Nahuatl generals consulting and following a military map (p. 33)
W hen 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 coordinat-ed 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). 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 num-ber of recorded sightings of spatial documents that were commensurable with the European mapping tradition.  

Nahua maps were one subset of a rich tradition of re-cording information through visual and glyphic language within screenfold books, looseleaf manuscripts, and large cot-ton canvases. Highly-trained makers (called tlacuiloque, or painter-scribes, in Nahuatl) inscribed divinatory, census, trib-ute, historical, and territorial data upon these media surfaces through a coded visual language system that intermixed picto-rial and glyphic messages. Thus, the Nahua (and many other pre-Hispanic ethnic groups) had their own manuscript cul-ture, one that predated the arrival of the Spanish and ex-pressed their worldviews.

Maps were one of the most diverse and enduring sub-sets of documents in this Nahua manuscript culture. Alt-
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 Nahua, 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
 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. 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
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:


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

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