

De Giorgi · Hoffmann · Suthor (Hrsg.)
in Zusammenarbeit mit Laura Veneskey

Synergies in Visual Culture
Bildkulturen im Dialog

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Wilhelm Fink

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Inhalt

<i>INTRODUCTION</i> EINLEITUNG	11
 <i>IMAGE=CULT</i> BILD=KULT	
 SCHELLEWALD, BARBARA Spiegelungen aus Byzanz. Die Heiligkreuzkapelle Karls IV. und die Ikone	19
 GEDEVANISHVILI, EKATERINE Encounters of Eastern and Western Christianity: Iconographic Peculiarities of the <i>Holy Face</i> of Telavi	33
 CROPPER, ELIZABETH Holy Face/Human Face: Thoughts on Bronzino's ›Lutheran‹ Panciatici Portraits	45
 HELAS, PHILINE <i>La Santa Coda</i> . Zu Legende und Rezeption einer ungewöhnlichen Reliquie . .	57
 AKIYAMA, AKIRA Similarities between Buddhist and Christian Cult Images. On Statue Dressing and Relic Insertion	71
 <i>SACRED SPACE AND IMAGINATION</i> HEILIGE ORTE – IMAGINATIONSRÄUME	
 ZCHOMELIDSE, NINO The Epiphany of the <i>logos</i> in the Ambo in the Rotunda (Hagios Georgios) in Thessaloniki	85
 BRENK, BEAT Apsismosaiken ohne Altar: Schiffbruch des Funktionalismus?	97

BACCI, MICHELE Il Golgotha come simulacro	111
KÜHNEL, BIANCA Migrations of a Building: The Dome of the Rock in Jewish Synagogue Architecture	123
SHALEM, AVINOAM The Four Faces of the Ka‘ba in Mecca	139
LEDDEROSE, LOTHAR Eine <i>translatio loci</i> von Indien nach China	155
 <i>MIGRATION AND CULTURAL TRANSFER</i> MIGRATION UND KULTURTRANSFER	
HAASE, CLAUSS-PETER Ancient Creatures and New Ornaments: Studying the Program of the <i>Mshatta</i> Façade in Berlin	167
NICOLAI, BERND »Wie Gott den Okzident in den Orient umgewandelt hat«. Aspekte mediterraner Transfermodi im hohen Mittelalter	185
BELAMARIĆ, JOŠKO »Where there is no illusion there is no Illyria« – In the Hinterland of Split	199
DIDEBULIDZE, MARIAM Tao-Klarjeti Murals: Interaction of Cultural Traditions	215
PAYNE, ALINA Renaissance <i>sgraffito</i> Facades and the Circulation of Objects in the Mediterranean.	229
NOVA, ALESSANDRO Il Levante nell’opera del Vasari	243
SINGH, KAVITA A Knowing Look: Appropriation and Subversion of the Mughal Idiom in Rajput Paintings of the Eighteenth Century.	257

- BAADER, HANNAH
 Das Objekt auf der Bühne: Diamanten, Dinge
 und Johann Melchior Dinglingers Imaginationen
 einer Geburtstagsfeier in Agra 269

CULTURAL HISTORIES

ZEIT(GE)SCHICHTEN UND WISSENSKULTUREN

- FRICKE, BEATE
 Behemoth and Double Origins in Genesis 287

- FEHRENBACH, FRANK
Homo nudus vivus: Zur Anothomia (1345)
 des Guido da Vigevano 301

- THUNØ, ERIK
 Thessalonikian Weddings. The Miracle at Cana in
 the Church of Saint Nicolas Orphanos 315

- DELL'ACQUA BOYVADAOĞLU, FRANCESCA
 Constantinople 1453: the Patriarch Gennadios,
 Mehmet the II and the Serpent Column in the Hippodrome 325

- FROMMEL, CHRISTOPH L.
 Vittoria Colonna und Michelangelos religiöse
 Krise von 1545/1546. 339

- BÄTSCHMANN, OSKAR
 Migrationen: Holbeins *Bildnis Thomas Morus* 359

- WITTMANN, BARBARA
 Das Spätwerk eines Neugriechen:
 Jean-Léon Gérôme bei den Tanagräerinnen 371

ARTISTIC ENCOUNTERS

KUNST UND BEGEGNUNG

- FALLA CASTELFRANCHI, MARINA
 Non solo «ellenismo perenne» nella pittura bizantina delle origini 387

- CALDERONI MASETTI, ANNA ROSA
 La raffigurazione dei Mesi nel chioostro dei Canonici a Genova 395

KESSLER, HERBERT L. Artistic Reciprocity between Venice and Salerno in the Thirteenth Century	407
ROMANO, SERENA Voli d'angeli da Avignone a Subiaco	421
FROMMEL, SABINE »Coullonnes en grez en façon de Thermes à mode antique«: Karyatiden und Hermen am französischen Hof in den Jahren 1540.	431
FAIETTI, MARZIA Roma 1527, Bologna 1530. Parmigianino, il Papa e l'Imperatore	447
RUSSO, ALESSANDRA Recomposing the Image. Presents and Absents in the <i>Mass of Saint Gregory</i> , Mexico-Tenochtitlan, 1539.	465
 <i>AESTHETICS OF COLLECTING</i> SYSTEME DER ÄSTHETISCHEN ORDNUNG	
GLUDOVATZ, KARIN Früchte des Himmels. Albert Eckhouts Stilleben und die ästhetische Ordnung der »Neuen Welt«	485
GÖTTLER, CHRISTINE The Alchemist, the Painter, and the »Indian Bird«: Joining Arts and Cultures in Seventeenth-Century Antwerp. Adriaen van Utrecht's <i>Allegory of Fire</i> in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels	499
PELLIZZI, FRANCESCO A Collection of Traditional Maya Textiles in the Chiapas Highlands	513
SCHMIDT-LINSEHOFF, VICTORIA (†) PARIS/DAKAR, DAKAR/PARIS The making of <i>La cour</i>	529
GAEHTGENS, THOMAS W. Weltkunstgeschichte als Kunst der Menschheitsgeschichte. Zu Karl Woermanns <i>Geschichte der Kunst aller Zeiten und Völker</i>	543

CARAFFA, COSTANZA

Isole di immagini: il »dono Croquison« nella Fototeca
del Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz 561

BREDEKAMP, HORST

Der Keil der Nofretete, oder: 8mm entscheiden die Welt 579

Excursus

ACIDINI, CRISTINA

Genesi immaginaria della *Pala Nerli* di Filippino Lippi 593

ALESSANDRA RUSSO

Recomposing the Image

Presents and Absents in the *Mass of Saint Gregory*,
Mexico-Tenochtitlan, 1539

In one of the essays of his *On n'y voit rien*, the French art historian Daniel Arasse begins with the exclamation: »Les Ménines! Encore? Non! Non! Par pitié. Ça suffit avec Les Ménines!«. ¹ The present essay could begin with: »The mass of Saint Gregory! Once again? No, please! Everything has been said about this piece«. And yet, because an artwork is by definition inexhaustible, we can look at it anew. As Arasse puts it: »Rien à faire, il faut que tu y reviennes«; that is to say, »nothing to do, you must go back to it«.

In the three decades since its fortunate discovery in the 1980s, ² the feather mosaic known as the *Mass of Saint Gregory* (fig. 1), made in Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1539, has been addressed in numerous publications, undergone a major conservation process, and been presented in international shows, traveling from the Musée des Jacobins, Auch (in Southern France), where it is preserved, to Denver, London and Paris in a specially constructed climatized box. ³ Art historians, historians, conservators and even philosophers have approached this masterpiece from different angles – iconographic, aesthetic, material, historical, theological and juridical. ⁴

* I would like to heartily thank Alexander Nagel who invited me to the month-long intensive workshop »1500-1600. Les réformes dans un context global«, sponsored by the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA) and the Fondation de France, in June 2010. In that occasion, I begun working on the present text, highly inspired by the ongoing conversation with the members of the workshop. He also drew my attention to the 1535 papal bull on indulgences in the Indies that I will comment on in the following pages. Thanks are also due to Berenice Alcántara for her help with the Náhuatl translation of the *Doctrina Christiana*, to Abigail Newman and Lia Markey for their support from the Princeton libraries, to Rebecca Fittle for her fine reading of the text and, finally, to the coordinators of this volume for the invitation to participate and for their attentive editing.

1 »The Meninas! Once again? Non! Non! For pity's sake! Enough with The Meninas!« Daniel Arasse, »L'oeil du maître«, in id., *On n'y voit rien. Descriptions*, Paris 2003, pp. 175-216.

2 Based on the information provided by Pascal Mongne, I narrate the specifics of this discovering in Alessandra Russo, »Inventory of Extant Featherwork from Mesoamerica and New Spain«, in *El vuelo de las imágenes. Arte plumario de México y Europa (Images take Flight)*, ed. Alessandra Russo, Gerhard Wolf & Diana Fane, México, forthcoming.

3 For a report of the conservation, see Claire Bergeaud y Frédérique Vincent, »Feather Stories: The Saint Gregory Mass and the Ecouen Triptych«, in *Feather Creations. Materials, Production and Circulation*, symposium paper published in *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, Paris 2006. <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/1450>

4 The bibliography includes Sonia Pérez Carrillo, »Aproximación a la iconografía de la Misa de San Gregorio en América«, in *Cuadernos de Arte Colonial*, 4, 1988; Elena Isabel Estrada de Gerlero &



Fig. 1: *Amanteca* (feather artists) from the school of San José de los Naturales, Mexico-Tenochtitlan, *Mass of Saint Gregory* feather mosaic with paint and gold on wood, 1539. Auch, Musée des Jacobins
 (Color image: [http://www.museoartpremier.com/Mosaique\(c\)MuseedesJacobins.jpg](http://www.museoartpremier.com/Mosaique(c)MuseedesJacobins.jpg))

Some of its iconographic details have been the object of in-depth studies, including the *pastiglia* pineapples standing on the sarcophagus in place of Mary Magdalene's anointment vessels. The pineapples, a fleshy and fragrant American product, provide here a profoundly innovative means of representing the dogma of the transubstantiation and evoking Christ's Passion.⁵ An iconographic reading of the turbaned figure and the man dressed in a Northern-European style portrayed on top, has identified them as a Turk and a Protestant, propelling the *Mass of Saint Gregory* scenario into the contemporaneous political struggles that Christianity was facing within Europe.⁶ Efforts have been also made to find the European print or prints used as probable »model(s)«,⁷ and to analyze the way in which the (uncertain) source could have been reinterpreted in the local artistic context. Of all the available evidence, the material composition of the image has provided the most intriguing clues to tracking these transformations. In the Mesoamerican world before the Conquest, feathers were associated with sacrificial practices. Here, in the context of the Christianization of New Spain, they seem to have acquired unexpected meanings, namely to represent the sacrifice of Christ.⁸ Yet in chromatic terms, the small Byzantine mosaic of the *Man of Sorrows* presently housed at Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome – already considered in the fifteenth century the *primae ymaginis pietatis*⁹ (the original vision that Pope Gregory had of the Christ humiliated) – pro-

Marita Martínez del Río de Redo, »The Mass of Saint Gregory« in *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries*, ed. John p. O'Neill, New York 1990, p. 260; Estrada de Gerlero, »Una obra plumaria de San José de los Naturales«, in *Arte y Coerción. Primer Coloquio del Comité mexicano de historia de arte*, México 1992; Pascal Mongne, »La Messe de Saint Grégoire du Musée des Jacobins d'Auch. Une mosaïque de plumes mexicaine du XVIe siècle«, in *Revue du Louvre*, 5-6, 1994, p. 178; Estrada de Gerlero & Donna Pierce, »Mass of Saint Gregory«, in *Painting a New World. Mexican Art and Life 1521-1821*, ed. Donna Pierce, Exhibition catalogue (The Denver Art Museum 2004), Denver 2004. Recently, a brochure co-edited by the Collège International de Philosophie has been devoted to the piece, claiming its philosophical potential: Dominique de Courcelles, Claude Louis-Combet & Philippe Malgouyes, *La Messe de Saint Grégoire*, Paris 2011. See, also, *El vuelo de las imágenes* (note 2), where the piece is addressed in several of the essays.

- 5 Gerhard Wolf, »Ananas und Tiara: zur Gregormesse von Auch«, in *Was aus dem Bild fällt: Figuren des Details in Kunst und Literatur. Friedrich Teja Bach zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Edith Futscher et al., Munich 2007, pp. 333-347. See, also, Mongne, »La Messe de Saint Grégoire« (note 4).
- 6 María Judith Feliciano, »Picturing the Ottoman Threat in Sixteenth-Century New Spain«, in *The Turk and Islam in the Western Eye, 1450-1750*, ed. James G. Harper, London 2011, pp. 243-265.
- 7 Mongne has proposed the engraving by Israel van Meckenem as the source (id., »La Messe de Saint Grégoire« (note 4)), but the image is probably the fruit of the combination of several prints, as it is often the case in the production of feather mosaics in New Spain.
- 8 Alessandra Russo, »Plumes of Sacrifice: Transformations in Sixteenth-Century Mexican Feather Art«, in *Res. Anthropology and Aesthetics: »West by Non-West«*, 42, 2002, pp. 226-250; Wolf, »The Incarnation of Light«, in *El vuelo de las imágenes* (note 2).
- 9 On the Byzantine mosaic and the engraving made by Israel van Meckenem, see Gerhard Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel. Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance*, Berlin 2002, pp. 163-166.



Fig. 2: *Man of Sorrows*, central panel of icon, mosaic on wood, c. 1300. Rome, Basilica di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme (Color image: <http://www.learn.columbia.edu/treasuresofheaven/relics/Imago-pietatis-Man-of-Sorrows.php>)

duces similar brilliant effects to those achieved in the feather »mosaic« (fig. 2). Scholars have also inquired about the possible presence of Mesoamerican motifs in the liturgical garments of the priests as well as the reference to New Spanish practices in the blue background, which could recall the open-air masses performed after the Conquest.¹⁰ The same color choice, however, is also present in images painted in the Old World at the end of the fifteenth century (fig. 3).¹¹ In an effort to track the »local taste« of the artwork, scholars have even ventured so far as to propose that Saint Gregory and his ministers possess pronounced indigenous features.¹²

The approach of the present essay is not iconographic, nor will I discuss the aesthetic of this image from the vantage point of its astonishing medium and of the

10 Mongne, »*La Messe de Saint Grégoire*« (note 4). Also note that the priests kneel on a soil that seems to be more of a turf than the interior of a church.

11 A blue background appears also in the Mass of Saint Gregory included in the retablo of San Blas (1462) by the Aragonese painter Martín de Soria. This piece presents another characteristic similar to the New Spain image: the presence of gold inlays; some of those will be substituted in the feather painting with *pastiglia* fills.

12 Dominique de Courcelles speaks of »Un pape aux traits indiens, entouré de deux assistants eux-même à l'indianité marquée« in Courcelles, Louis-Combet & Malgouyes, *La Messe de Saint Grégoire* (note 4), p. 42.

Fig. 3: Jean Poyer, *Mass of Saint Gregory*, illumination in the *Hours of Henry VIII*, c. 1500. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library (Color image: <http://www.themorgan.org/collections/swf/exhibOnline.asp?id=331>)



new pictorial directions that it took after the conquest.¹³ I will instead return to the historical context of the production of this magnificent piece, shedding a different light on the meanings of its appearance in the Mexico-Tenochtitlan of the year 1539.

A locked image

The complete »decipherability« ascribed to the *Mass of Saint Gregory* is partially due to the almost impeccable Latin inscription that frames the central part of the image and seems to leave little room for any doubt. If we transcribe it from the top left, it reads:

PAULO III PONTIFICI MAXIMA EN MAGNA INDIARU[M] URBE MEXICO
/ CO[M]POSITA D[OMI]NO DIDACO GUBERNA/TORE CURA FR[ATR]IS
PETRI A GANTE MINORITAE A.D. 1539

All the information regarding the making of the piece seems to be present within the mosaic itself. Suspending for a moment the syntax of the inscription, we find

¹³ See Russo, »A Contemporary Art from the New Spain«, in *El vuelo de las imágenes* (note 2).

in order of appearance: the pope, Paul III; the great city »of the Indies« (Mexico-Tenochtitlan); »Diego« (Huanitzin or Huanitl, or Panitzin), recently appointed the first governor of the capital of New Spain; the »architect« of this masterpiece, the Franciscan (»brother minor«) Pedro de Gante, under whose care (*cura*) the image was composed (*composita*); and, finally, the year: 1539.

The quantity of historical clues inherent in this masterpiece is rare even beyond the panorama of New Spanish artistic production. The inscription that entirely encircles and »locks« the image appears to be an attempt to avoid any heterodox interpretation. It presents the artwork as an alliance, or at least states the contemporaneity, between the papacy and the local »authorities« of Mexico (Diego Huanitzin and Pedro de Gante). The papacy is also the object of the image contained within the Latin frame: the representation of the vision that Pope Gregory the Great (540-605 CE) had just after requesting a sign of the real presence of the body of Christ in the host during the celebration of the Eucharist (transsubstantiation): the *Man of Sorrows* appeared out of the sepulcher, surrounded by the instruments of the Passion, the *arma Christi*.

Since the pioneering reading of Estrada de Gerlero and Martínez Del Río de Redo, scholarship has linked the reference to Paul III in the inscription with the *Sublimis Deus* bull expedited by the pope in 1537.¹⁴ The *Sublimis Deus* was the official document that stated the rationality of the Indians, their freedom, along with their capability and even desire to receive the Catholic faith: »the Indians are truly men and [...] they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic Faith but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it«. The *Mass of Saint Gregory* would have therefore been a counter-gift offered (and even made) by the local lord to the pope to thank him for this document acknowledging the humanity and liberty of the local population. But, as Hanke reminds us, Paul III's bull can also be seen as »the opening wedge for a more aggressive papal program in the affairs of the Indies«. ¹⁵ In fact, the »recognition« of the rationality of the Indians provided the indispensable juridical basis for their Christianization and affirmed the responsibility and, more specifically, liability of their behavior.

Furthermore, the interpretation of the inscription is open to debate: Pope Paul III could be the recipient of the work but his name and title could also function as a simple temporal reference; Diego could be the author of the mosaic but it is more likely that his name functions as a marker of the political situation in Mexico in 1539; and *maxima* could be a corruption of *maximo* (»Pontifici Maximo«) but could also be correctly declined as feminine to refer to the composition itself (the word *res*

14 Estrada de Gerlero & Martínez del Río de Redo, »The Mass of Saint Gregory« (note 4). Since then, scholars cite the bull to claim »the pope's unprecedented position on human rights to be the true foundation of international law« (Pierce, »Mass of Saint Gregory« (note 4), p. 98).

15 »Paul III may have issued the bull solely because of his desire to protect the Indians, but it is possible that this shrewd and tenacious ruler also intended the bull to be the opening wedge for a more aggressive papal program in the affairs of the Indies«; Lewis Hanke, »Pope Paul III and the American Indians«, in *Harvard Theological Review*, 30, 1947, p. 73.

would here be implied). The inscription could therefore be read as: »Composed in the great city of Mexico for the Supreme Pontiff Paul III, by the Lord Diego, under the care of the Friar Minor Pedro de Gante, in 1539«, »For Pope Paul III, a most splendid thing fashioned in the great city of Mexico of the Indies by the Governor Don Diego, under the care of Friar Minor Pedro de Gante, AD 1539«, or even »Composed in the great city of Mexico when Paul III was Supreme Pontiff and when Lord Diego was governor, under the care of the Friar Minor Pedro de Gante, in 1539«. I believe that the »neutrality« of this last translation provides the possibility of a new interpretation of the piece itself.

Regardless of the intended recipient of the artwork, the *Mass of Saint Gregory* clearly intends to provide the perfect »image« of the outcome of exactly two decades of colonization and Christianization. The rhetorical term chosen to describe the making of the image, as *composita* (composed, constructed, invented) provides a rich insight. Pedro de Gante, the only certain active player in the making of the image, seems to have crafted it as the triumphal icon of the Franciscan missionary project, and more precisely of his catechizing method, in which artistic training played a crucial role. But it seems necessary to question this »affirmative image of the conversion of the Mexicans«¹⁶ that the *Mass of Saint Gregory* intends to portray – and in fact to »construct« (*componere*) – by broadening our lens onto the actual situation of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1539.

A tarnished image

The indispensable counterpoint to the ideal and idyllic representation of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1539 offered by the *Mass of Saint Gregory* is the ferocious fight against a panoply of offences that the Apostolic inquisition¹⁷ was waging in the very same years. Since the first bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga, had been appointed General Inquisitor of New Spain in 1535, the number of accusations had tremendously increased, with a peak in exactly 1539, when at least forty trials took place: idolatrous, bigamous, blasphemous, medicine men hidden in the Nahuatl population, but also – and in a much stronger proportion – Spanish, Italian, Flemish, Greek, Portuguese and mulattos, among others, pursued for »Judaizing« behaviors, Protestantism, blasphemy, superstition, heresy, witchcraft and even

16 Tom Cummins, »To Serve Man. Pre-Columbian Art, Western Discourses of Idolatry and Cannibalism«, in Res. *Anthropology and Aesthetics*: »West by Non-West«, 42, 2002, pp. 109-130, p. 116.

17 This term identifies the activities of the Inquisition before the establishment of the Tribunal in New Spain in 1571. Further distinctions are made between the very first years where the inquisitorial powers weren't legislated (1521-1524), the »monastic inquisition« (1524-1535) and the »episcopal inquisition« (1536-1571). See Richard E. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century*, Albuquerque 1969; Bernard Grunberg, *L'inquisition apostolique au Mexique. Histoire d'une institution et de son impact dans une société coloniale (1521-1571)*, Paris 1998.

Erasmianism. The accusers appeared daily in front of the authorities, along with the countless number of witnesses summoned in the most remote villages of New Spain as well as throughout the capital. Let us remember the case of Francisco de Sayavedra, the Spaniard accused in 1539 of missing Mass for a period of six months and forcing his workers to work on Sundays, while declaring that one needs to pray only to God, not to the saints. He was also thought to have kept Erasmus's essay on free will (*De libero arbitrio diatriba sive collatio*, 1524) in his home.¹⁸ That same year was also the peak of the trials for Judaizing purposes, at least sixteen, including the one of Francisco Millan, who turned on and denounced several dozens of other people – traders, barbers, school teachers, goldsmiths, knitters, miners, stonemasons, innkeepers, and so on.¹⁹ One of Millan's victims was the Portuguese Pedro Hernández. Born in the Açores, Hernández was denounced as Judaizing because in church he closed his eyes during the elevation of the host (he defended himself by claiming to suffer of insomnia) and turned his back to the images of saints.²⁰ Another interesting case is that of the jeweler Alonso Aleman, accused of Lutheranism for having affirmed, among other things, that papal bulls had no authority and that the indulgences and the pardon of the pope were only superstitions – along with, of course, the cult of images.²¹ In the same year (1539), Juan Nizado, an Italian shoemaker, was denounced for having torn up a papal bull and the Flemish Juan Banberniguen for refusing to believe in the sacrament of the transubstantiation and in the existence of the Purgatory.²² All these trials resonate very deeply with the content of the *Mass of Saint Gregory* composed that same year.

But the two most complex and spectacular trials that took place in 1539 involved Nahuas nobles. Although these trials developed in parallel, they resulted in different verdicts. The first, initiated on June 22 1539, accused the cacique of Texcoco, Don Carlos Ometochtli, of practicing the ancient sacrificial rites. The numerous «idols» found in his possession were cited as evidence. He was publicly burned as a «dogmatizing heretic» in the square of Mexico on 30 November of the same year.²³ The other trial began two days before Ometochtli's, on 20 June 1539, when another noble, Miguel Pochtecatl Tlaylotla, was accused of keeping in his house «bundles» from the temple of Huitzilopochtli (fig. 4) – bundles also called «Huitzilobos» (*tlaquimilolli* in Náhuatl) composed of objects and statues associated with the Mexica

18 Grunberg, *L'Inquisition apostolique* (note 17), p. 154 (based on a trial in the AGN of Mexico, *Inquisición*, III, 3, fol. 95-97).

19 *Ibid.*, p. 122 (based on the trial, AGN of Mexico, *Inquisición*, XXX, exp. 8, 12, 13).

20 *Ibid.*, p. 125 (based on the trial, AGN of Mexico, *Inquisición*, XXX, exp. 5, fs. 57-64).

21 *Ibid.*, p. 134 (based on two trials, AGN of Mexico, *Inquisición*, II, 1 fs. 1-32 and XL, 24, fol. 133).

22 *Ibid.*, p. 136 (based on a document kept in the AGN of Mexico, *Inquisición*, XXX, 1, fs. 3-20).

23 *Proceso inquisitorial del cacique de Texcoco*, first published by Luís González Obregón in *Procesos de indios idólatras y hechiceros*, Mexico 1910. This trial has been studied by numerous scholars, including Patricia Lopes Don, *Bonfires of Culture. Franciscans, Indigenous Leaders, and Inquisition in Early Mexico, 1524-1540*, Norman 2010.

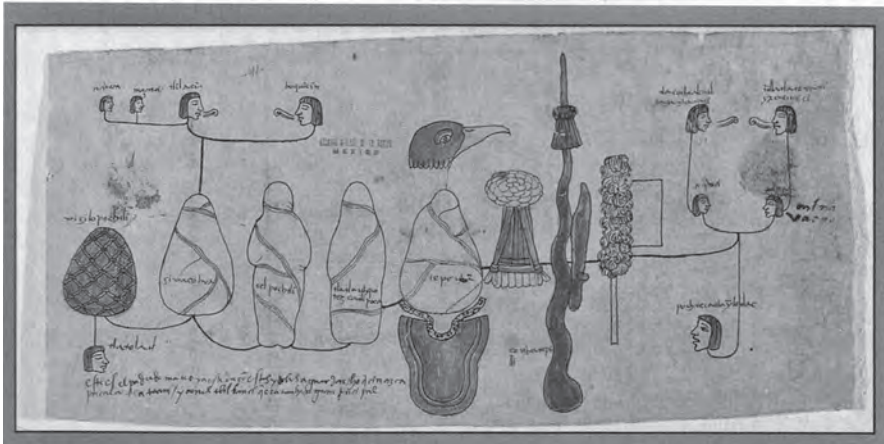


Fig. 4: *The Huitzilopochtli bundles*, page from of the inquisitorial trial of Miguel Pochtecatl Tlaylotla, pictography on amate paper, 1539. Mexico City, Archivo General de la Nación

war »god«, including edible statues made of seeds of *tzoalli* (a dough formed of *huauhili*, or amaranth seeds) eaten during the ceremonies²⁴. The missionaries immediately compared these practices with the Eucharist. Numerous other people were implicated in the case of the bundles of Huitzilopochtli, including Diego Huanitzin, the same Diego whose name appears on the *Mass of Saint Gregory* as the *gubernator* of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. One of the witnesses interrogated in 1539 reports an event supposedly dating back to 1530/1531:

In Azcapotzalco, Don Diego [Huanitzin], the lord of Mexico now, and [Don Pedro] Achacatl and three other nobles discussed among themselves what to do about the friars preaching to them about giving up the Huitzilobos. Don Diego said that they ought to give the Huitzilobos to the friars. Achacatl said they should not give them up or say anything about them to the friars, and so they did not.²⁵

Even though he was mentioned several times in the trial, Diego Huanitzin was not interrogated by Zumárraga after Francisco's deposition. Was it because his high position as the governor of the city granted him a kind of political immunity? Or was Francisco's deposition enough to free the governor from any further suspicion? Eight years earlier, he had already advised his peers to give the bundles to the friars;

24 On the *tlaquimilolli*, see Guilhem Olivier, »Les paquets sacrés ou la mémoire cachée des Indiens du Mexique central (XVe-XVIIe siècles)«, in *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, 81, 1995, pp. 105-141.

25 The trial of Pochtecatl Tlaylotla is also transcribed by Gonzáles Obregon, *Procesos de indios idólatras* (note 23) and analyzed by Lopes Don, *Bonfires of Culture* (note 23) who translates and comments this excerpt on p. 132.

through this action he could have built a perfect profile for a position in the colonial establishment. Apparently, he was not only ready to collaborate, but also to actively participate in the political imbroglios. If it is true that as the grandson of the Mexica *tlatonani* Axayacatl and nephew of Moctezuma, Diego was the first indigenous governor of the city, it is also true that he was appointed after a conspiracy against another family member, a conspiracy in which he probably played a role. Up until 1536, the candidate for this position had been his cousin, Martín Cortés Nezahualtecolotzin, son of Moctezuma. He was poisoned and thereby eliminated from the political scene.²⁶ The literary portrait of Huanitzin in several of the Náhuatl poems of the *Cantares Mexicanos* (probably written around 1550) manifests the same level of ambiguity: he is recalled as the defeated chief through the description of the events of 1519, when he was the governor of Ecatepec and Cortés made him prisoner, but he also appears as *tepixohuatzine* »the Sower-of-Men«, that is to say, the one capable of repopulating Mexico after the defeat.²⁷

The past relationship between Huanitzin and Pochtecatl Tlaylotla is not the only element that allows us to relate the context of the *Mass of Saint Gregory* with the inquisitorial trials of the same years. During the noble's trial, Pedro de Gante had helped Zumárraga determine where the idols of Huitzilopochtli had gone. We know that after being interrogated and tortured, Miguel Pochtecatl Tlaylotla was placed under de Gante's surveillance (we could say »*cura fratris petri a gante minoritate*« as we read on the frame of the *Mass of Saint Gregory!*).²⁸ As for the actual relationship between Huanitzin and Pochtecatl, Diego's name on the *Mass of Saint Gregory* could have also served to further eliminate any blame against him in the Huitzilobos case.

The dozens of trials taking place in 1539 clearly show how the entire society of New Spain, in its heterogeneity (not only the indigenous population), was under the effects of »inquisitorial fever«. But the situation reached a breaking point in that precise year. Zumárraga's measures and the whole Inquisition model set up by the bishop were highly criticized. The Supreme Council of the Inquisition openly reprehended the decision to burn Ometochtli with several letters sent from Spain, as we can read in this *Cédula* issued in 1539:

It has seemed to us a very rigorous thing to treat a person recently converted to our holy faith that perchance was not instructed in its matters as necessary; and in these parts, in regards to the moriscos that converted themselves many years ago and have been indoc-

26 María Castañeda de la Paz stresses the discrepancies found in the sources on the starting date of Huanitzin's appointment. Based on a comparison of these documents, she proposes 1538 as the most plausible year. María Castañeda de la Paz, »Historia de una casa real. Origen y ocaso del linaje gobernante en México-Tenochtitlan«, in *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, Debates 2011, <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/60624>.

27 *Cantares Mexicanos, Songs of the Aztecs*, ed. John Bierhorst, Stanford 1985, Song 66, stanza 14, p. 321.

28 Grunberg, *L'inquisition apostolique au Mexique* (note 17), p. 87.

trinated and taught in the things of our holy faith and speak our language, one has not used nor uses similar rigor before imposing other spiritual penitences on them.²⁹

Comparing the situation with the long-term experience of the conversion of the Muslims in Spain who were indoctrinated in an effective way (and once converted, will become Moriscos), the highest Peninsular authorities took Ometochtli's case as the demonstration of the failure of the (Franciscan) catechizing method used in New Spain: »perchance he was not instructed in the things of our Holy faith as necessary«. In 1540, a *cédula* passed the role of judging the Indians accused of idolatry to the viceroy Antonio de Mendoza tacitely recognizing Zumárraga's inquisitory model as a fiasco.³⁰

Given these facts, the year 1539 begins to appear more and more as a moment of great instability. It is a turning point for the new society. In Mexico, as well as Texcoco and Tlaxcala, people weighed the effects of colonization by arguing about idolatry and baptism.³¹ Moctezuma's nephew Diego Huanitzin is present in the inscription of the mosaic as the symbol of an Indian governor who was Christianized and collaborated with the new regime, whereas other Nahuas nobles, such as Ometochtli or Pochtecatl Tlayotla, became symbols of the opposite, of traitors to the local political establishment, always ready to »hide idols behind altars« and of the failures of the Christianization. But a broader perspective on the inquisitorial processes of the same years shows that other portions of this new society were undermining its orthodoxy. The Holy Office was also accusing individuals coming from the Old World of Protestantism and Judaizing behaviors (in particular, related to the Mass and papal authority); the *Mass of Saint Gregory* somehow also addresses, while simultaneously concealing, this other part of the story.

A polished image

It is time to return now to the central part of the piece, the representation of the *Mass of Saint Gregory*. One of the most debated iconographies in the context of the Reformation, the subject was banned in many Protestant lands due to its association with the selling of indulgences. For instance, the Act of Supremacy issued in England in 1534 declared: »the Pope with all his College of Cardinalles with all

29 »Nos ha parecido cosa muy rigurosa tractar a persona nuevamente convertida a nuestra sancta fe, y que por ventura no estaba tan instruido en las cosas dellas como era menester; y que en estas partes a los moriscos que ha muchos años que se convirtieron y han sido adoctrinados y enseñados en las cosas de nuestra sancta fe católica y tienen nuestra lengua, no se ha usado ni se usa semejante rigor, antes se les ponen otras penitencias espirituales»; *Cédula al Obispo Zumárraga reprobando la ejecución del cacique Don Carlos*, 1539, doc 19 in García Icazbalceta, *Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga, primer Obispo y Arzobispo de México: estudio biográfico y bibliográfico*, Mexico 1881. See also Fernando Domínguez Reboiras, »La Inquisición española y los Indios«, in *Esplendores y miserias de la evangelización de América: Antecedentes europeos y alteridad*, ed. Wulf Oesterreicher & Roland Schmidt-Riese, Munich 2010, p. 55.

30 Grunberg, *L'inquisition apostolique au Mexique* (note 17), p. 26.

31 René Acuña, *Fray Julián Garcés: su alegato en pro de los naturales de Nueva España*, Mexico 1995.

their Pardons and Indulgences was utterly abolished out of this realme«. In 1539 in Norfolk, the indulgences on the Wall of Mildenhall were erased; the churchwardens' account noted: »the raising owht of the bysschoppys of rome pardon on ye wall«. ³² An injunction »against superstitious abuse of images« – including the Mass of Saint Gregory – was issued the year before. ³³

As it is well known, the number of years in Purgatory that the faithful would be »excused from« by praying in front of this image varied, but in Europe could total up to 45,000 years. The practice of obtaining indulgences on the other side of the ocean seems to have been debated since the first decade of the colonization. In a bull written by the Cardinal Quiñones and dated 20 February 1535, Paul III granted the people living »in the Indies« who visited Franciscan churches and monasteries the same rights as the faithful who physically visited Rome:

[...] all the faithful from one or another sex that in the festivity of Christ and the Holy Virgin will visit the Churches and Chapels or Oratories of the Religion of Our Holy Father Frances, in the Indies, and who will pray five times a Pater Noster and an Ave María, may obtain the indulgences of Rome as if they had visited personally its holy Basilicas. ³⁴

In 1546, another document seems to have secured the right to indulgences for visitors to any New Spanish church while insisting that there mustn't be any monetary correlation. Indulgences had to be granted for free. ³⁵

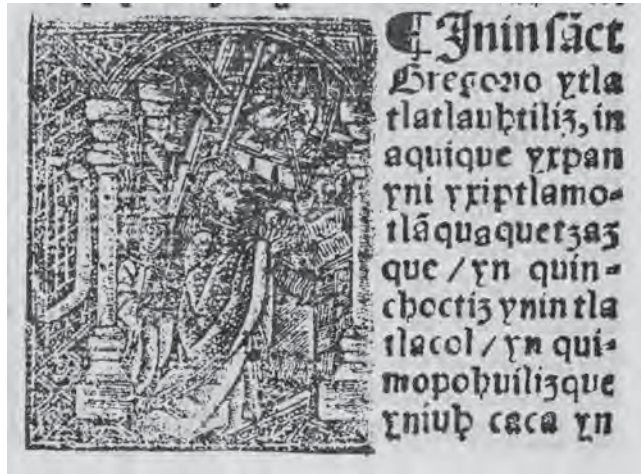
32 Robert Norman Swanson, *Indulgences in Late Medieval England: Passports to Paradise*, Cambridge 2007, chap. 10, p. 469.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

34 *Bula Universalis*, 20 de Febrero de 1535 transcribed and translated into Spanish by Buenaventura Salazar, *Los primeros doce franciscanos en México*, Mexico 1943, p. 164: »Este documento es una concesión dada *vivae vocis oraculo* por S. S. Paulo III el 20 de Febrero de 1535. Redactado por Immo. Fr. Francisco de Quiñones, Presbítero Cardenal del título de la Santa Cruz de Jerusalem y Protector de toda la Orden de los Frailes Menores, dice así: Esta es Auténtica original a favor de todos los fieles de uno y otro sexo que en las fiestas de Christo y la Santísima Virgen visitaren las Iglesias y Capillas ú Oratorios de la Religión de N. p. S. Francisco en las Indias y rezaren cinco veces el pater noster y Ave María consigan las indulgencias de Roma como si personalmente visitasen sus santas Basílicas«. See, also, Juan Meseguer Fernández, »Contenido Misiológico de la Obediencia e Instrucción de Fray Francisco de los Angeles a los Doce Apóstoles de México«, in *The Americas*, 11 (3), 1955, pp. 473-500. Cardinal Quiñones had played an active role in the mission of the »Twelve Apostles« that left for New Spain in 1522. He was also the Cardinal of the Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, where the Byzantine icon with the Man of Sorrows (fig. 2) was kept. I thank again Alexander Nagel for putting me on this track, which needs now to be further developed with archival research.

35 »Por ende para la buena edificación de los indios, que no piensen que la doctrina, sacramentos y las otras cosas espirituales que se les administran para su salvación se les den por vía de [?] y mercadería, como Sant Pablo nos lo enseña, pareció a la congregación que no se devia predicar, ni comunicar a los yndios bulas y otras indulgencias por precio alguno. [...] Y las yndulgencias y jubileos que vienen en las bulas se les conceda gratis, con que rezen y visiten alguna yglesia; Fernando Gil, »Las «juntas eclesiásticas» durante el episcopado de Fray Juan de Zumárraga (1528-1548). Algunas precisiones históricas«, in *Teología*, 54, 1989, Apéndice

Fig. 5: *Mass of Saint Gregory*, in Pedro de Gante, *Doctrina christiana en lengua mexicana*, woodcut, Mexico City, 1553



Images provided another way to obtain indulgences in New Spain. Here our source is one of Pedro de Gante's printed works, his *Doctrina Christiana*, which was published in Mexico in 1554 and probably related to the very first book printed in Mexico (and the Americas) in 1539: the *Breve y mas compendiosa doctrina Christiana en lengua Mexicana y Castellana* by Juan de Zumárraga. In de Gante's *Doctrina*, Indians are invited to pray in front of the image of Saint Gregory in order to obtain »*indulgentias yn perdone*s«. The Náhuatl text reads:

Inin sanct Gregorio ytlatlatlauhtiliz, in aquique yxpan yni yxiptlamo- tlāquaquetzazque / yn quinchoctiz yn intlatlacol / yn quimopohuilizque yniuh caca yn matlactlamantli / yn itlatlatlauhtiliz / quimacehuazque amo çan IX pohualtzonxiqipilxihuitl oc tlanahua. Auh yn viernestica yn aquin quipohuaz amo çan cempohualtzonxiqipilxihuitl, yn quimacehuaz yntlayhiyohuilizpolihuiztli yn itoca indulgentias yn perdone. Auh yn aquique amo quimati amatl, çam quitozque X Pater noster X Ave maria. Yn iyxpan yxiptlatzin sant Gregorio: yn quimacehuazque çan nepantlaxelihuiz in omite indulgentias.

This is the prayer of Saint Gregory; those who [will say it] before his image, kneel and cry for their sins, will have it taken into account as if it were ten prayers, and they will deserve more than $9 \times 20 \times 400 \times 5000$ [= 64.000.000] years. And on Friday those who will say it $1 \times 20 \times 400 \times 5000$ [= 576.000.000], they will deserve the pardon of the sins, also called indulgences and pardons. And those who do not know the paper [i.e. the prayer], may just say X [10?] Pater Noster, X [10?] Ave maria in front of the image of Saint Gregory, they will deserve only the half of these indulgences.³⁶

3: »Copia de un capítulo que se hizo y horden en la congregacion de perlados y religiosos que se tuvo en la ciudad de Mexico el año de MDXLVI«, p. 34.

36 I thank here Berenice Alcántara for helping me with the translation of this passage and Caterina Pizzigoni for her advice on the exact arithmetical »translation« of the numbers.



Fig. 6: *Friar and officiant celebrating the Eucharist*, in Pedro de Gante, *Doctrina christiana en lengua mexicana*, woodcut, Mexico City, 1553

The page with the instructions for the prayer is accompanied by an image of the *Mass of Saint Gregory* (fig. 5) in which a minister assisting the pope seems to be portrayed with the typical long, square haircut found in Post-conquest representations of the Nahuas (compare with the portraits in fig. 3), yet already showing a tonsure. In another image from the *Doctrina Christiana*, a minister with the same appearance seems to be giving the hosts to the faithful while a priest stands in front of the altar (fig. 6). In a third image from the same source, two individuals that seem to once again possess the physical characteristics associated with the Nahuas are kneeling in front of an altar while witnessing an apparition of Christ emerging directly from the chalice, without the presence of any intermediary (fig. 7).

A fictive image

Mexico, 1539. A polished and idealized ›icon‹ of the process of Christianization, of the Franciscan project, is created through a new sacred material (fig. 1). Here the apparent ›syncretism‹ of the *Mass of Saint Gregory* (a ›Prehispanic‹ technique and a ›European‹ iconography) appears less as the artistic essence of the piece and instead as an image or, more precisely, an imaginary portrait of the project of Christianization – in short, as its fiction. The illustrations included in Pedro de Gante's *Doctrina Christiana* and many other post-conquest sources offer the same fictive portrait

Fig. 7: *Two individuals kneeling in front of the host*, in Pedro de Gante, *Doctrina christiana en lengua mexicana*, woodcut, Mexico City, 1553



of New Spain as the ideal syncretic society, capable of transforming tensions and differences into apparently stable and ›harmonic‹ representations. Let us think once again of the *Cantares Mexicanos* wherein the cruel Zumárraga will be sung of in Náhuatl as the one who ›purified this city with a golden balm and sprinkled it with water‹.³⁷

Whatever the correct reading of the alphabetic frame, the *Mass of Saint Gregory* is an icon that recomposes the image of a New Spain dominated by inquisitorial processes and intense debates on the missionary projects; on the Christianization methods; on the effective powers of the image; on the prayer and on the institutions established during the first two decades after the arrival of the Spaniards. The clarity of the bull of concession of 1535 that granted indulgences to the faithful of the New World is as important as the confusion (or at least freedom) about the exact number of years of indulgence granted to them in Pedro de Gante's work (64.000.000 and 576.000.000!). The *Mass of Saint Gregory* can therefore be read as an idealization of the outcomes of Christianization, but also as an identification with and perhaps a desperate call to the paradigmatic figure of Christian history who was Gregory the Great. It is interesting to note that Zumárraga himself made a strong reference to Saint Gregory in the *Junta Eclesiástica* of 1539:

37 *Cantares Mexicanos* (note 27), song 68, stanza 58.

Item, queen el baptizar de los adultos se guarden y renueven los decretos antiguos, como se guardaban y guardaron y mandaron guardar y renovar en la conversión del Alemania e Inglaterra cuando se convirtieron en tiempo del Papa Gregorio y del Emperador Carlo Magno y Pepino, pues tenemos el mesmo caso entre las manos e hay la mesma razón que cuando se establecieron los dichos decretos había, y los que los ordenaron tuvieron cuando la Iglesia católica se asentó en sus ritos y ceremonias, que fueron entre otros los Papas Siricio, Leon, Dámaso, Gelasio, Ambrosio, Augustino, Hierónimo, en sus tiempos, y después el Papa Gregorio los renovó y practicó en el suyo cuando el mesmo caso se le ofreció, como agora se nos ofrece [...].³⁸

It is not Gregory the destroyer of idols with whom Zumárraga aims to identify himself, but Gregory the builder, the missionary in Germany and England – curiously the same exact lands where the Protestant Reformation was then spreading. Comparing the Franciscan missionary work in New Spain with that of an indefatigable Gregory, the Bishop states: »we have the same situation on our hands [...] [Gregory the Great] was confronted with the same case, as we are now«. This comparison was also addressed by the Dominican Bartolomé de las Casas few decades after, in his *Apologética Història Sumaria*, where Gregory's former missionary work in England and Scotland among the »barbarians of the North« was presented as a reference point for the ongoing task in the new continent.³⁹ We must remember here the true ›osmosis‹ effect that the Christianization of the New World was meant to have in relationship to the Old World: the lands ›lost‹ in the Northern territories due to the Reformation – and in the East due to the Ottoman advance – could be gained in the West, that is to say, in the Americas.⁴⁰ And the *Mass of Saint Gregory* could therefore also function as an imaginary warranty of a renewal project of the Church, an image that set aside and sublimated all the local contradictions of the

38 »Testimonio de varios capítulos que en virtud de la Real Cédula [...]«, del 17 de abril de 1539 (see García Icazbalceta, *Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga* [note 29], doc. 26). See, also, Cristóforo Gutiérrez Vega, *Las primeras juntas eclesiásticas de México (1524-1555)*, Rome 1991.

39 »¿Qué mejor se puede explicar la brutalidad e irracionalidad, vicios y costumbres pravas de gente alguna? Empero, no por eso las menospreció y de su Evangelio las excluyó Dios. Los ingleses y scocianos no tuvieron menos ni menores fealdades que otras naciones, como queda claro; pero Sant Gregorio no los menospreció [...] envió a Augustino con cuarenta monjes por sus apóstoles. Así lo refiere Beda en la Historia de aquellas naciones, y el mismo Sant Gregorio en hartas partes«, Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologética Historia Sumaria*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman [1555 ca.], Mexico City 1967, 2 vols., here: vol. 1, cap. CCLXIII, p. 633. See, also, the Náhuatl psalms devoted to Saint Gregory and composed by Bernardino de Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana* [Mexico City 1583], transl. by Arthur J. O. Anderson, Salt Lake City 1993, pp. 83-87.

40 On the multiple connections addressed in the historical sources between these apparently different contexts see Serge Gruzinski, *What time is it there? America and Islam at the dawn of the modern age* [2008], Cambridge/Malden 2010. Let's remind that 1539 is the year of the Treaty of Frankfurt, between Charles V and the Protestants. In 1539 the Electorate of Brandenburg, under Joachim II, converted to Protestantism.

ongoing Christianization, and all the political tensions of that difficult Mexican year 1539, into a wishful portrait of what a new perfect Christian society could be.

Now, after the interpretation of the *Mass of Saint Gregory* proposed in these pages, we could question whether the historical sources collected »outside the image« are pertinent to an art historical analysis of the piece. If we return to Daniel Arasse, we are reminded of his steadfast insistence on examining the details provided *within* the artwork itself over references and texts external to the artwork. But if the *Mass of Saint Gregory* is the idyllic portrait of Christianization, the art history of the piece must consider such choices and decisions as who was or was not⁴¹ to be represented in the picture and on its inscription. In this sense, the key to an art historical analysis of this image seems to be that internal ›detail‹ inscribed in the work itself – the word *composita*, which appears on the frame. This is the clue through which we can begin to envision how the *Mass of Saint Gregory* was materially and symbolically composed, constructed and invented as a locked, polished and fictive representation of »Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1539« – what we might describe as the cover to a Pandora's box.

41 It is interesting to note the other historical figures that are ›absent‹ from the inscription on the *Mass of Saint Gregory*: Charles V, Antonio de Mendoza the Viceroy and of course Zumárraga himself, not to mention Cortés, who that same year, after strong dissonances with the Viceroy, was packing his bags to leave New Spain forever. Back in Spain he was judged in his own trial (*juicio de residencia*), after which he departed for the Battle of Algiers. I have proposed a possible link between Cortés's departure from New Spain in 1539 and the shipping to the *Mass of Saint Gregory* in Alessandra Russo, »Cortés's objects and the Idea of New Spain. Inventories as Spatial Narratives« in *Journal of the History of Collections*, Special Issue *Captured Inventories*, ed. Jessica Keating & Lia Markey, 23 (2), 2011, pp. 229-252.