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Nahua generals consulting and following a military map (p. 33)

LOCATING THE PAST IN NAHUA CARTOGRAPHIC HISTORIES

HAYLEY WOODWARD

When the Spanish arrived on the coast of what is now modern Mexico, they were astounded to find that the indigenous people they encountered had maps. Hernando Cortés, the lead *conquistador* who orchestrated the coordinated political usurpation of the Aztec Empire's capital Tenochtitlan, writes that he received a map of "the whole country" from the indigenous peoples he met upon first landing in Veracruz in 1519 (Fig. 1).¹ Across the first years of encounter between the Nahua (those that spoke Nahuatl, the *lingua franca* of Central Mexico) and the Spanish, there were a number of recorded sightings of spatial documents that were commensurable with the European mapping tradition.²



Figure 1. Nahua generals consulting and following a military map in the lower left corner, detail from the Florentine Codex, book 8, chapter 17, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence. Image from World Digital Library.

Nahua maps were one subset of a rich tradition of recording information through visual and glyphic language within screenfold books, looseleaf manuscripts, and large cotton canvases. Highly-trained makers (called *tlacuiloque*, or painter-scribes, in Nahuatl) inscribed divinatory, census, tribute, historical, and territorial data upon these media surfaces through a coded visual language system that intermixed pictorial and glyphic messages. Thus, the Nahua (and many other pre-Hispanic ethnic groups) had their own manuscript culture, one that predated the arrival of the Spanish and expressed their worldviews.

Maps were one of the most diverse and enduring subsets of documents in this Nahua manuscript culture. Alt-

hough none of the map products created before the arrival of the Spanish survive (as the Franciscan friars systematically burned all evidences of pre-Hispanic "idolatry" upon their arrival in 1524), in the years after the encounter, thousands of map products were produced, each which satisfied unique needs for their makers and their communities. Presently, within the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City, court documents on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century legal disputes over land rights often have an associated drawn map attached to the records. Such maps, which represent a continuation of indigenous conceptions about land and stylistic traditions from the pre-Hispanic era into the colonial, were considered as acceptable and persuasive evidence in the Spanish *audiencia* (or court of law), where such disputes were settled.

In addition to the many property and city plans produced by painter-scribes in an effort to picture (and therefore assert) land rights, *tlacuiloque* incorporated historical memory and storytelling into the painted projection of landscape of other spatial documents. Such maps, called cartographic histories or history-maps, embed historical narratives within spatially-meaningful geographic representations. This means that painter-scribes located events from the past—like migrations, marriages, or wars—within an armature of geography, thereby inextricably linking the past and place. Place was an apt structure to tell histories of migrations and foundations, which center on movement through and settlement in the landscape.

Nahua painter-scribes structured cartographic histories in one of two ways. Some embedded events into a cartographic composition, thereby emphasizing an overall territorial scope to locate the past. This is the case in the Codex Xolotl, which is oriented to the east at the top of the page and displays the then-present lake systems of Central Mexico (painted in blue pigment), as well as a major mountain range that undulates across the upper half of the sheet (here, outlined with black pigment) (Fig. 2, next page). Glyphic place names identify important communities using a logosyllabic writing system; many of the signs take the form of a bell-shaped, dark green hill with different signs atop or within it. For instance, a place named Chapultepec is composed of a grasshopper (*chapulin* in Nahuatl) atop a hill sign (*tepētl*); the two signs merge together to prompt the name of the place (Fig. 3, next page). Thus, no alphabetic writing was required to identify places on these maps.

The arrangement of this topography and toponymy approximately emulates the actual physical and sociopolitical terrain of this area. When compared to what this region looked like in the sixteenth century, the positioning of the mountains and lakes corresponds between reality and representation, and



Figure 2. Codex Xolotl, page 2, 42 x 48 cm, *amatl* paper, Mexicain 2, Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 3. Detail of Chapultepec, Codex Xolotl, page 2, Mexicain 2, Bibliothèque nationale de France. (see white rectangle in Fig. 2)

the place names of communities spatially relate to one another. Thus, the makers positioned place signs as an interlocking web that reflects true geography against one another; this manuscript, and many others like it made by the Nahuatl, is a sophisticated cartographic statement, made more important by the incorporation of complex historical events upon the map face. In the Xolotl; people and their actions fit into the map framework; figures move across the landscape, begin families (whose children marry into other genealogies), and wage war on one another. The painter-scribes strung together narrative sequences that occur in different areas with footprints, which index movement across space.

Other cartographic histories, like the Mapa Sigüenza, combine the web of geography evinced

in the Xolotl with another spatial framework, one that subjugates the landscape to the presented history, emphasizing itineraries or sequencing of events over portraying a "true" reflection of the physical landscape (Fig. 4). The Mapa Sigüenza presents the migration story of the Mexica, who depart from their homeland of Aztlan and eventually find the place they will settle within, Tenochtitlan (today called Mexico City). The right side of the sheet of indigenous paper depicts a circuit of stops in their itinerary, composed as a string of place



Figure 4. Mapa Sigüenza, 54.5 x 77.5 cm, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. Image from World Digital Library.

glyphs in a continuous line. This sequence is like a Metro map that collapses its stops into a straight line, demonstrating sequence but not coordinates.

The narrative begins in the top right corner, at the island of Aztlan (represented as a square filled with blue wavy lines representing water), where elongated figures line up in profile to begin the migration. Their itinerary follows along a thin pathway that twists and turns, first circumambulating the island of Aztlan, then snaking down to the lower right corner before turning upward through the middle of the page, curving through the upper left quadrant and ending at a large sign called Chapultepec, the same place seen in the Xolotl. The pathway meanders throughout the page, passing through signs that represent different mythic places visited by these travelers. Dots next to these place signs express how many years the migrants stayed in each place, thereby inlaying temporal data into the map face.

At Chapultepec, the map transitions into a tableau of geography, like the Codex Xolotl. Below this place, the painter-scribe adds descriptive geographic features (like blue straight lines that signify canals and marshy vegetation) that identify this environment as lacustrine. An itinerary still appears, indexing movement into and through this landscape, but the place signs in the lower left side of the page adhere to a cartographic web, their positionalities on paper mimicking the actual environment.

The Codex Xolotl and the Mapa Sigüenza's makers decided to use a map-like format to give viewers a better understanding of the spatial relationships of historical events. Although geographically-motivated histories are diagrammatically-advantageous as a presentational framework, for the Nahua, space was the prime way to preserve and create historical memory. Miguel León-Portilla contends that the Nahua believed that the harmony of the universe was maintained through the "spatialization of time," meaning that the passage of time (through which history unfolds) was equivalent to moving through space.³ Thus, time/event and place were synchronous, overlapping, and mutually-influencing concepts to the indigenous people of Mexico, and a cartographic history stabilized these three elements together. At the same time, like all maps, cartographic histories propose, rather than objectively reflect, landscape. The Xolotl depicts the stories and genealogies of the royal house that commissioned it and minimizes the size and importance of other places that were depicted as politically significant in other manuscripts. Likewise, the Sigüenza's narrative is centered around a single group, the Mexica, and the depicted geography is laser-focused on the sites that were important to the story being told while inevitably excluding other places. Thus, each cartographic history had an agenda with its own narrative needs and is a text to be read, rather than a documentary representation of "true" landscape.

Endnotes

¹ Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, translated and edited by A.R. Padgen (London: University of Oxford Press, 1972), 340.

² This essay uses the classifier "Nahua" instead of "Aztec" to describe the people of Central Mexico because "Aztec" is a Western term, popularized by Alexander von Humboldt; the peoples of the "Aztec" Empire would never have called themselves as such. Nahua refers to a group with a shared linguistic tradition and accounts for continuity after the conquest.

³ Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, translated by Jack Emory Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 56.

Suggested reading:

Leibsohn, Dana. "Primers for Memory: Cartographic Histories and Nahua Identity." In *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, 161-187. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994.

Mundy, Barbara. "Mesoamerican Cartography." In *The History of Cartography* vol. 2, book 3, *Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, edited by David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis, 183-256. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Pulido Rull, Ana. *Mapping Indigenous Land: Native Land Grants in Colonial New Spain*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020.

Publisher's Note: See also David Kalifon's article on the early maps of Tenochtitlan in the Spring 2021 issue of *Calafia*?

Hayley B. Woodward is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Art History and Latin American Studies program at Tulane University, where she earned her M.A. in Art History as well. Her research centers on Nahua artistic and historiographic practices as evinced in painted manuscripts. She is currently a Predoctoral Fellow at the Getty Research Institute and has held the Center for Renaissance Studies Consortium Fellowship at the Newberry Library.



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