Portraying the Aztec Past in the Codex Azcatitlan: Colonial Strategies[1]

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During the period of Aztec expansion and empire (*c.* 1325-1525), painter-scribes of high social-standing (*tlacuiloque*) used a pictographic writing system to paint hundreds of manuscripts detailing historical, calendric, and religious information on hide, paper, and cloth. Although none of these Aztec manuscripts survived the events following the Spanish conquest of Mexico (1519-1521), indigenous and mestizo artists continued to use prehispanic writing systems to record information about native culture throughout the sixteenth century. This paper examines some of the colonial strategies employed by indigenous artists in the Codex Azcatitlan, a post-conquest pictorial narrative that provides an extensive historical account of the origin and migration of the Mexica people, a genealogy of their rulers, and a brief history of conquest and post-conquest events. The Mexica are one of several indigenous groups collectively referred to as "Aztec." Focusing on the migration history in the Codex Azcatitlan, this paper considers some of the transformations that take place in indigenous pictographic expression in response to the profound social and cultural changes that occurred after the conquest.

Previous studies have looked at the migration manuscripts primarily as indigenous artistic and historical productions. In the last sixty years, scholars have periodically attempted to legitimate Mexica migration history archaeologically, searching unsuccessfully for the remains of Aztlan, the place the Aztecs called their homeland.[2] These studies have often debated the status of the migration accounts as history or myth. More recently, Elizabeth Hill Boone has explored indigenous production and use of migration manuscripts. Her work has examined the narrative structure of the migration story, proposed the idea of migration history as ritual performance, and has situated the histories in the wider context of central Mexican manuscript production.[3] Federico Navarrete Linares' work has offered a comprehensive historical overview of all Aztec groups migrating into the Basin of Mexico and has addressed alphabetic and pictorial accounts of the migration written by both indigenous and European authors.[4] The historical studies of both Navarrete and María Castañeda de la Paz have expanded our understanding of the political ramifications of the migration history.[5] This paper will not attempt to differentiate between historical and mythical aspects of the Mexica migration. Rather, it will situate the Codex Azcatitlan's migration account in colonial discourse, examining how and why the migration story is presented at this time. Using an art historical approach this paper looks at the way the definition and contextualization of visual signs helps to make the Azcatitlan "readable" to an audience living with mixed artistic and cultural traditions.

In addition to the Codex Azcatitlan, several sixteenth-century colonial sources contribute to our understanding of the Mexica migration. For example, the Codex Boturini, Codex Aubin, Codex Mexicanus, Codex Mendoza, Codex Telleriano-Remensis, and Codex Vaticanus A/Ríos are other pictorial manuscripts that address this theme. The Mapa Sigüenza is an important pictorial document in map form that features the migration. Several sixteenth-century religious and secular writers provide prose histories based on oral traditions and/or older pictorial manuscripts. These writers include Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, Diego Durán, Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, Francisco de San Antón Chimalpahin [Cuauhtlehuanitzin], Juan de Torquemada, Juan de Tovar, and the unknown authors of the *Histoyre du Mechique*, *Leyenda de los Soles*, and *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*. The *Historia de Tlatelolco desde los tiempos más remotos*

1 Following North American usage, the term "Aztec" will be used to designate the inhabitants of Mexico-Tenochtitlan and their empire. "Mexica," the name the Aztecs called themselves, will refer specifically to the last indigenous group to migrate into the Basin of Mexico and found the Aztec empire. "Colonial" refers to the period 1521-1821.

2 See for example, Paul Kirchoff, "Civilizing the Chichimecs: A Chapter in the Culture History of Ancient Mexico" *Latin American Studies* 5 (1948): 80-85; Wigberto Jiménez Moreno "La migración mexica" in *Atti del XL Congresso Internazionale degli Americanisti, Roma-Genova, 3-10 Settembre 1972* Vol. 1 (Geneva: Tilgher, 1972): 167-172; and Michael E. Smith "The Aztlan Migrations of the Nahuatl Chronicles: Myth or History?" *Ethnohistory* 31:3 (1984): 153-186.

3 See Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Migration Histories as Ritual Performance" in *To Change Place: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes*, ed. David Carrasco (Boulder: U of Colorado, 1991) 121-151; Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Aztec Pictorial Histories: Records without Words" *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter G. Mignolo (Durham: Duke UP, 1994) 50-76; and Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2000).

4 Federico Navarrete Linares, *Mito, historia y legitimidad politica: las migraciones de los pueblos del Valle de Mexico* (Mexico City: UNAM, Facultad de Filosofia y Letras, Doctoral Thesis, 2000).

5 Navarrete, *Mito, historia y legitimidad politica* and María Castañeda de la Paz, "De Aztlan a Tenochtitlan: Historia de una peregrinación," *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 18:2 (Fall 2002): 163-212.

and the *Anales de Gabriel de Ayala* are also relevant. Among these sources, the Codex Azcatitlan, housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Codex Boturini, located in the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City, and Codex Aubin, found in the British Museum, are closest in narrative, perhaps deriving from a single earlier source, and provide the most extensive pictorial recordings of the Mexica migration history.[6]

The Codex Azcatitlan uses painted images and glyphic signs to recount the origin and migration of the Mexica people, the last of several indigenous groups to depart from a place called Aztlan in the twelfth century. Depicted as a ragged band of hunters, the Mexica are led by their god Huitzilopochtli and endure great hardships during a two-hundred year journey, until they encounter the omen of an eagle on a nopal cactus, and, at last, settle at Tenochtitlan (an island in a lake that was located at the heart of present-day Mexico City). Though the last to arrive in the Basin of Mexico, the Mexica used the next two hundred years to build an expansive empire and to create and dominate the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, and Texcoco. The Codex Azcatitlan is an annal and records each year of the migration. The migration sequence begins with the departure of the Mexica in the year 1 Flint (glossed as 1168) and records each year until the arrival at Tenochtitlan.

Consisting of twenty-five leaves, the Codex Azcatitlan is painted on both sides of European paper by two or more artists and is bound like a European book.[7] Three leaves appear to be missing from the whole, reducing the total number of images from fifty-six to fifty. The Azcatitlan presents three major subjects: (1) The migration sequence from Aztlan (glossed here as Azcatitlan) to the founding of Tenochtitlan; (2) the dynastic history of the Tenochca monarchs; and (3) the arrival of the Spaniards and events of the early conquest period.

While clearly a post-conquest document, the dating of the manuscript remains uncertain. Unfortunately, the European paper on which the manuscript is painted contains no watermark.[8] John Glass lists it as a sixteenth-century document.[9] Michel Grauhlich, in the recent 1995 facsimile edition of the manuscript, notes that the handwriting on the glosses resembles that on other works produced in the latter third of the sixteenth-century; he proposes a date from this period, arguing that the images and glosses on the Azcatitlan, both unfinished, are probably contemporary.[10] The degree and occurrence of European devices, including the binding in book format, rounded dimensional renderings of the figures, and interest in perspective, suggest a date that is no earlier than the latter half of the sixteenth century.

In the prehispanic period, painted manuscripts were used to record information and as part of an oral tradition. Painted by *tlacuiloque*, trained male painter-scribes from the noble class, the pictorial manuscripts served as mnemonic devices, reminding an orator of key points and details in the narrative. The images may or may not have been shown to the audience. As Federico Navarette Linares has pointed out, the narrative may have been read completely or selectively to suit various audiences which may have included members of the privileged class, the province (*altepetl*), rival groups, or neighboring *altepetl*.[11] Pictorial manuscripts were used to record a variety of information including histories, genealogies, geography, calendrical and cosmogonic information, songs, and poems.

After the conquest, production and use of pictorial manuscripts altered dramatically. In 1528, under the first Bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumarraga, manuscript collections were systematically destroyed as a means of wiping out pagan belief systems and introducing Christian doctrine. In addition, decimation of indigenous populations from disease, disruption of elite indigenous educational and religious systems and society, and availability of new materials and artistic traditions all contributed to a profoundly different environment for manuscript production and use.

As a product of transculturation—cultural interchange between prehispanic and European traditions—the Codex Azcatitlan provides a microcosm for the study of changes in native pictorial tradition in the sixteenth century. These transformations reflect experimentation in artistic processes and attempts to communicate Aztec history in new ways. At the most basic level, change is registered in the materials, construction, and format of the Codex Azcatitlan (Figure 1). It is helpful to compare the Azcatitlan to the closely related Codex Boturini and Codex Aubin, two sixteenth-century annals that also use painted images and glyphic signs to recount a similar narrative of the origin and migration of the Mexica people (Figures 2 and 3). The Codex Boturini, initially believed to be prehispanic, follows indigenous pictographic conventions much more closely than the Azcatitlan.[12] Painted on native

6 Boone, *Stories in Red and Black* 213.

7 For a discussion on the multiple artistic hands at work in the Codex Azcatitlan, see *Codex Azcatitlan*, intro. Michel Grauhlich, commentary Robert H. Barlow (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France/Société des Américanistes, 1995) 22-23.

8 A watermark would indicate a date for the production of the paper and provide a guideline for dating.

9 John Glass, *A Census of Middle American Pictorial Manuscripts*, vol. 14, *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Robert Wauchope (Austin: U of Texas P, 1975) 92.

10 *Codex Azcatitlan* 17.

11 Navarette Linares, *Mito, historia y legitimidad politica* 38.

12 For arguments in support of the colonial dating of the Codex Boturini see Robert H. Barlow, "El Códice Azcatitlan" in *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 38 (1949): 101-135; and Donald Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period* (Norman and London: U of Oklahoma P, 1994) 83-86.

paper and folded in a traditionally prehispanic accordion-style, the Boturini consists of twenty-one and one-half leaves and appears to be incomplete. The stylized images of the migration story are painted entirely in black, with occasional red lines connecting date cartouches, and breaks off at the period when the Mexica are subject to Coxcox, ruler of Culhuacan in approximately 1355. In contrast, the Codex Aubin, like the Azcatitlan visually incorporates European elements, including glosses in Spanish and Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs), Roman numeral dates, and stylistic traits (e.g., linear perspective). It is painted on European paper and bound as a book. Although the eighty-one leaves of the Codex Aubin, *c.* 1576-1596 and 1597-1608, painted on both sides with a range of colorsrecord events similar to those in the Codex Azcatitlan, there is a much greater emphasis on alphabetic text.

These three manuscripts indicate different approaches to the problem of communicating Aztec history after the conquest. The Codex Boturini employs a traditional approach, inviting a traditional use of the manuscript, whether it was actually used as such or not. The book format of the Codex Azcatitlan and Codex Aubin acknowledge a new social context. The Codex Aubin, which is small in size, treats each page as a separate unit, and places a heavy emphasis on text. It particularly signals the shift from a public oral tradition to a private written one. The Codex Azcatitlan remains primarily pictorial, but adapts the pictorial content to a changing social context.

The visual imagery in the Codex Azcatitlan is defined, contextualized, and amplified. In contrast to the stylized depictions in the Boturini, the Azcatitlan is very detailed, utilizes more space to depict the same events, incorporates glosses, and often blends indigenous and European artistic techniques (compare Figure 1 and Figure 2). These tactics expand the possibilities for understanding the narrative content.

The glosses in Nahuatl that accompany many of the images in the migration sequence are a straightforward example of an additive way of defining some of the images in the Codex Azcatitlan. For example, although the place glyphs at the beginning of the Azcatitlan would have been readable to an informed prehispanic audience, they are accompanied by text here (Figure 4). The glyph labeled "Xochmillca" would have been understood by the images alone to be a phonetic combination of the Nahuatl words xochitl (flower), milli (cultivated land) and calli (house, place of). The neatly rendered alphabetic script duplicates the information rendered pictorially. In addition to a traditional audience, the glosses presume an educated reader of Nahuatl who may not fully understand the indigenous pictographic writing system.

Longer descriptive text accompanies some of the scenes depicted in the Codex Azcatitlan. On plate V, for example, the Nahuatl text reads "*homca mixpolloque tepetla cuauhtla texcallco can cani neneca mexica*" [here they were lost among the mountains, in the forests, in the place of the rocks, it is in every way that the Mexica proceeded] (Figure 5).[13] The words *tepetla*, *cuauhtla* and *texcallco* are repeated in the upper portion of the scene. The text next to the second female from left reads "*quimama inteo*" [she carries their god on her back].[14] These descriptions would have aided a reader familiar with alphabetic Nahuatl. Unlike text-heavy manuscripts such as the Codex Aubin, however, the burden of carrying the narrative still rests primarily on the images.

In Plate V, the image is a landscape, clearly influenced by western artistic traditions, that depicts the Mexica traveling through the wilderness. One of the most detailed and colored images in the manuscript, this scene is not referenced in the Aubin or Boturini. The undulations shown on typical prehispanic representations of a hill are here incorporated into the landscape (see also Figure 6). The trees, painted and shaded according to western models are also depicted with their roots, a prehispanic trait. The use of paint and layering of images attempt a European sense of depth and suggest the path's recession into space, but the footprints, a ubiquitous precolumbian symbol of directionality and movement, are retained. While the more summary images found in the Aubin or Boturini might have been sufficient for someone trained in the prehispanic oral tradition, the Azcatitlan records more detail visually. In this example, information about topography, flora, fauna, and dress is conveyed. The two figures being attacked by the animal at left serve to illustrate the perils of the Mexica journey. Traditional prehispanic forms of imagery are modified and contextualized in a western setting, making the scene accessible to viewers familiar with either artistic tradition. The female godbearers, having no Spanish equivalent, are labeled alphabetically.

Like the alphabetic glosses, the date cartouches combine glyphic forms and European characters. The dates are represented in typical prehispanic cartouches that refer to the 52-year calendar cycle (Figure 7).[15] The yearbearers are depicted in glyphic images, alternating flint, house, rabbit, and reed.[16] The related day count numbers, 1-13, are written in Roman numerals next to each image. The translation of the Mexica calendar count to a European year is written in at the top of the cartouche. The date cartouches are hybrid, rather than simply repeating information in two different formats. The Roman numerals one through thirteen take the place of the dots that represent these numbers in prehispanic art (Figure 7).

[13] Translated to English from the Spanish translation in *Codex Azcatitlan,* 60.

[14] Translated to English from the Spanish translation in *Codex Azcatitlan,* 60.

[15] When the Mesoamerican 260-day and 365-day calendars were set in motion with one another, it took 52 years for a given date to repeat.

[16] "Each Aztec year bore the name of the 260-day almanac that occurred on the last day of the 18th month. This works out to be one of four possible day names (with its number)." Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993) 50.

The date cartouches are an integral part of the manuscript and help to shape the narrative and the layout of the page. Year cartouches are grouped together to represent a length of stay in a certain area or the time period of certain events. Clusters of year cartouches allow the artists to focus on selected events: they appear regularly throughout the migration sequence in the Azcatitlan, from the departure from Aztlan in 1168 to the events surrounding the death of Copil, dated 1354-1381. The last cartouche on Plate XIII shows a rabbit without the accompanying Roman numerals. Presumably the figures were produced first and the numerals added subsequently with the help of a straightedge.[17] There are several instances where the pictorial imagery and date cartouches overlap, demonstrating that they were considered part of the composition of the page (Figure 7).[18] Although there are no date cartouches in the ruler geneaology or conquest scenes, space seems to have been reserved for them.

Since the date cartouches combine prehispanic and European systems, they seem to be intended for an audience familiar with both. The Roman numeral years would have been clear to anyone familiar with the European calendar count. The native and mestizo populations may have understood the image-based date glyphs, but the Azcatitlan requires familiarity with the Roman numerals 1-13 that replace the prehispanic dot representation.

In addition to expanding visual representations, the artists are clearly experimenting with European artistic techniques. In the scene featuring the departure from Aztlan, the artist attempts perspective in the drawing of the temple (Figure 1). Additionally, the figures in Plate II and throughout the manuscript appear in a variety of forms and positions. While some figures appear very stylized, others demonstrate a European plasticity. Figures appear frontally displayed, in profile, from the rear, and in three-quarter views. In the departure scene (Figure 1), their bodies are shown interacting rather than just occupying communal space; this is particularly evident in the figures to the left of the hill. The multiplicity of figures throughout the manuscript allow the artists to present traditional stylized representations as well as the human form in a variety of new positions: with arms raised, legs crossed, pointing, rowing, in spatial relationship to one another. Although the results are often awkward, they document the dynamic innovations of an artistic tradition in transition.

The defining or contextualization of visual signs seems to represent a conscious attempt on the part of the artists to address mixed audiences in the era after the conquest. This audience may have included Europeans or European-educated indigenous populations, for whom the glosses were added. It may also have included various indigenous populations with cultural differences, or an indigenous and mestizo population that was beginning to forget older visual forms and/or understand new European-influenced forms.

Another possibility is that the expanded visual representation was intended to capture nuances in meaning that were also part of the oral tradition, but not necessarily recorded pictorially in such detail in the past. For example, in contrast to the six glyphic house representations in the Boturini's departure scene (Figure 2), the Azcatitlan shows four houses in a variety of forms (Figure 1). Each of these forms conveys slightly different information about the object, yet they are similar enough that we visually link them. The four houses on the hill most closely resemble conventionalized glyphic forms for house, comparable to those that appear in the Codex Boturini. The houses on the lower right of the rectangular island tell us as viewers that the glyphic house forms may relate to actual architectural units built up from cut stone as detailed here. From a late-sixteenth or seventeenth-century perspective, a person familiar with the quadripartite organization of the Tenochtitlan city and empire, might also recognize the houses with glyphs on top as signs that relate to geographical or political divisions and groups of people. The Azcatitlan artist links a human figure to each of the houses in the right half of the rectangle.[19] The various house forms convey different information, but they also link and define each other. We might compare this to the repetition (and perhaps rhythm) of certain descriptions, recorded textually, in Franciscan friar Bernaldino de Sahagun's Florentine Codex. For example, a description of the harlot recorded from Sahagun's native informants in the sixteenth century reads: "a young woman [or] an evil old woman, besotted, drunk—very drunk, much besotted; dejected, perverse. . .a free yielder of herself, a whore from the brothel, a deflowered one….She appears like a flower, looks gaudy, arrays herself gaudily; she views herself in a mirror."[20] The information is repetitive, but conveys slightly different information with each variation.

The colonial strategies employed in the Codex Azcatitlan reveal different ways of thinking about and shaping indigenous identity in the colonial period. The artists attempt to preserve an account of the earliest stages of Aztec history, while adapting and responding to cultural and linguistic changes. The fact that they are recording this particular part of Aztec history is significant. As Elizabeth Hill Boone writes, "The essential message being conveyed by the migration story is . . . the transition of the Mexica from a small and relatively insignificant band to the people destined to rule the world as it was then known."[21] In its sixteenth-century context, the Mexica migration history may have helped to establish a sense of identity for an indigenous population in post-conquest

17 Two unfinished date cartouches also appear on Plate XII. As there is no gap in the year count, these appear to be a mistake on the part of the less-refined second artist.

18 Images and date cartouches overlap on Plates VI, IX, X, and XII.

19 These have been read as Cihuatecpan (a phonetic rendering of 2 jars represented as spiny cactus), Chalman (which has the glyph for jade with a cord running through it), Tlacochalco (2 javelins), and Tlacatecpan (which is represented by a banner). See *Codex Azcatitlan* n. 8.

20 *Florentine Codex*, Book 10, 55.

21 Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Migration Histories as Ritual Performance" 142.

Mexico. Just as the Mexica departed from Aztlan in a humble state, endured hardship and rose to noble status, so could their descendants. As the transformation of a people is represented throughout the course of this manuscript, so is it represented in visual images and changing sign systems on each page.

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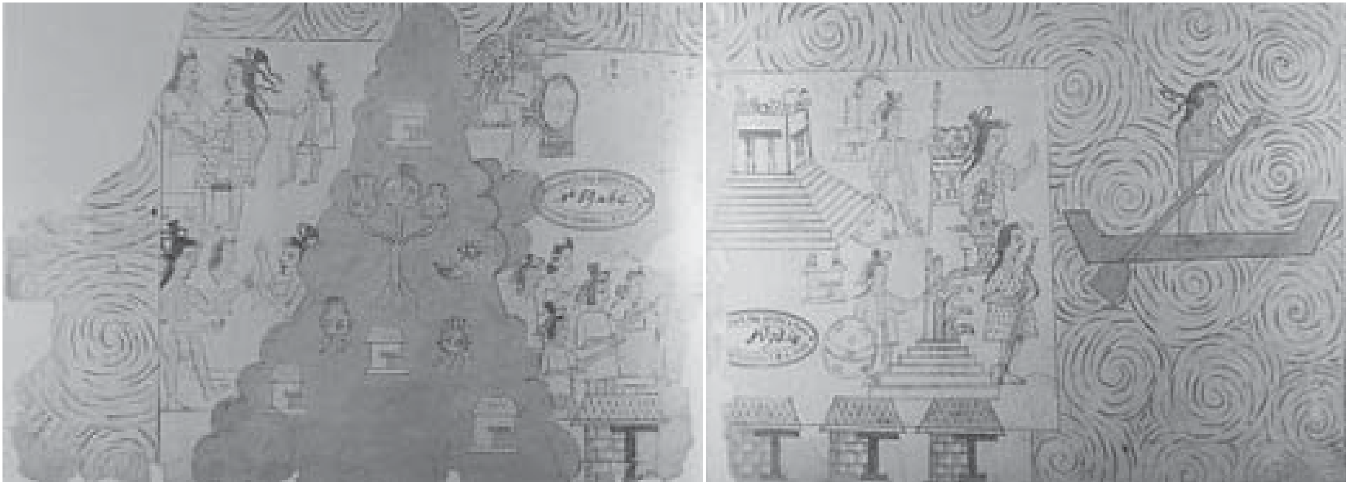
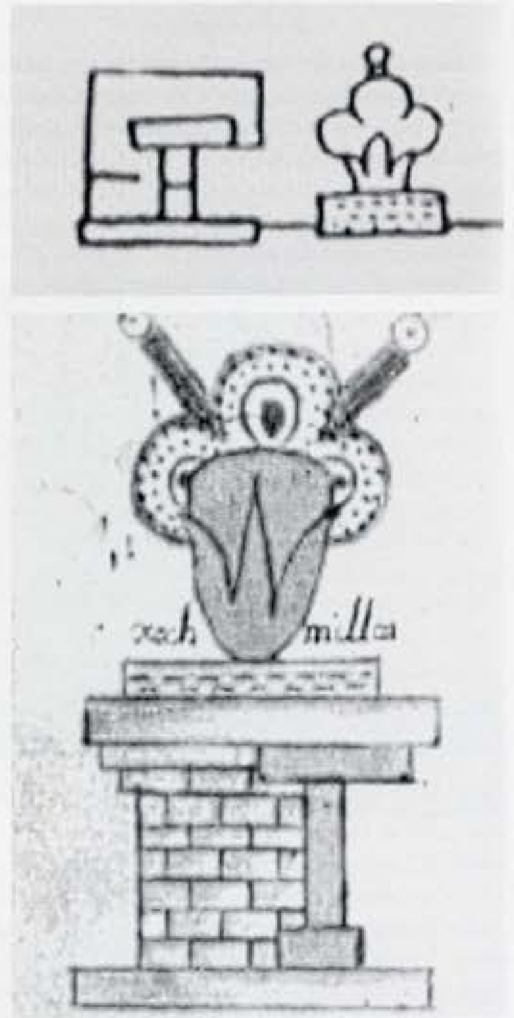


Figure 1: Departure from Aztlan in the Codex Azcatitlan, photograph from *Codex Azcatitlan*, 1995 (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France/Société des Américanistes) Plate II.

Figure 2: Departure from Aztlan in the Codex Boturini, Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

Figure 3: Departure from Aztlan in the Codex Aubin, folio 3, The British Museum.



[*above right*] Figure 4: Comparison of the glyphs for Xochimilco in the (top) Codex Boturini, Biblioteca National de Anthropologia e Historia, and the (bottom) Codex Azcatitlan, from *Codex Azcatitlan,* Plate III, right.

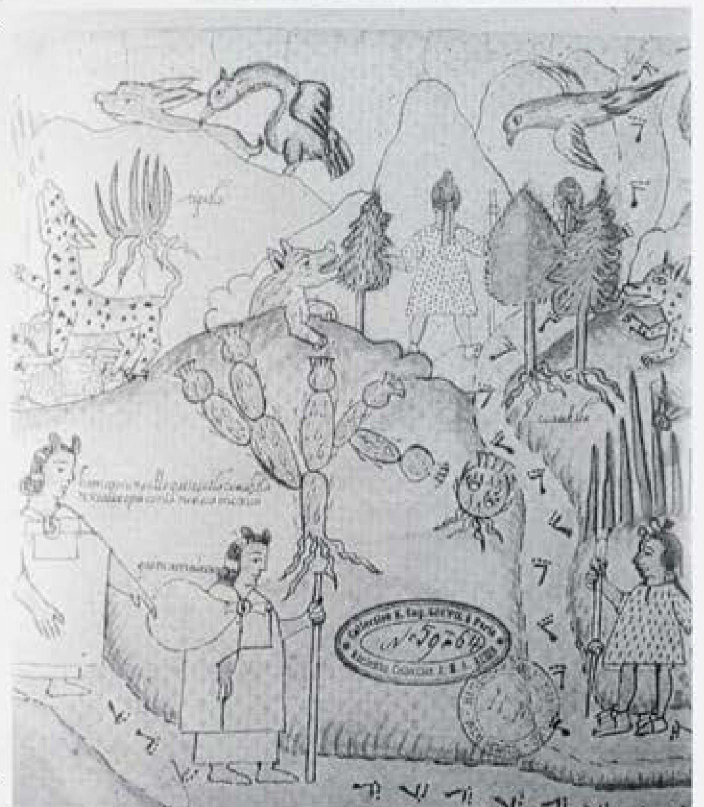


Figure 5: Wilderness scene from the Codex Azcatitlan, *Codex Azcatitlan*, Plate V, right.

Figure 6: Codex Azcatitlan scene depicting Mexica travels, *Codex Azcatitlan*, Plate VI, left.

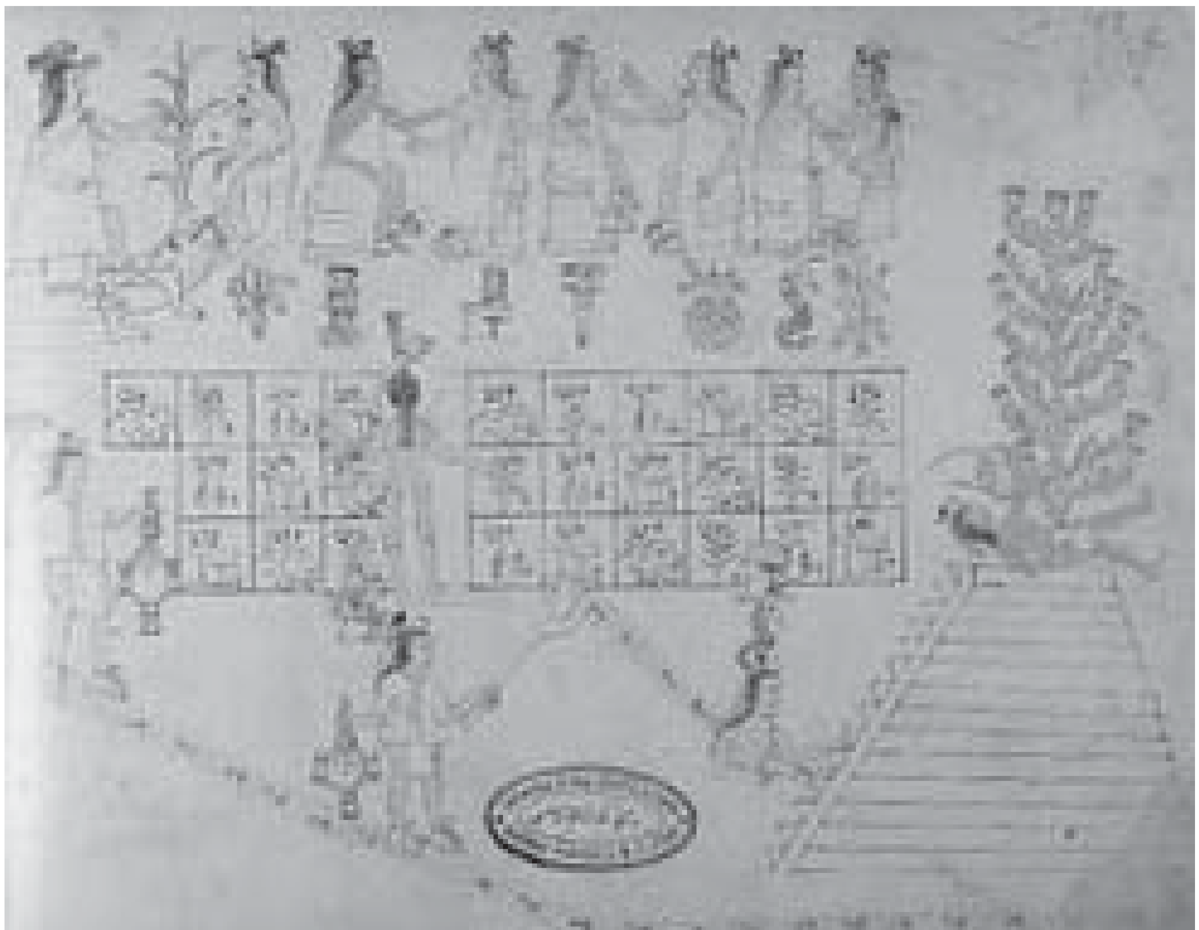


Figure 7: Overlap of pictorial image and date cartouche in the Codex Azcatitlan, *Codex Azcatitlan*, Plate VII, right.