Figure 1. The departure from Aztlan. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

The hidden codes of the Codex Azcatitlan

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The document known as the Codex Azcatitlan is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful and complex colonial Mexican codices we know.[1] Besides containing significant historical and cultural information, this sixteenth-century document is characterized by its complex combination of Mesoamerican pictographic and visual narrative conventions and European pictorial techniques. Furthermore, the various parts of the Codex were painted in very different styles and with variable degrees of detail and care. As a result, Donald Robertson described this document as a highly acculturated codex and attributed its visual heterogeneity to the haste with which it was made or to the participation of several different artists. He even proposed that it could actually be a seventeenth-century copy of a sixteenth-century lost original document (Robertson 1959:184).

In this article I will seek to demonstrate that the Codex Azcatitlan is, in fact, a very coherent document, which combines native Mesoamerican and Western visual conventions and styles to strengthen the highly complex historical arguments that its authors were trying to convey to their different audiences.

The central visual and narrative frameworks employed by the *tlacuilome* that painted this Codex were the conventions and techniques of Mexica and Mesoamerican pictographic books.[2] It is widely accepted that this narrative visual language combined conventional pictographic signs (for personal names, place names, dates, and several key concepts) with more pictorial depictions of scenes involving historical characters, landscapes, buildings, rituals, battles, etc.[3] These native Mesoamerican features are combined throughout the Codex with pictorial conventions of

European origin. For example, the *tlacuilome* used drawing techniques, such as shading and foreshortening, to create the illusion of volume, and strove to create the illusion of space by using the juxtaposition of human figures or landscape features as well as some form of perspective. By doing so they broke with the Mesoamerican tradition of depicting pictographic elements in what Robertson has defined as a "spaceless landscape" (1959:61).

This combination is not the simple result of a mechanical process of acculturation, or even of the fact that the *tlacuilome* had been trained in using European pictorial techniques and had been influenced by European images. The Codex Azcatitlan should be understood and analyzed as the result of a complex dialogue between Mesoamerican and European visual conventions: the authors chose to employ one or the other in order to better address the different Native and European audiences they sought to reach with parallel and distinct arguments.

To begin with, this Codex was made by and for Mexicas from the city of México–Tlatelolco, and therefore it presented their local version of the history of Mexica people. This document was also simultaneously addressed to other Mexicas from the dominant twin city of México-Tenochtitlan, and thus it overtly followed their own official version of the history of the Mexicas, while subtly subverting some of its main tenets. Finally, the document was meant to be seen and accepted by a European audience with authority and power over the Mexicas, consisting mostly of bureaucrats and priests, which its creators sought to please and convince through the use of European conventions and techniques.

To understand how this document could address such diverse audiences and present different messages to them we may refer to James Scott's analysis of the coexistence of public and private transcripts in the discourses and practices of subjects involved in vertical power relations such as the ones created by colonialism (Scott 1990).

Since the aim of the Codex Azcatitlan was to persuade those in power, the Spaniards, of its historical arguments, its creators strove to make the document both understandable and pleasurable to the Spaniards and thus employed their own visual language in a first public discourse. At the same time, however, the Codex

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1. The name was given to this mysterious document by Robert Barlow, the author of the only detailed study of the document (1995). Michel Graulich has recently annotated and extended his study (1995).

2. *Tlacuilo* (sing.) and *tlacuilome* (pl.) mean "writer–painter" in Náhuatl and are derived from the verb *cuiloa,* which means both "to paint" and "to write." In Mesoamerica in general the practices of drawing and writing were never divorced (see Coe 1997), and the practices of seeing and hearing were combined in an audiovisual discourse that used both pictographical books and oral tradition (Mignolo 1994). I use the word Mexica to refer to the inhabitants of México-Tenochtitlan and México-Tlatelolco, to distinguish them from their Náhuatl-speaking neighbors, who are commonly known as Aztecs.

3. For a discussion of this pictographic style and its conventions, see Robertson 1959, Smith 1973, León-Portilla 1996, Boone 2000, among others.

was a vehicle for other discourses directed at Indian audiences. In this case, we have a second overt or public discourse, directed to the Mexica elite of Tenochtitlan, and a third private or hidden one, aimed at a Tlatelolca audience. Since the latter two messages, and particularly the third one, had to be less explicit, in order not to interfere with the public discourse directed at the Spaniards, they were dissimulated behind obscure allusions, visual analogies, and puns. Gordon Brotherston recently demonstrated the existence of such hidden discourses in the Codex Mexicanus (Brotherston 2000) and I will suggest that they are also present throughout the Codex Azcatitlan and are fundamental to understanding both its historical arguments and its visual complexity.

To accommodate these different discourses and arguments, the Codex Azcatitlan had to achieve a remarkable level of *indeterminacy*. This concept, as defined by the literary critic Wolfgang Iser (1993), refers to a deficit of meaning in a text that is left for its readers to create and elaborate, thereby making them active participants in the construction of the signification of the literary work. The existence of indeterminacy, according to Iser, explains why a text can be read and understood over and above temporal and cultural barriers. This concept is particularly relevant to the visual narration in the Codex Azcatitlan, since it was addressed to audiences with different cultural backgrounds. The fact that this Codex was defined as an enigmatic document by Robertson can be explained as the result of its indeterminacy (1959:184). Even as they have been seduced by the beauty of the painting and its assimilation of Western values and practices, it is possible that Western eyes have not understood many of the scenes in this Codex precisely because they were meant not to.

In order to demonstrate these hypotheses, I shall examine the interaction between the traditional Mesoamerican pictographic conventions and the new European pictorial techniques within the context of the narrative of Mexica history presented by the Codex Azcatitlan.

As we have seen, the Codex Azcatitlan is respectful of the visual narrative conventions employed by Mexica pictographic histories, and thus its general organization is similar to that of most Mexica codices. The style of this Codex, however, is strikingly different, since it is enriched by the consistent use of European pictorial techniques and conventions. These European elements constitute "motifs," that is, specific visual and symbolic elements that have well defined meanings and narrative functions and that are systematically repeated throughout the Codex. I have been able to identify four of these European motifs:

1. Depictions of landscapes that use European conventions, such as the horizon line, the superposition of figures, as well as different forms of perspective and shadowing, to create an illusion of depth and space.
2. Three-dimensional depictions of important buildings, mostly the main temples of Aztlan, México-Tlatelolco and México-Tenochtitlan, using point of fugue perspective and shadowing.
3. Depictions of groups of people in circles, representing important councils and gatherings, that use European techniques of foreshortening and superposition.
4. Depictions of the corpses of victims of acts of sacrifice or warfare using elaborate drawing techniques.

As we follow the narrative of the Codex, we shall see how these motifs interacted with the Mesoamerican conventions that structure its visual discourse to present the complex and multilayered messages of the *tlacuilome*.

The migration period

A representation of Aztlan, the original home of the Mexicas, figures prominently at the beginning of most Mexica pictographic histories as it does in the Codex Azcatitlan (see fig. 1). Although its depiction of Aztlan is broadly similar to that in other codices, because of its use of similar pictographic conventions, including the bi-dimensional profile representation of buildings and persons, the Codex also introduces three of the European motifs defined above.

First, the main temple of Aztlan is drawn three-dimensionally, using a kind of one-point perspective.[4] The use of this mode of representation is highly significant, since the motif of the temple plays a central role in the narration of the imperial stage of Mexica history. Thus, the Codex Azcatitlan, like most other Mexica histories, establishes an explicit analogy between the original temple of the Mexicas in Aztlan and their main temple in Mexico.[5]

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4. The temple, however, is superposed on a human figure in a manner that breaks all the rules of Western representation. It is difficult to know whether this breach was intentional or the result of a misunderstanding of these conventions.

5. The evident similarity between Aztlan and Mexico has been a subject of discussion between specialists since Edmund Seler argued
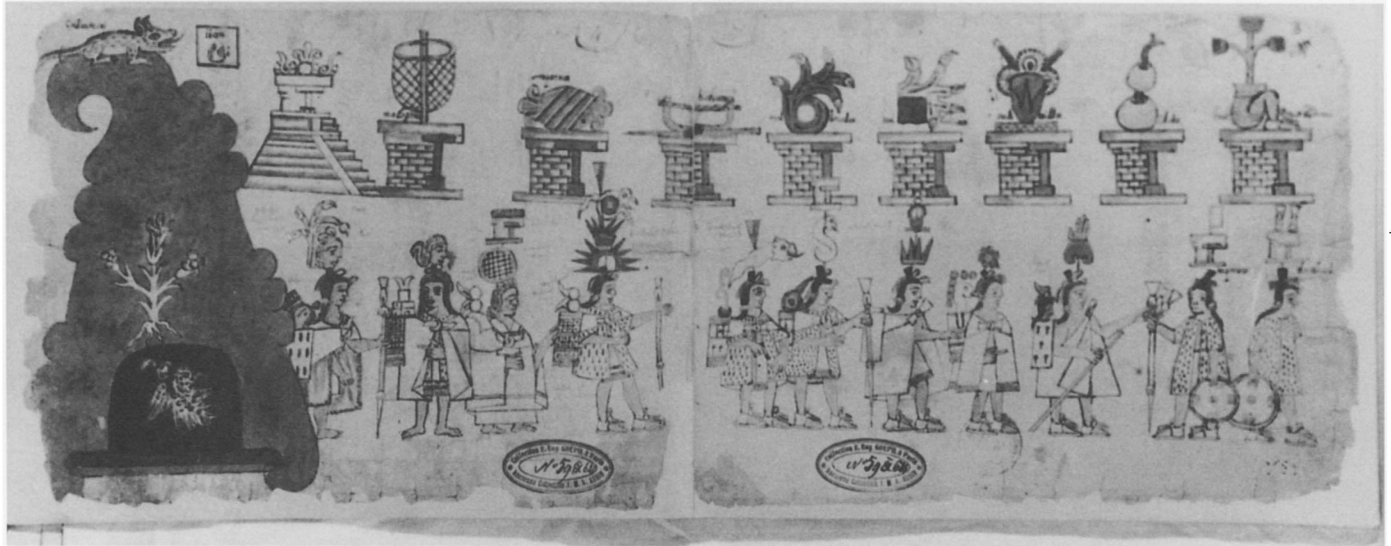
Figure 2. Colhuacan and the presentation of the other migrant groups. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Second, the motif of the landscape is introduced through the use of European conventions in the depiction of the mountain to the left of the plate, which has the requisite Mesoamerican three-lobbed glyph, meaning *tépetl,* mountain, but also serves as a standing ground for the god Huitzilopochtli and the houses and cacti growing on it.

Finally, the motif of the council is used in the depiction of a group of people, to the left of the plate, who appear to be discussing the imminent departure of the migrants. On the other side of the mountain the superimposition of a group of people who bid farewell to the departing Mexicas emphasizes their number.

The combination of these European motifs in the depiction of Aztlan can be interpreted as a sign of the importance of this episode to the narrative of the Codex.

The following plate (see fig. 2) depicts the other migrant groups that the Mexicas met at Colhuacan-Chicomóztoc immediately after they began their journey. It contrasts sharply with the first one, since it employs no European motifs, adhering strictly to the traditional Mesoamerican pictographic style.

This absence cannot be attributed to haste, since the figures and glyphs in this plate are carefully drawn and colored. It can be surmised that the content of this plate was considered of less interest to a European audience,

since it involved a complex mythical and political argument about the relation between the Mexicas and their neighbors, and that therefore the *tlacuilome* decided there was no point in deploying any European motifs.[6]

The third plate (see fig. 3) presents a beautiful desert landscape. In a further development of the motif introduced in the first plate, the glyphs used to denote the word *tépetl,* mountain, become actual mountains in a panorama that includes two palm trees that could be allusions to the landscape of the Exodus in the Bible.[7] This plate uses another key European landscape convention, the horizon line, upon which all the figures are depicted standing firmly. Similarly, the route of the Mexicas, traditionally represented in Mesoamerican pictographic histories as a row of footprints, is represented here as a path in the European manner.[8]

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that it demonstrated the mythical nature of Aztlan (see Seler 1985 and Navarrete 1999).

6. About the symbolic meaning of Colhuacan-Chicomóztoc and the groups of related and neighboring peoples that emerge from this mythical place, see Limón Olvera 1990:117–119 and López Austin 1999:53–54.

7. Pablo Escalante has demonstrated that these palms are very similar to species found in sixteenth-century engravings depicting the Exodus of the Israelites, (1996:252–253).

8. On this line see my article, Navarrete Linares 2000, and Nicholson's demonstration that the use of footprints as a metonym of traveling is one of the oldest Mesoamerican narrative conventions, dating back to the Olmec, (1976:163–164).

Figure 3. The path through the desert. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

The illusion of depth in the landscape is enhanced by the superposition of two of the mountains that also hide the path of the migrants that passes between them. This "realist" detail is also a direct allusion to the name of the place, Tepemaxalco, "Where the mountains crash." This location has strong religious overtones, since it is similar to one of the places traversed by dead souls in their journey toward their final abode in the underworld Mictlan (López Austin 1960:144).

Thus we can conclude that this plate presents both a finely executed European landscape, including important Biblical allusions that establish a valuable analogy between the Exodus and the Mexica migration, and an image fully participant of the Mesoamerican tradition, through the use of its conventions and the direct representation of an episode full of native religious overtones. This is a clear example of how the combination of Mesoamerican and European elements allowed the authors of the Codex Azcatitlan to convey different messages aimed at their distinct audiences, who were expected to decipher the visual cues that were familiar to them.

The following page, which appears to be mutilated, contains one of the most mysterious scenes in the whole Codex (see fig. 4).[9] The mountain, with a lioness face

and six protuberances, or teats, has been identified with the mythical Chicomóztoc, Place of the Seven Caves. On the right there is a complex scene involving the god Huitzilopochtli and the sacrifice of several characters.

From the point of view of our analysis, the most remarkable feature of this scene is the depiction of two drowned men floating face downwards on the river. This three-dimensional representation of sacrificial victims introduces the fourth European motif in the visual discourse of the Codex.

The next page, or the right side of this plate, depicts a beautiful mountain landscape that further develops the European techniques introduced earlier (see fig. 5). To create a convincing sensation of space, the mountains and other features of the landscapes are superposed; also, while the frontmost elements of this landscape are carefully rendered, the more distant mountains are depicted with much less detail and in lighter hues, creating a kind of aerial perspective; finally, while the human figures in the front are shown in a traditional Mesoamerican profile depiction, those in the distance are smaller and shown with their backs to the viewer, thus enhancing the perception of distance.

As we have seen, the fact that this scene uses so many European conventions can be taken as an

9. This enigmatic scene was described at length by both Barlow (1995:57–58) and Graulich (1995:58–60), and they disagree whether it

is incomplete, lacking the right page, or combined with the mountain landscape that appears afterward, which we shall discuss below.
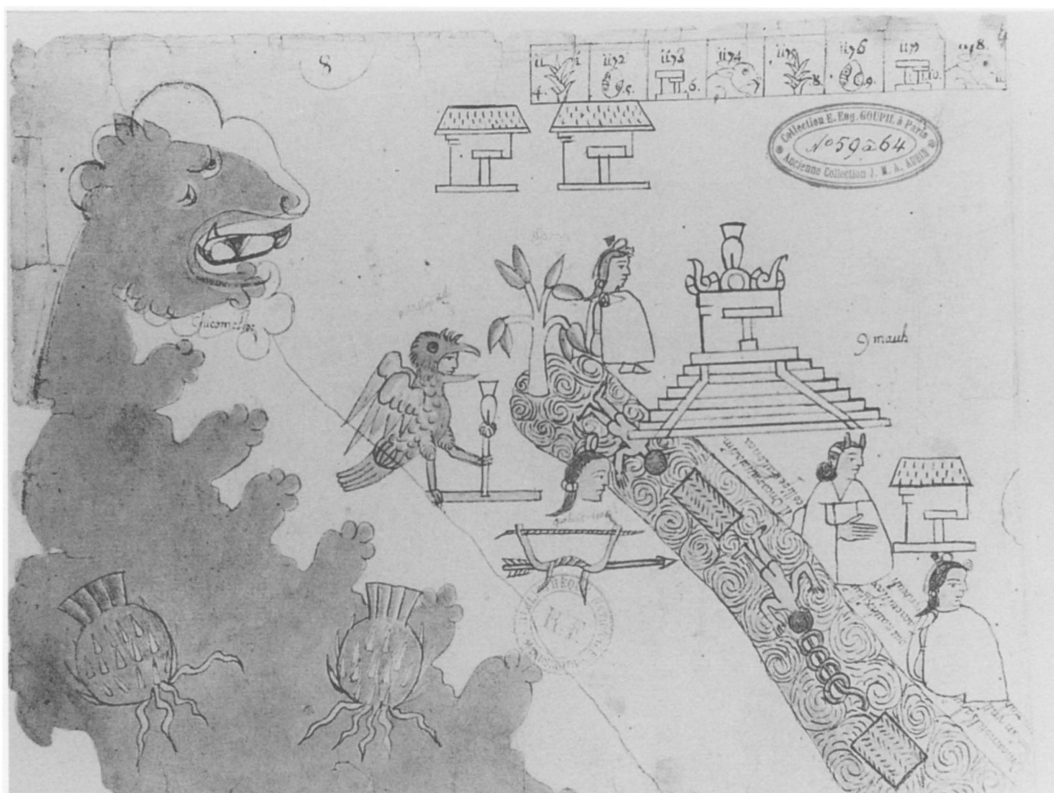
Figure 4. Chicomóztoc. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

indicator of its importance for the narrative. However, once again, these conventions were used to depict an event that was filled with native symbolic and religious overtones, since the crossing of the wild lands at Chicomóztoc was a ritual action that provoked the transformation of the ethnic identity of the migrants and entailed a radical break with their past history at the beginning of a new historical era.[10] Here too, the *tlacuilome* seem to be addressing two distinct audiences with parallel messages: while the native viewers would immediately recognize the symbolic meaning of the scene, the European ones would see an attractive landscape in the manner of a European illustration.

The four highly significant and carefully painted scenes at the beginning of the Mexica migration, which we have analyzed so far, stand in dramatic contrast with the following seven plates, which narrate the journey of

the Mexicas until the foundation of their new homeland in México-Tenochtitlan. These are drawn in a much simpler, more traditional style, almost lacking in color and adhering closely to Mesoamerican pictographic conventions.

Robertson attributed the striking simplification of the drawing in these middle plates to the haste of the painters (1959:69). However, in my opinion, the use of a simpler style has a narrative intention. In all known Mexica histories, pictographic or written in alphabetic script, this part of the migration is rather monotonous and not very significant from a narrative point of view, consisting only in the enumeration of the places visited by the Mexicas and of the length of their stay in each one, without much further elaboration. Therefore it can be assumed that the *tlacuilome* of the Azcatitlan adopted a simpler pictorial style that reflected the reduced importance of this part of the migration history, and also established a meaningful contrast with the previous and subsequent parts.

10. On this symbolic birth of the migrating peoples, see Navarrete Linares 2000a, as well as Hers 1996:97.
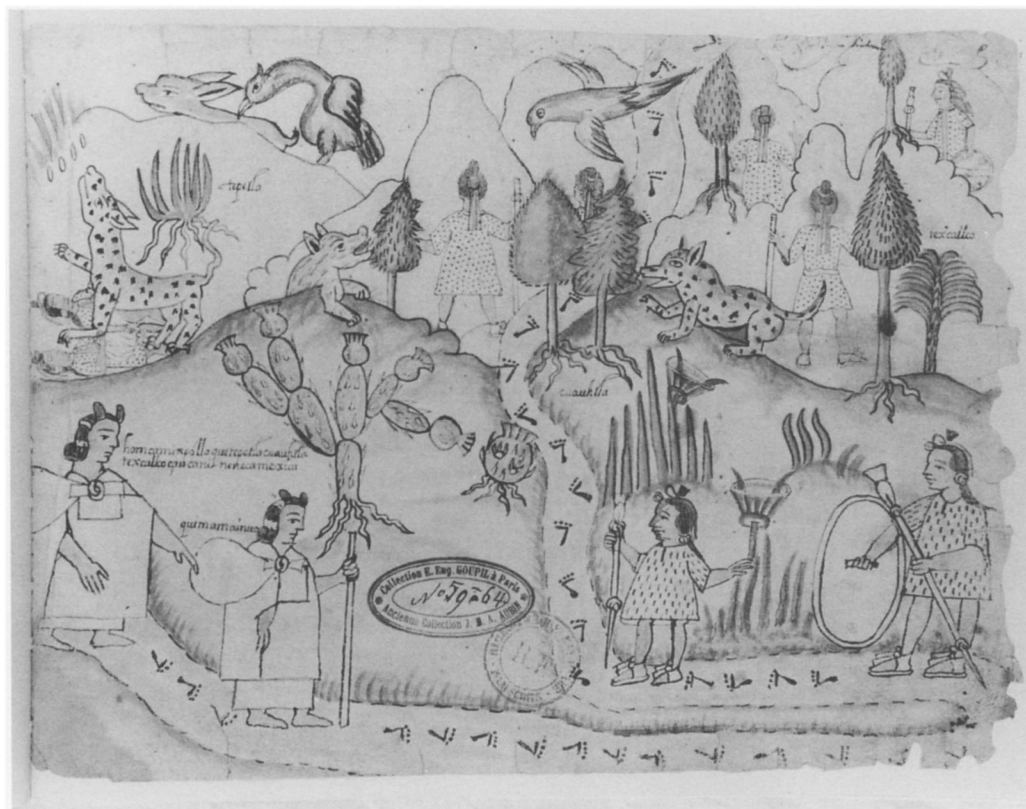
Figure 5. The mountain landscape at Chicomóztoc. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century.
Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

The only utilization of the European landscape motif in this section is a fairly idiosyncratic one: in the sixth plate the path followed by the Mexicas is gradually transformed from the realist depiction used up to that point into a single continuous line. In the following plates, this line comes to play the role of a horizon line on which the human figures walk and temples and other buildings stand (see fig. 6). This horizon line creates a "transversal" landscape, depicted not from the front but in a kind of cross-section, similar to the traditional Mesoamerican profile. This peculiar use of the horizon line appears to be a bicultural visual pun that conflates a Mesoamerican convention with a European one in a unique way that could only be understood by someone familiar with both traditions, that is by the *tlacuilome* and their native audiences. This detail proves that this part of the Codex, however austere, is not visually unrelated to the more complex previous one.

Another European motif used in this section is that of the gathering of people in circles, employed to represent the battle in which the Mexicas were defeated at Chapultepec and their ensuing captivity among the victorious Colhuas, two highly significant episodes.

During their forced stay in Colhuacan, the Mexicas were compelled to make war with and vanquish the Xochimilcas. This victory had great symbolic meaning for them, since it demonstrated their prowess even in such dire straits. It seems no coincidence therefore that the Codex presents a careful drawing of the body of a Xochimilca war prisoner as he is being sacrificed. This is the second instance of a motif that will acquire great significance in the following parts of the Codex.

The last plate of this section represents the final stage of the Mexica migration culminating in the foundation of the city of México-Tenochtitlan (see fig. 7). As the culmination of the migration, and the beginning of a new stage in Mexica history, this foundation figures prominently in most Mexica codices, such as the Mendoza, the Aubin and the Vaticano-Ríos, where it is placed in the center of a plate, thus emphasizing the
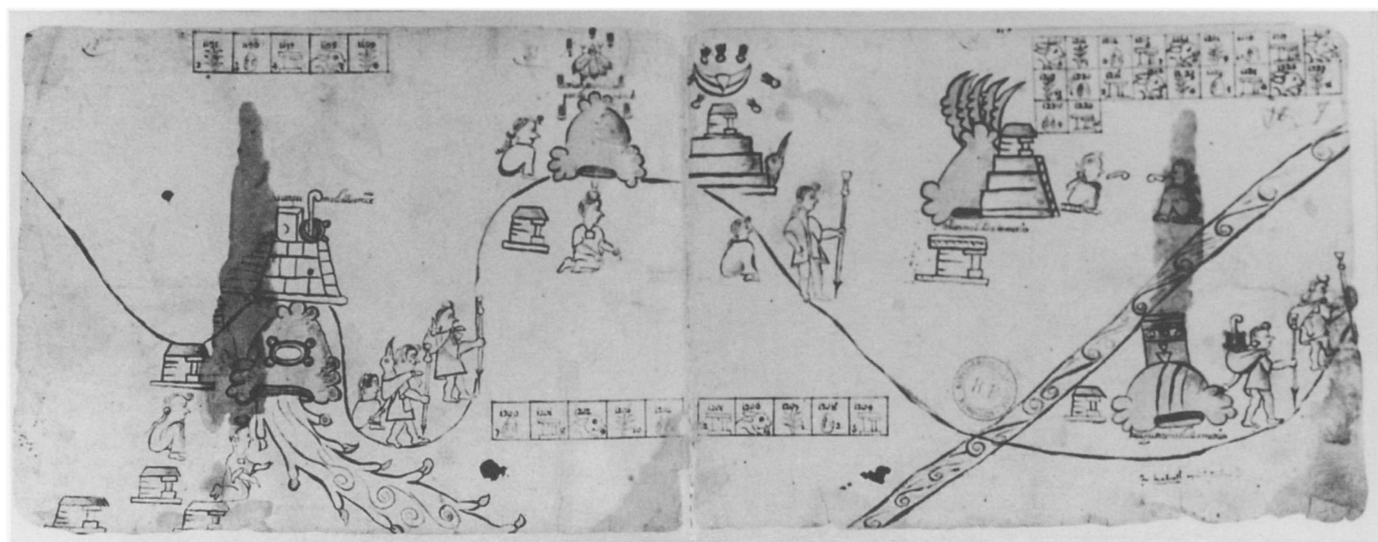
Figure 6. The horizon line and the path followed by the Mexica. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

emergence of the newly founded city as a cosmic and political center.

However, it appears that the *tlacuilome* of the Codex Azcatitlan chose to undermine the significance of this foundation, since they depicted it on the right edge of a plate that contains many other episodes. Furthermore, the only European motif employed in this depiction is the body of a sacrificial victim, which lies atop a temple, and upon whose breast grows the emblematic cactus tree that gave its name to the new city. This motif is used to establish a negative association between the Tenochcas and cruel death. Finally, the simple bi-dimensional representation of the first temple of the Mexicas in Tenochtitlan contrasts sharply with the three-dimensional representations of the temple at Tlatelolco.

If the *tlacuilome* of the Codex Azcatitlan sought to make light of the foundation of Tenochtitlan, their narrative strategy is made clearer in the next plate, which depicts the parallel coronations of the rulers of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, and which is more carefully painted and full of European motifs (see fig. 8).

In this scene, the motif of the council of people reaches its fullest expression and its final manifestation, since both of the new rulers, the Tenochca Acamapichtli, to the left, and the Tlatelolca Cuacuauhpitzáhuac, to the right, are represented in the center of carefully drawn circles of characters whose presence emphasizes the solemnity and transcendence of the occasion and

establishes an elaborate game of comparisons between both ceremonies.

The Tenochca coronation involves twelve characters, most of which have name glyphs and are drawn with greater detail. In contrast, the coronation of the ruler of Tlatelolco involves just five attendants, who are drawn with fewer details and deserve no name glyphs. At first glance this would seem to imply that the latter ceremony is less important than the former, which would confirm the historic dominance of the Tenochca over the Tlatelolcas.

However, three details underline the comparative importance of the Tlatelolca coronation. First, it is presided personally by Tezozómoc, the ruler of the then dominant *altépetl* of Azcapotzalco and the father of Cuacuauhpitzáhuac. The *tlacuilome* show that this powerful ruler also presided at the coronation at Tenochtitlan, since his mouth is united by a dotted line to the Tenochca ruler on the opposite side of the plate, a feature used later on in the Codex to establish a causal relationship between two elements, which in this case most likely meant that he ordered, or allowed, his coronation. However, the fact is that he was not physically present, as he was in the coronation of his Tlatelolca counterpart. Second, the Tlatelolca ruler, Cuacuauhpitzáhuac, deserves a name glyph, in contrast to the Tenochca king who has none and is depicted with his back toward the viewer. Finally Cuacuauhpitzáhuac
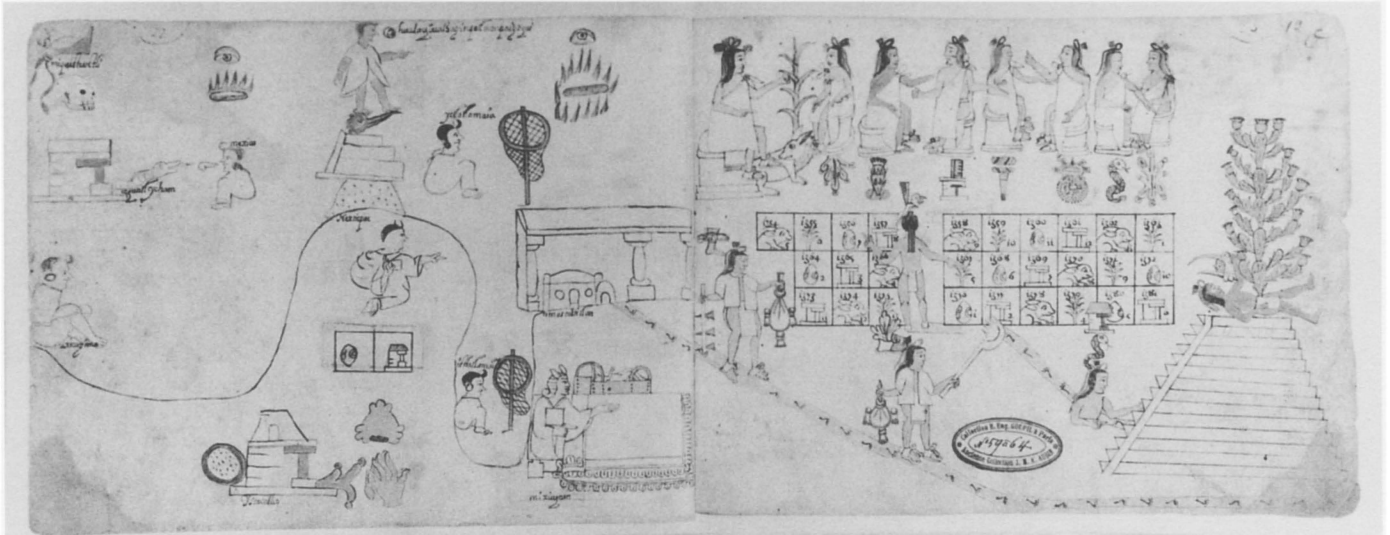
Figure 7. The foundation of México-Tenochtitlan. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

is shown seated on the glyph of Tlatelolco, and wearing and holding the attributes of power, a crown, a cloak, and a staff, while the Tenochca ruler is depicted seated on a chair and just receiving those attributes, although they are much more carefully painted.

What could be the meaning of this elaborate counterpoint? First of all, this plate confirms a well-known historical truth: Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco had different rulers when they were founded. However, the mere fact that the *tlacuilome* chose to represent both coronations as simultaneous and equivalent proves that they were Tlatelolcas, since the Tenochca histories never paid much attention to Tlatelolco and its dynasty.[11] Thus, while the authors of the Codex Azcatitlan overtly recognize the supremacy of Tenochtitlan, drawing the coronation of the Tenochca ruler first and with much more detail, they covertly stress the importance, or even the preeminence, of the Tlatelolca coronation.

A complex, carefully painted depiction of the lake around the city and the activities of the fishermen and hunters in its waters separates these parallel and rival coronations. This scene was considered by Robertson to be an arbitrary insertion:

> A large "coronation" scene is divided in the middle by a clearly interpolated genre scene of fishing and bird netting on the lake. In this view of the lake the lower of the two

sets of nets are reduced to precisely defined linear and rectangular forms of almost geometric regularity, a peculiarity of this manuscript. The genre details here are additions to a scene of historical importance that must be shown as continuing from one side of the lake to the other. (1959:184)

In my opinion this scene is neither an interpolation nor is it irrelevant to the narrative messages of the *tlacuilome*. One of its functions appears to be to emphasize the distinction between the two parallel coronations and thus to "decentralize" Tenochca history, as in the previous plate. Furthermore, the depiction of the Mexicas engaged in lowly hunting–gathering activities after the foundation of their new *altépetl* is an important theme in many Mexica histories, where it is used to stress their humble origins and to exalt their future glories.[12] Therefore, it seems that even if a European audience could interpret it as a genre scene, an unnecessary but attractive addition to the main discourse, this image was also transmitting important content for its native audiences.

It must also be stressed that this is the last instance of the landscape motif in the Codex, and as such it echoes the beautiful, elaborate landscapes at the beginning of the migration, and provides a fitting visual narrative culmination to the whole history of the migration.

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11. In fact the only other Mexica source that describes the coronation of the first ruler of Tlatelolco is the *Annals of Tlatelolco* (Berlin, 1948).

12. For example, the Codex Telleriano-Remensis portrays the foundation of Tenochtitlan among fishermen and hunters, and many written sources also describe these activities.
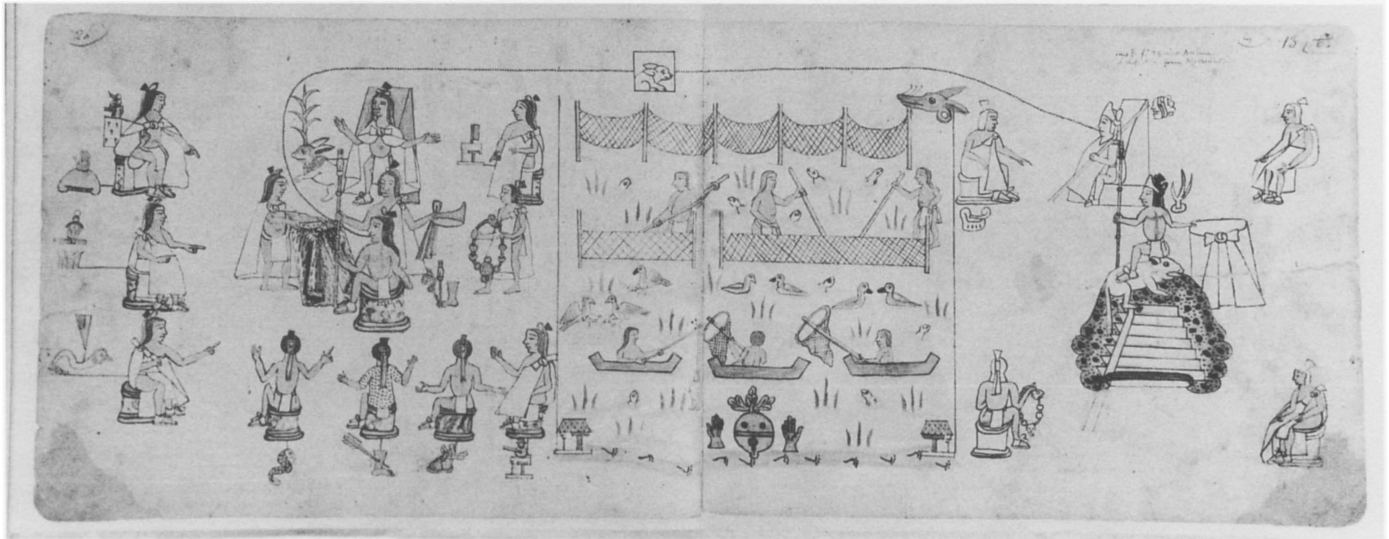
Figure 8. The coronations. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

The imperial period

The following nine plates of the Codex Azcatitlan deal with the settled life of the Mexicas and the rise of their empire. This section of the document presents a sharp narrative, visual, and stylistic contrast to the previous one. These transformations are parallel to the ones that take place in all the other Mexica codices that also deal with the imperial period, which adopt a special chronotope for narrating the settled stage of Mexica history.[13] The history of the Mexicas in this period was no longer that of a group looking for a place to found their city, but of a group firmly established in its new capital and reaching out to conquer the world around it. Therefore, time was no longer measured by the rhythm of the stopovers of the migrants in their journey towards their definite homeland, but by the reigns of the successive Tenochca rulers and by their conquests. Similarly, space was firmly anchored on the main temple of Mexico, whose expansions and renovations were carefully registered since it was both the cosmic center and the embodiment of the power of the Mexicas.[14]

Since the second section of the Codex carefully respects all these conventions, it appears to be more

Mesoamerican in emphasis than the previous one. All plates begin at the left with the portrait of a recently crowned ruler of Tenochtitlan, and end at the right with the representation of his dead body wrapped in a funeral bundle; these images establish both a conceptual and a temporal frame of reference for the whole plate. Between them, the *tlacuilome* depicted a row of glyphs enumerating the places conquered by the ruler, and also, in some cases, scenes of ritual, productive, or warlike activities. These depictions are generally bi-dimensional and they lack a horizon line, being placed in the typical Mesoamerican "spaceless landscape." While some of the plates of this section are almost completely monochromatic, others are carefully colored, a difference that, as we shall see, does not appear to be accidental.

The only two European motifs employed in this section of the Codex are the three-dimensional depiction of the main temple of Mexico and the careful representation of victims of sacrifice or war. By placing such great importance on the depiction of the main temple of Mexico, the authors of the Codex Azcatitlan overtly adhered to the conventions used by other Tenochca histories, but once again gave them an interesting and highly significant twist, since the first temple they depicted was that of Tlatelolco.

The first representation of the temple of Tlatelolco shows its construction, under the reign of Cuacuauhpitzahuac, in a plate overtly devoted to the rule of the first Tenochca king, Acamapichtli (see fig. 9).

13. These are the codices Telleriano-Remensis, Vaticano-Ríos, Mendoza, and Aubin.

14. For a definition and explanation of the imperial chronotope, and its differences with the migration chronotope, see Navarrete Linares 2000.
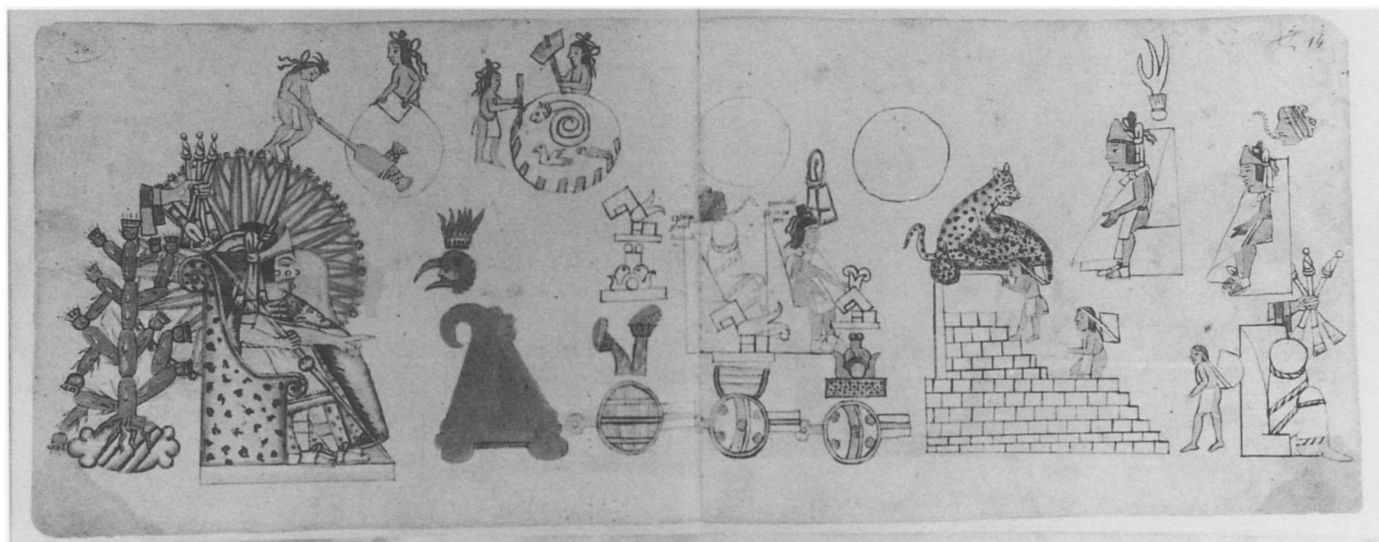
Figure 9. The rule of Acamapichtli and the building of the temple of Tlatelolco. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

While this image is strictly bi-dimensional, its importance is stressed by the presence of three porters carrying stones towards the building. It also serves to reintroduce the motif of the temple in the visual narrative of the Codex, echoing both the three-dimensional temple of Aztlan and the strictly bi-dimensional temple of the foundation of Tenochtitlan.

Four plates, and four Tenochca rulers later, under the reign of Moteuhczorna Ilhuicamina of Tenochtitlan, the temple of Tlatelolco is depicted again, this time three-dimensionally in all its splendor (see fig. 10).

In the following plate (see fig. 11), devoted to the rule of Axayácatl in Tenochtitlan, the temple of Tlatelolco is represented in the same fashion, but this time it is also the site of the defeat of the Tlatelolcas by the Tenochcas. Tenochca warriors are shown attacking to the left of the temple, one of them climbing its stairs. On the right, the brutally mutilated body of Moquíhuix, the last ruler of Tlatelolco, is shown falling down the stairs of the temple. His individual death serves as a striking metonym of the conquest and defeat of all the Tlatelolcas by the Tenochcas in 1473 (Garduño 1997:121–153).

This dramatic scene combines the motif of the temple with that of the careful depiction of sacrificial victims. In this instance, the combination serves to denounce the atrocities committed by the Tenochcas against the Tlatelolcas, and their brutal defiling of the sacred center of Mexico at Tlatelolco.

The following three plates, corresponding to the reign of the last three Tenochca rulers, Tízoc, Ahuítzotl, and

Moteuhczoma Xocoyotzin, include three-dimensional depictions of the temple of Tenochtitlan, which now has become the main sacred center of Mexico. However, in two of the plates these are accompanied by detailed and gory representations of sacrificial victims, thus creating an association between this building and the performance of bloody acts. This association will acquire its full narrative meaning later in the Codex, in the last representation of the temple of Tenochtitlan as the site of the massacre of the Tenochcas by their Spanish conquerors.

In this way, the Codex Azcatitlan overtly followed the conventions used by all other Mexica codices dealing with the imperial period while presenting at the same time a highly subversive message that sought to delegitimize the Tenochcas in the eyes of its Mexica audiences, by showing that their temple and sacred center was merely a substitute for the original Tlatelolca one, and also in the eyes of a European public by associating the temple of Tenochtitlan with acts of cruelty and sacrifice.

Aside from this highly significant argument, the *tlacuilome* of the Codex sought to underline the importance of Tlatelolco in Mexica history in other ways. For instance, some of the initial plates, while overtly devoted to the reigns of the Tenochca rulers, actually contain more information about the actions of the rulers of Tlatelolco and, consequently, are carefully drawn and colored. In contrast, the plates that contain no information regarding Tlatelolco are generally drawn
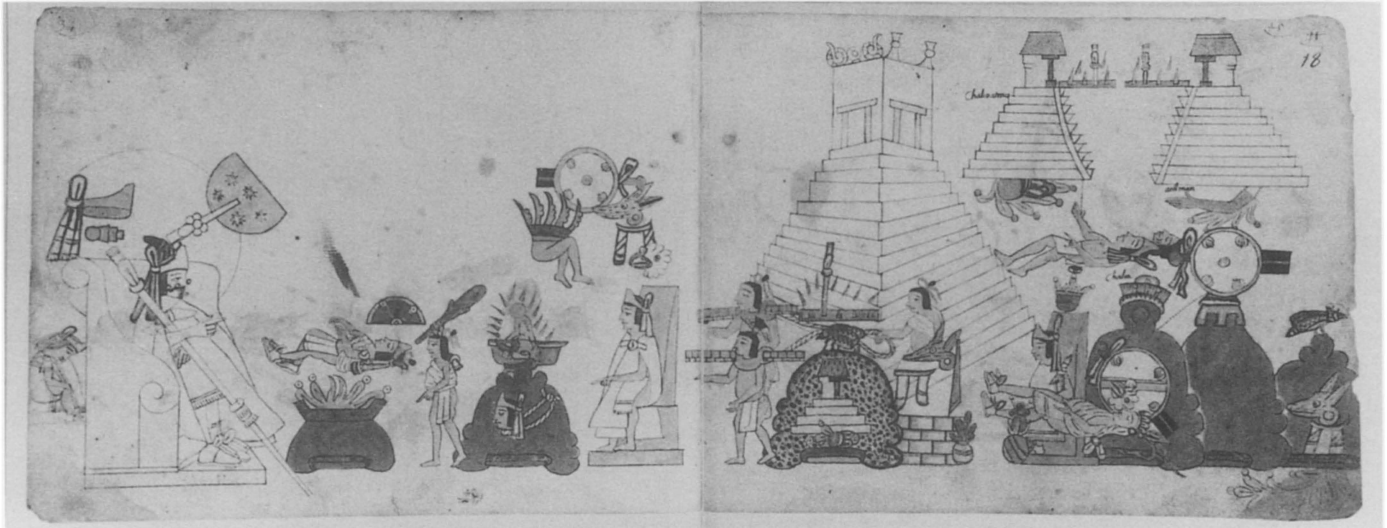
Figure 10. The reign of Moteuhczoma Ilhuicamina and the temple of Tlatelolco. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

in a much simpler style, with almost no color and very few figures, other than the glyphs representing the places conquered by the Mexica ruler.

The conquest

The next section of the Codex Azcatitlan, dealing with the Spanish conquest of the Mexicas, between 1519 and 1521, is much shorter and unfortunately appears to be incomplete. Nevertheless, this section, as well as the following one, which deals with colonial history, present a clear stylistic and narrative contrast to the previous two parts of the Codex. This can be explained by the fact that in drawing the two sections, the *tlacuilome* of the Azcatitlan had no established visual narrative conventions to follow, and so they were free to experiment.

It comes as no surprise that the *tlacuilome* adopted a more Europeanized style to depict the conquest, to the extent that some of their drawings resemble the illustrations of a Western book. The first page of this section (see fig. 12), for instance, presents a carefully rendered portrait of the arriving Spanish army, headed by Hernán Cortés and, significantly, by his Indian interpreter, Malinche. Most of the figures are shown standing firmly on an undulating horizon line and some are juxtaposed to create an illusion of space and depth. The use of these European conventions, however, appears to fail in the case of the Indian porters that walk behind the Spaniards and are shown hovering above the

horizon line. Nevertheless, throughout the page there is a skillful use of color and shading in clothes, flesh, and weapons, and the flag of the Spaniards, with a peculiar rendition of the dove of the Holy Ghost, is convincingly shown fluttering in the wind.

Unfortunately, the right-hand page of this plate appears to be missing, but it can be assumed that it contained a similar portrait of the Mexicas who came to receive the Spaniards, headed by Moteuhczoma Xocoyotzin. If this is true we can surmise that this plate presented a synchronic representation of a single key moment in the conquest, the meeting of Spaniards and Mexicas at the gates of México-Tenochtitlan.

The next plate, logically, is also mutilated, and we only know its right half, containing a detailed rendition of a combat at the main temple of Tenochtitlan (see fig. 13). This scene is one of the most complex in the Codex and it still defies interpretation.[15] This dramatic conquest

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15. Barlow proposed that it was the representation of the famous massacre carried out by the Spaniards during the feast of Tóxcatl. This interpretation is based in the presence of the musicians, who were playing at that party and whose brutal slaying is a common theme in all Indian descriptions of the massacre (1995:138). Graulich instead proposes that the presence of the dead body of Moteuhczoma proves that this is a depiction of a battle that took place afterwards (1995: 138). It seems to me that both interpretations could be correct, and that the scene could concentrate several meaningful episodes of the conquest related to the temple.
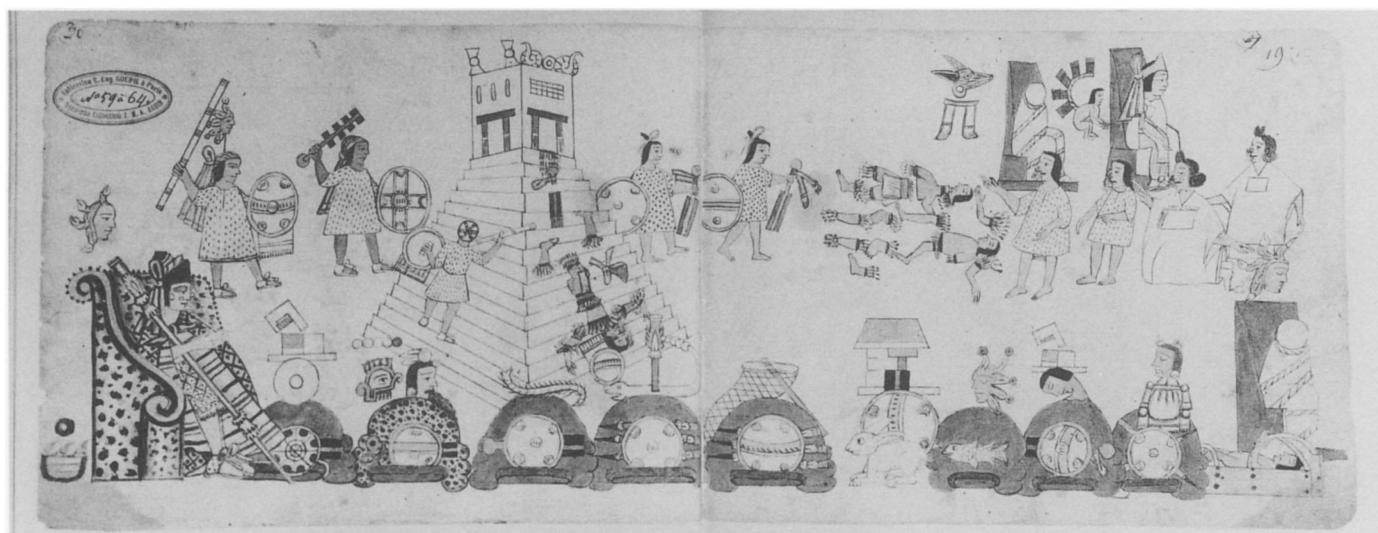
Figure 11. The reign of Axayácatl and the conquest of Tlatelolco by Tenochtitlan. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

scene can be considered the culmination of the visual narrative argument presented by the *tlacuilome* through the second section of the Codex, since it unites its two key narrative motifs: the depiction of the temples of the Mexicas and the victims of acts of conquest and sacrifice.

The beautiful three-dimensional rendition of the temple of Tenochtitlan can be considered the culmination of its previous representations in the Codex. As happened with the landscape and council motifs in the migration section, which culminated in the plate of the parallel coronations, this final representation is the most careful and detailed one, providing a sense of narrative closure.

On the shaded steps of the temple lies the carefully drawn, upside-down corpse of a ruler, who can be identified as Moteuhczoma Xocoyotzin by his magnificent regalia. This scene clearly echoes the representation of the conquest of Tlatelolco under the reign of Axayácatl in figure 11, and the corpse of Moteuhczoma falling down the stairs of the temple of Tenochtitlan can be considered a direct counterpart to the corpse of Moquíhuix falling down the stairs of the temple of Tlatelolco. The contrast and similarity between these two scenes appear to be enhanced by the fact that their composition is inverted.

In this way, the Codex Azcatitlan appears to be presenting once more a subversive anti-Tenochca message while apparently following the official

Tenochca narrative. Indeed, Mexica histories placed great emphasis on the massacre perpetrated by the Spaniards at the temple of Tenochtitlan, in order to highlight the brutality of the conquerors and the bloody defilement of this sacred center. While overtly doing the same thing, the *tlacuilome* of the Azcatitlan seem to argue, in the first place, that the temple that was defiled was only a late illegitimate substitute for the original sacred center at the temple of Tlatelolco, and also, that the Tenochcas were victimized by the Spaniards in the same way they had victimized the Tlatelolcas.[16] Such an argument would have pleased the Spanish audience of the Codex, while confirming the Tlatelolca audience in its rejection of Tenochca hegemony.

The following two pages present what we could consider vignettes of the war of conquest. These scenes display a skilful use of European pictorial techniques, such as perspective and shading, and appear to be inspired by European illustrations. However, the *tlacuilome* did not employ a horizon line or landscape scenery, so that the elements appear lost in a vacuum. There is also a total absence of temporal markers and of any indication of a causal relationship between the different elements. The possible relationship between

16. Similar anti-Tenochca arguments are presented in the *Annals of Tlatelolco,* and in a less explicit way in the narrative collected by Bernardino de Sahagún for his famous Book 12 of the *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España.* For the most thorough comparative analysis of these histories of the conquest see Lockhart 1993.
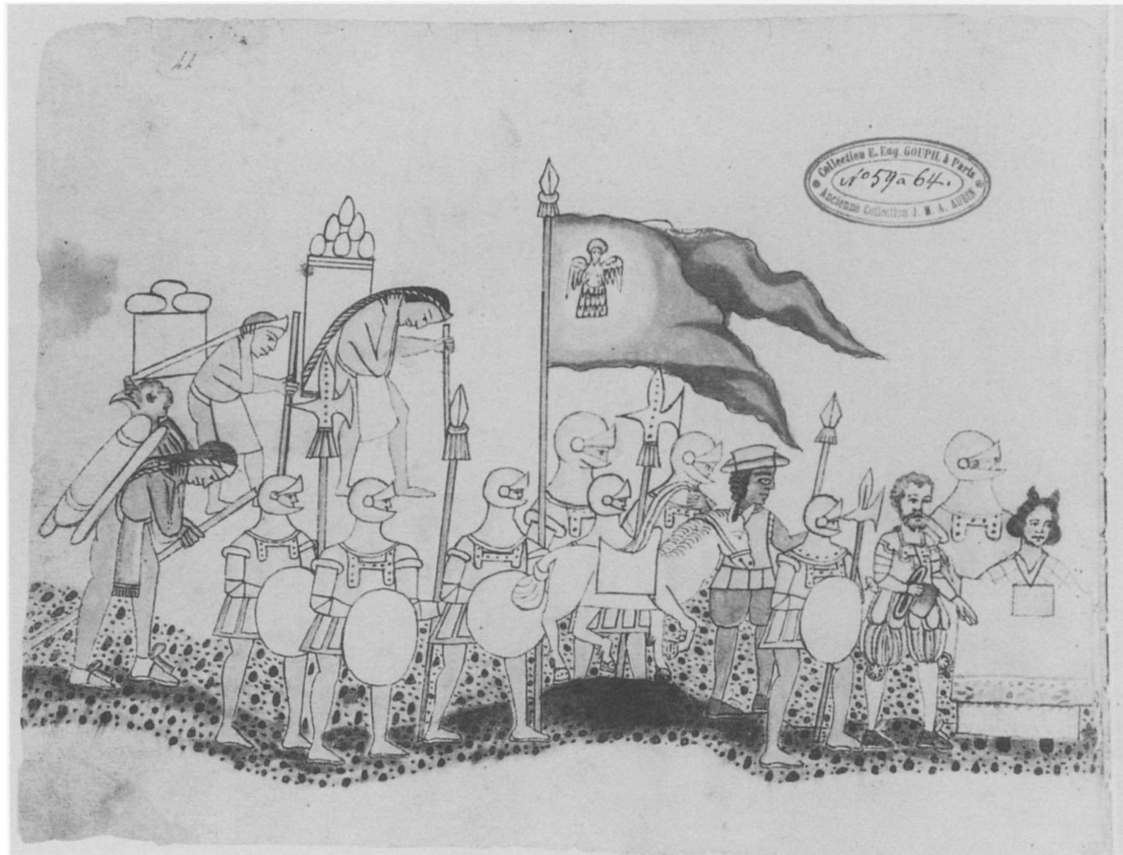
Figure 12. The arrival of the Spaniards and Malinche to Tenochtitlan. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

these vignettes cannot be understood without an oral explanation.

The colonial period

The two final plates of the Codex Azcatitlan deal with the colonial period and are full of detail. However, as in the section dealing with the conquest, we have no clear temporal and spatial markers to aid us in their interpretation. The *tlacuilome* introduced a dotted line that seems to establish a causal link between the different episodes, but it is not very helpful. They also combined the careful depiction of European objects and buildings, using perspective, with a general composition that remained loyal to Mesoamerican conventions, using an abstract space and profile depictions.

The fact that the plates dealing with the Spanish conquest and the colonial period are almost impossible to interpret can be attributed to several concurrent

reasons. To begin with, the lack of a coherent, established chronotope deprives the narrative discourse of a temporal and spatial frame that could be used both by the *tlacuilome* and by the audiences as a key to guide their reading. This absence was perhaps unavoidable, since we can assume that the migration and imperial chronotopes used by the Mexica codices were the result of a gradual and complex ideological elaboration. Such a process could not have taken place so fast after the conquest in order to narrate its events, and perhaps was even useless, since the Mexicas no longer had the means, or the need, for such ideological enterprises.

Besides, it can be surmised that the Codex Azcatitlan, like many other Mesoamerican colonial histories, sought to present both a general panorama of Mexica and Tlatelolca history, and a particular argument and claim, directly concerning the individuals and groups that composed the document in order to obtain a specific
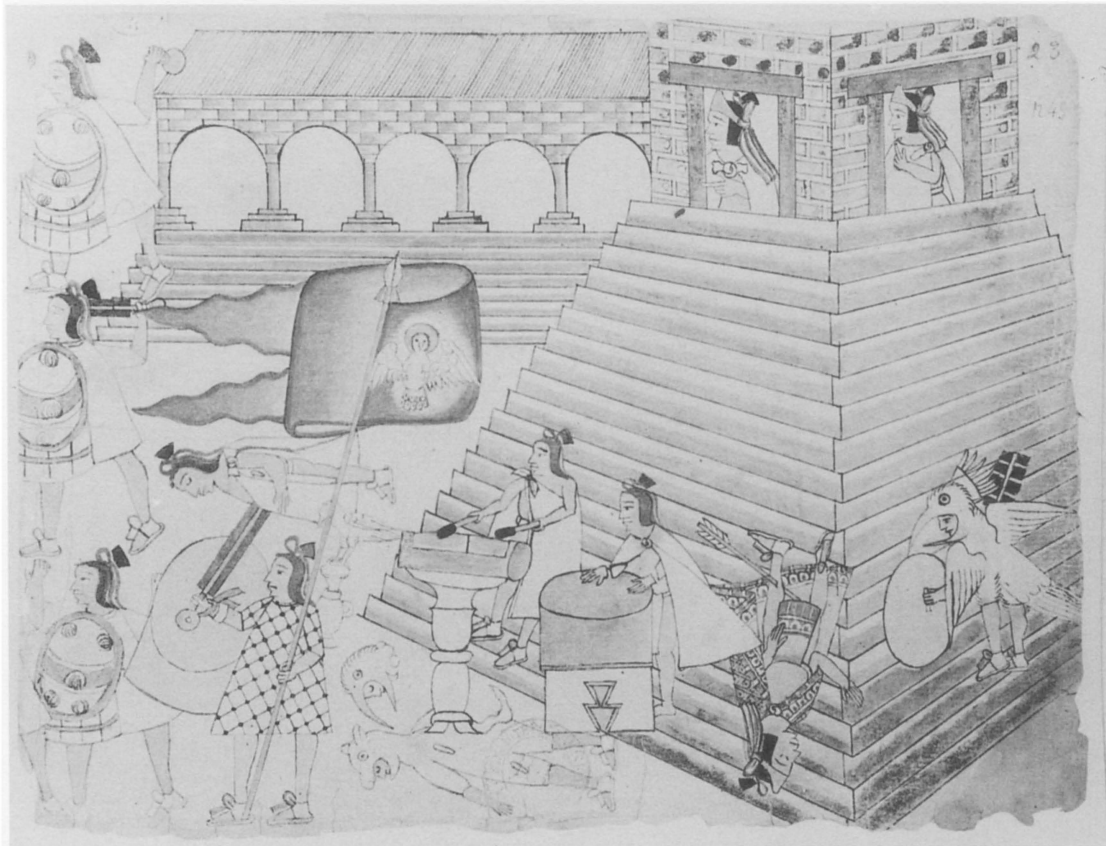
Figure 13. The battle at Templo Mayor. Codex Azcatitlan. Mexico, sixteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

concession from the Spanish authorities.[17] That is why Mesoamerican histories were usually shaped like a "funnel," moving from the general to the particular. This organization can be recognized in the general structure of the Codex Azcatitlan: first, during the migration period, it deals with the Mexicas as a whole; then, after the foundation of Mexico, it clearly distinguishes between Tlatelolcas and Tenochcas, extolling the former and denigrating the latter; this general historic panorama reaches its climax in the massacre at the temple of Tenochtitlan and after it the Codex appears to concentrate on a series of anecdotes that could perhaps be directly related to the individuals or group that drew and wrote

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17. Such is the case of two very important Mesoamerican histories: the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, from the Valley of Puebla, which was produced as a legal document in a boundary dispute between two Indian towns in a Spanish tribunal, and the *Popol Vuh*, from Guatemala, which was presented as part of a claim made by Quiché Maya to the Spanish crown for the recognition of their aristocratic titles.

it. If this part is much more obscure to us it is precisely because it was only this particular group, most probably from Tlatelolco, who had the keys to explain their own particular history and to present it to their audiences.

Conclusion

Despite its visual heterogeneity, the Codex Azcatitlan is a highly coherent document, since its *tlacuilome* followed a carefully defined narrative program, which determined the different techniques, styles, and European motifs that they employed in each particular scene.

The narrative arguments behind this program were highly complex since they combined distinct messages addressed to different audiences. It can be assumed that the use of European pictorial conventions and themes was intended to please, and persuade, a European audience, presenting them with an apparently familiar and acculturated document. Simultaneously, the *tlacuilome* sought to please their native audience by

being faithful to Mesoamerican narrative conventions and the established chronotopes of Mexica history and by alluding to important symbolic and religious themes. These two aims, interestingly, were not mutually exclusive. As we have seen, some of the most "Europeanized" scenes in the Codex are also the ones that contained a more important native message. In fact, to return to Scott's ideas, these scenes were perhaps depicted in a "public" European style precisely to allow them to transmit more effectively their "hidden" native messages. Similarly, the messages aimed at a Tlatelolca audience were effectively hidden behind an overtly Tenochca organization, and they managed to subvert this public message by never openly challenging it, while subtly undermining its main tenets.

In order to achieve its complex aims, and to please its different audiences, the Codex Azcatitlan had to maintain a very high level of ambiguity and indeterminacy. This meant that not all of its messages were meant to be understood by all audiences, and the *tlacuilome* relied on the fact that their different audiences would have different capacities to decode their hidden, or non-explicit, messages. Indeterminacy was also an integral part of the working of a visual narrative discourse that was meant to be accompanied by a concurrent oral recitation, since many of the elements in the page needed an explanation by the narrators. We can assume that this oral explanation varied greatly according to which audience it was being presented to, and that therefore the visual narrative had to leave sufficient room for different, even contradictory, readings.

One final reflection concerns the matter of the acculturation or Europeanization of Mexican colonial pictographic documents. Traditionally, following Robertson's seminal study, it has been assumed that the gradually increasing incorporation of European pictorial conventions and techniques into these documents was a sure indicator of the assimilation of European cultural and religious values, and of the progressive dissolution of Mesoamerican culture during the colonial period. However, I hope that this analysis of the Codex Azcatitlan has shown that the use of European elements in Indian contexts is much more complex, since they could be employed to actually preserve and strengthen a Mesoamerican tradition or message. Therefore, the cultural meaning of these elements should not be taken as a given, but should always be analyzed and understood in the specific context where they are utilized, which may give them different and even contradictory meanings. This means that the object of

analysis should not be individual traits or images and their possible European origin, but rather the discursive wholes constituted by Mexican pictographic histories and the role that these elements play in them.

From this point of view the Codex Azcatitlan can be best understood as the product of a highly sophisticated cultural dialogue in which the Mexicas were fluent both in their own visual and historical traditions and in the newly arrived European ones, and were willing to employ and combine them in order to enrich their message in a highly creative and innovative way. The inexhaustible complexity and striking beauty of the Codex they produced is testimony to the vitality of their culture even under colonial rule.

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