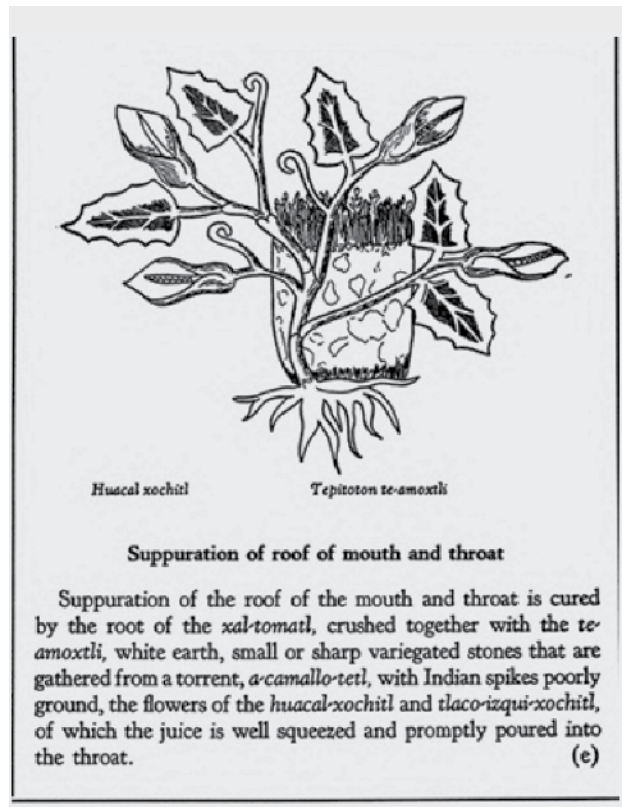


Figure 3a-b.

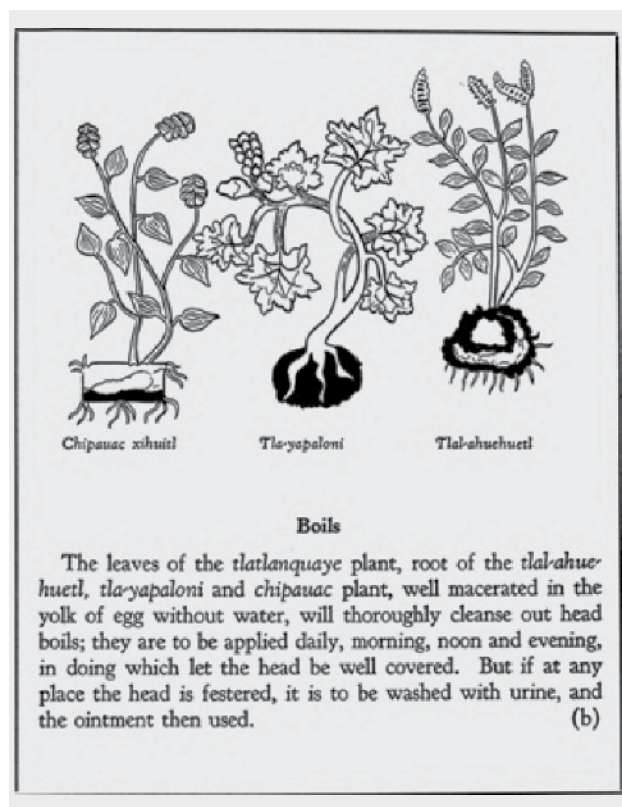


Figure 4a-b.