

Marking Place, Making History: the Shifting Narrative Structures of the *Codex Xolotl*

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After the conquest of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1521, neither the burgeoning Viceroyalty of New Spain nor the newly supplanted mendicant orders could stifle pre-Hispanic modes of artistic representation in the early colonial period. While only a number of Aztec books or works on paper survived the Spanish conquest (none of which derive from the Valley of Mexico, the navel of the Aztec Empire), local artists created hundreds of books, manuscripts, and maps in the sixteenth century.¹ Amidst this broad corpus of Nahua manuscripts (Nahua referring to those who spoke Nahuatl, the indigenous language of Central Mexico) painted after the conquest is an exceptional example of pre-Hispanic style and subject matter: the *Codex Xolotl*.² This document is brimming with chronologically-organized historical, genealogical, and martial information of the Chichimecs, a nomadic group who entered and ultimately settled in the eastern Valley of Mexico, founding one of the great cities on the shores of the lake, Texcoco. Upon their settlement into Texcoco, the Chichimec ethnic group acculturated and transformed into the Texcocans.

Place, event, and time are threaded together as a narrative story in the *Codex Xolotl*. This document projects a view of the Valley of Mexico in nine of its ten pages; upon this screen of landscape, events take place. Notations of time accompany individual scenes, providing a temporal framework to guide the reader through the evolving story taking place upon the paper's surface. Strings of footprints connect the places and personages, denoting movement and sequential order of movement across the region.

Past scholarship rightly treats the *Codex Xolotl* as a prime example of a cartographic history, meaning the codex effec-

tively combines geographic space with historical narrative.³ This conclusion is based on a close analysis of the first page of the codex, which emphasizes place and movement through the land and allots more detail to the topographic features of the landscape compared to the other pages (Figure 1). However, a critical analysis of all ten pages of the document is forced to acknowledge its shifting narrative structures as the codex progresses through time. A study of the changes and continuities in the natural landscape throughout the pages of the *Xolotl* reveals how the indigenous artist strategically uses (and at times omits) place to express historical narrative.

The classification of "historical narrative" implies that the depicted history is not only a story with historical underpinnings, but a story with a specific function and agenda. Thus, each page strategically structured its narrative, morphing the history into the story its creators wished to convey. By studying the document through this lens—as one that covers centuries of political and social transition in Central Mexico through a subtle multiplicity of formats—one can understand how the narrative both complies with and suppresses the geography it inhabits, creating a specific story for a specific people.

The date of the *Codex Xolotl* does not survive in the historical record. While some (including Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci, and Joseph Marius Alexis Aubin) have identified the *Xolotl* as a pre-Hispanic manuscript, subtle pictorial conventions reveal that the document's *tlacuiloque* (or indigenous artist-scribes) were exposed to European stylistic conventions.⁴ For instance, banners are depicted as curved, two-pronged pennants, while animate faces sit within the middle of the sun glyphs, both indices of

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¹ Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Pictorial Documents and Visual Thinking in Post-conquest Mexico," in *Native Traditions in the Preconquest World*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Tom Cummins (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992), 149.

² The ten pages of the *Codex Xolotl* are labeled Fonds Mexicain 1-10, and are currently held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

³ Barbara Mundy, "Mesoamerican Cartography," in *The History of Cartography* Vol. 2, Book 3, ed. David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 205-207; and Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000), 79-81.

⁴ Walter Lehmann, *Methods and Results in Mexican Research*, trans. Seymour de Ricci (Paris: H. Clarke, 1909), 13; Charles E. Dibble, *Códice Xolotl*, 2 vol. (1951; repr., Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1980), 11-12; Donald Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 143; and Eduardo Douglas, *In the Palace of Nezahualcoyotl: Painting Manuscripts, Writing the Pre-Hispanic Past in Early Colonial Period Tetzaco, Mexico* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 25.

European artistic influences upon the *tlacuiloque*, or ruling class of Texcoco. The *Xolotl* likely responded to the colonial concerns of early 1540s Texcoco, based on its similarities in subject matter to the *Mapa Tlotzin* and the *Mapa Quinatzin*, two works on paper deriving from Texcoco that have clear dates associated with their creation (1541 for the *Tlotzin*, and 1542-1543 for the *Quinatzin*).⁵

The *Xolotl* visually expresses events from the thirteenth century to its denouement in 1431, leaving a lacuna of over 100 years between the end of the narrative and its proposed moment of creation. This gap demonstrates that the *Xolotl* is likely a copy of a single pre-Hispanic document or a pool of different indigenous documents from Texcoco consolidated into the *Xolotl*.⁶ These predecessor documents were likely created directly after the events represented in the codex came to completion, to be preserved and passed down by the *tlacuiloque*. The assumption of pre-Hispanic predecessors and sources for the *Xolotl* accommodates the confluence of minor European visual conventions with the document's overall organization, which undoubtedly utilizes a uniquely indigenous mode of presenting history.⁷

As previously mentioned, the early colonial order saw a proliferation in indigenous-made visual documents in a moment of political tension between the nascent colonial bureaucracy and the surviving indigenous royal dynasties, especially in *Xolotl*'s place of creation, Texcoco. These documents served as a mode of visually delineating the ancient history of the indigenous ruling class, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy within the colonial order. While the codex lacks a firm historical context of its date and commissioner, a visual analysis of the codex's narrative structures hints at the reason for the document's creation as a means of representing the collective memory and ancient lineage of the Texcocan rulers within the fluctuating colonial order. The comparative study of the landscape outlined in this paper elucidates and supports this assertion.

The *Xolotl*'s narrative is cast across ten sheets of native paper, each painted on one side, all but one depicting a projection of Central Mexico. Oriented to the east, four then-extant lakes of the Valley of Mexico stretch horizontally across the lower registers of the pages (Xaltocan, Texcoco, Xochimilco, and Chalco from left to right). The eastern mountain range dominates the upper registers, concluding with the looming volcanoes of Popocatepétl and Iztaccihuatl to the south (or to the right side of the range). Across the pages, green or outlined hill signs litter the landscape. While a number of these signs indicate orography, the majority

function as toponyms, or formalized symbols of place. The conventional signs are composed of a nominal glyph attached to a topographical feature, evinced in the glyphic representation of Chapultepec, comprised of a grasshopper (*chapul-*) sitting atop a hill glyph (*tepec*) (Figure 2). Serving to spatially relate the places to one another by fixing the toponyms in their approximately correct location in physical space, the artist does not arbitrarily situate the place signs onto the page. Instead, the toponyms possess geographic significance.

Thus, there is a cartographic correlation between the *Xolotl* and geographic reality. The bumpy eastern mountain range separates the flat lakeshore region from the polities to the east of the range, culminating in the great volcanoes to the south. The outline of the four lakes approximately mimics the lake system's true shoreline boundaries, although there is a degree of stylization between the codex's pages (Figure 3). At times, the *Xolotl* takes liberties from spatial reality, particularly in the arrangement of the boundary toponyms that hug the margins of the *Xolotl*'s first page, which eschew geographic reality in order to condense the signs into the map's vantage point.⁸ Thus, this document functions as a close suggestion of the Valley of Mexico's geography to the reader, a projected screen of landscape upon which narrative occurs.

Xolotl, the leader of the Chichimecs and namesake of the codex, and Nopaltzin reappear throughout the first page, both wearing textured capes of animal hair, knotted at the neck connected by indigenous styled footprints (Figure 4). Affixed to their bodies are their identifying name glyphs: for *Xolotl* a dog head in profile, and for Nopaltzin a nopal cactus. The reoccurring figures are linked by a string of footprints, indicators of their movement across the landscape. They begin in the lower left corner of the valley, moving east passing through various places and toward ancient ruins, which they observe and discuss. The two then separate, Nopaltzin surveying the eastern expanse of land between the lakes and the mountain range, while the leader *Xolotl* returns west, establishing a community kingdom called Tenayuca. He concludes his journey by circumambulating the margins of the plan as an act of ritual exploration and understanding of the land.⁹ Thus, the landscape allows for a sequential series of events, the footprints acting as a guide for the reader as to the sequential order of the protagonists' travels.

This first page of the *Codex Xolotl* is a textbook example of a cartographic history, a mode of visually representing history within the pre-conquest Mexican pictorial tradition.¹⁰ The artist strategically located the narrative on a backdrop of

⁵ Douglas, *In the Palace*, 24-26.

⁶ Jerome A. Offner, "Ixtilxochitl's Ethnographic Encounter: Understanding the Codex Xolotl and Its Dependent Alphabetic Texts," in *Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl and His Legacy*, ed. Galen Brokaw and Jongsoo Lee (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 83.

⁷ Dibble, *Códice Xolotl*, 12.

⁸ Mundy, "Mesoamerican Cartography," 206.

⁹ This summary is based on Dibble's (*Códice Xolotl*, 18-27) interpretation of document, in which he draws heavily on the seventeenth-century historian Alva Ixtlilxochitl's chronicle of events: Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras históricas*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1985).

¹⁰ Other examples of cartographic histories from Mexico include the *Mapa Sigüenza*, the map of Cuauhtinchan from the *Historia Tolteca Chichimeca*, and the *Lienzo de Zacatepec*.

the Valley of Mexico and its environs to serve the needs of the narrative being told: a story of a migration, and the first encounter with the landscape that they would eventually settle and civilize. Thus, the narrator's intent dictates the document's structure, requiring a map-like, geographically-motivated narrative format. Beyond the necessity to demonstrate movement, this format requires an action on the part of the viewer. By creating a cartographic history depicting movement through the landscape, the artist requires the viewer to follow along on the journey, thereby recreating the ancient Chichimec migration in the present viewer's mind, as an act of engagement.

As the Chichimec's story progresses, the topographical features of the region expand and contract to accommodate the narrative taking place upon the paper's surface. In the sixth page of the codex, the geographic features morph and adhere to the narrative in new ways, the location of the toponyms sliding to mere suggestions of true place (Figure 3). Page six notes the genealogies of the Texcocan ruling family and their allies; connecting lines and footprints demonstrate marriages and progeny between the members of the ruling families across space. While the uncolored mountains and lakes continue to stretch horizontally across the page, the spatial relationship between the place signs adheres more to a desire for linear order rather than to geographic reality. In a series of four reoccurring place-signs, Texcoco, Huexotla, Cohuatlichan, and Coatepec, from left to right, the place signs even out, creating a straight, linear formation (Figure 5). This pictorial distribution does not match the true spatial distribution of the community-kingdoms; instead, the artists depict the sites as an orderly list to better accommodate the proliferating genealogical information registered below.

These locales, along with the rows and columns of place signs and leaders bordering the page, represent specific allies to the Texcocan court in a period of growing political tensions across the Valley of Mexico.¹¹ The linear, orderly nature of page six attests to a form of narrative expediency, minimizing place to enhance information. After the establishment of landscape in the previous pages, the artists minimally suggested the geographic projection in page six to serve the narrative's purposes: to purport a broad list of allies in the face of surmounting troubles for the protagonists in the subsequent pages. This page signals the transformation the Chichimecs have undergone over the course of the *Xolotl*, from nomadic people to the holders of power in the court of Texcoco, a city-state with so many allies, their signifiers had to be squeezed into the frame of the page.

Page eight of the codex is a narrative anomaly, because it completely departs from the geographic orientation of the preceding seven pages (Figure 6). Instead, it adopts an annals

format, meaning the narrative is structured by the continuous passage of time. The page isolates individual scenes into registers, then subdivides the registers by Aztec calendrical years, which are notated by a numerical value and a visual icon.¹² The reader begins in the top left corner, reads left to right, and then proceeds onto the next register, interpreting each year with an independent scene. Beginning in the top left corner, the year date 4 Rabbit (which equates to 1418 in the Gregorian calendar) indicates that in that year, the enemy ruler Tezozomoc addressed over a dozen polities after the murder of the Texcocan king Ixtlilxochitl (Figure 7). The following scene takes place in the year 5 Reed (or 1419), followed by those that occurred in 6 Flint (1420). This reading pattern continues on, dropping to the second register with the grouped events of the years 7 House to 12 Rabbit (or the years 1421-1426), and concludes with 13 Reed (located to the left of the center fold of the page). At this point, the annals format disintegrates, and it is assumed that all of the subsequent events take place in this year (1427).

Timeline presentations, such as the format utilized on page eight, employ a constant and ongoing measure of time to organize historical events. This time-based structure allows for expanded detail in storytelling because it is not bound to the geographic features of the previous seven pages. Amidst the growing tensions between various community kingdoms (Texcoco, Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, and Atzacapotzalco) visually represented on the page, the artists and/or patrons determined that the annals format most effectively outlined the series of complicated events in this pivotal moment in Texcocan history. Page eight functions as a footnote to the narrative, a conscious departure from the established geographic format in order to include vital information before proceeding to the climax of the narrative in the final two pages.

While there is an evident decline in geographic-motivation of the *Codex Xolotl* as the pages progress chronologically, the structure of the final two sheets of the document firmly recall the geographic-motivation of the first page (Figures 8 and 9). Pages nine and ten feature the same projection of the Valley of Mexico present throughout the codex (with the exception of the preceding page eight). Each page displays half of the narrative, and the extended lake system and mountain range stretch across the sheet, indicating that the two pages were intended to be viewed together as a composite whole. The increase in surface area allows for more accurate geographic representation while not sacrificing quantity or variety of events expressed.

Pages nine and ten depict the plight and persecution of Nezahualcoyotl, the prince of Texcoco, by the enemy Tepanecs. Nezahualcoyotl reappears over twenty times in

¹¹ A critical summary of the political milieu of the early fifteenth century can be found in Jongsoo Lee, "The Aztec Triple Alliance: A Colonial Transformation of the Prehispanic Political and Tributary System," in *Texcoco: Prehispanic and Colonial Perspectives*, ed. Jongsoo Lee and Galen Brokaw (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2014), 64-69.

¹² More information on the Aztec calendrical system can be found in Alfonso Caso, "Calendrical Systems of Central Mexico," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 10, ed. Robert Wauchope, Gordon F. Ekholm, and Ignacio Bernal (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1971), 333-348.

page nine alone, his reoccurring signifier connected by a string of footprints to depict his travels across the region. Due to surmounting political tensions between the protagonist Texcocans and the enemy Tepancecs, Nezahualcoyotl is forced to flee Texcoco, gathering support from old allies throughout the region and evading encounters with the enemy. For instance, on page nine, near the shores of the lake, Nezahualcoyotl greets four lords who are searching for him, only to craftily escape through the back of a palace (Figure 10). The direction of his footprints indicates that he travels farther east, where he covers himself with agave leaves to escape his persecutors. He continues on to speak with a counselor, and receives help from an aged woman.

The final pages of the document evoke the first page, which depicts Xolotl's entry into the valley. He and Nopaltzin reappear multiple times throughout the first page, observing and exploring the foreign landscape. Similarly, Nezahualcoyotl traverses the landscape in pages nine and ten, but under duress and persecution. The structure of page one in pages nine and ten assumes the viewer has already seen the preceding pages, and will be capable of drawing parallels between the earlier and present format. This recollection is a coda, a means of recalling the theme of the first page upon the closing of the narrative to tie the story together as a cohesive whole.

Through this recollection of migration and movement in pages nine and ten of the *Codex Xolotl*, the artist strategically elicits the narrative structure of the first page to display a significant aspect of Nezahualcoyotl's legitimacy in a moment of ambiguity and adversity for the Texcocans. Nezahualcoyotl's exodus from his home and his resulting wanderings through the eastern valley foreshadow the ultimate predominance of Texcoco under his reign. As the Chichimec king Xolotl entered the valley with little more than the wooly cape on his back, he established a dynasty through local alliances, marriages, and military victories through the subsequent pages of the document. His migration ushered in an age

of settlement and eventual civilization for the Chichimecs. Similarly, as Nezahualcoyotl had been stripped of his throne, left to roam through the land while evading enemy forces, his parallel migration to his ancestor leader Xolotl promised to culminate in a victorious re-entry into Texcoco, ushering in an ultimate age of political and military predominance in the region. Thus, the first and final pages of the *Xolotl* are complementary bookends, pages that utilize the same geographically-motivated narrative structures and themes to convey parallel messages of the preeminence of the Chichimecs and their heirs, the Texcocans. Historical sources support this postulation; in 1428, the Tepanec ruler was defeated by an alliance of Texcocans and other neighboring city-states. In that year, Nezahualcoyotl took back his father's throne as the rightful king of Texcoco and began his nearly fifty-year reign.

In conclusion, the visual representation of place morphs throughout the *Codex Xolotl*, adhering to the narrative goals of the artist and the patrons. The representation of the landscape disintegrates throughout the codex, even completely abandoning the geographic projection on page eight, only to return to the determined employment of place in the final two pages. Upon a close examination of the details, uses, and omissions of the representation of the landscape and its connection to the narrative, it is clear that the use of geography is more fluid throughout the pages of the document than previously considered, and that it supports the narrative being conveyed. In the *Xolotl*, place is malleable and flexible, and at times even optional. These subtle shifting narrative structures indicate that multiple strategies are at play within the *Xolotl*, each attesting to the underlying theme of the codex: the legitimacy and endurance of the Texcocan kings.

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Figure 1. Page 1 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 2. Detail of Chapultepec place glyph, page 1 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 3. Page 6 of Codex Xolotl, c. 1541, amatl paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 4. Detail of Xolotl and Nopaltzin, page 1 of Codex Xolotl, c. 1541, amatl paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

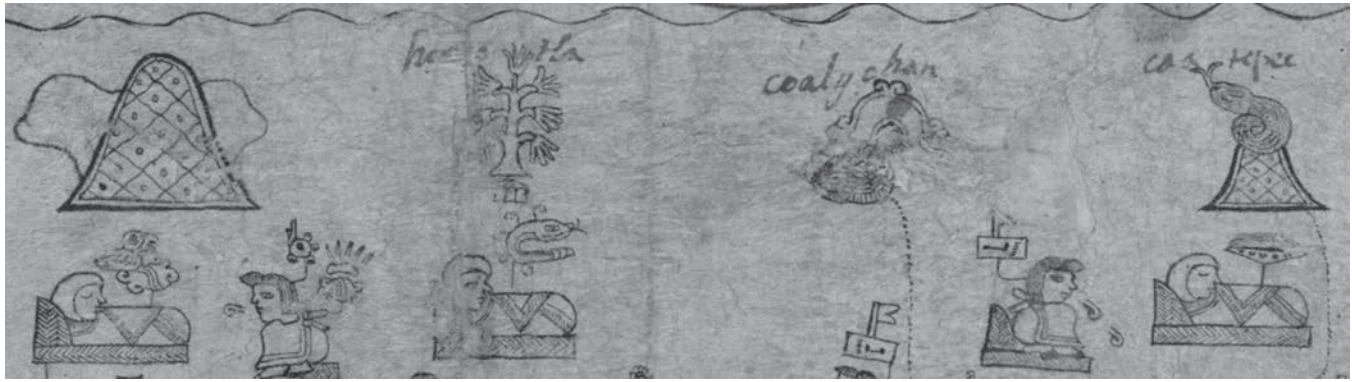


Figure 5. Detail of linear toponyms, page 6 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 6. Page 8 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

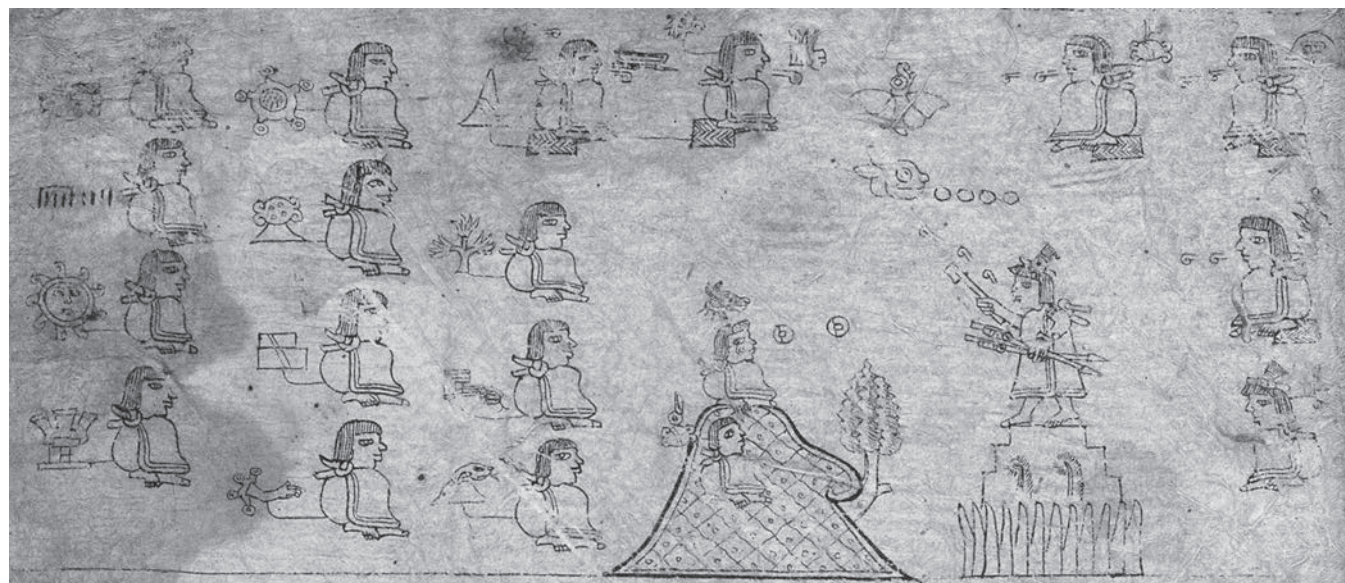


Figure 7. Detail of the events of 4 Rabbit, page 8 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 8. Page 9 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 9. Page 10 of Codex Xolotl, c. 1541, amatl paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figure 10. Detail of Nezahualcoyotl's travels, page 9 of Codex Xolotl, c. 1541, amatl paper, 42 x 48 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

