Compressing History: Excavating Meaning from the *Codex Xolotl* Fragments

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The Codex Xolotl stands out within the oeuvre of early colonial Nahua manuscripts for its compendium of historical, genealogical, martial, and geographical information, painted by the hands of multiple indigenous painters-scribes in early 1540s Texcoco.¹ Across ten pages of indigenous amatl paper, the historical narrative of the Chichimec migratory group and the nascent royal line of Texcoco unfolds onto a geographic template, which binds the painted events to a spatial schema of the eastern valley of Mexico. Although many questions remain regarding the ten primary pages of the document, even less is known about three fragmentary sheets that are undoubtedly associated with the Xolotl (Figures 1, 2, and 3). These fragments portray a parallel valley schema and exhibit stylistic similarities with the ten complete pages, but the narrative content is obscure and has received even less scholarly attention than the completed codex.

After providing a background on the pictorial histories of Texcoco and the ten complete pages of the Codex Xolotl, this paper will examine the material and textual evidence of the fragments’ relationship to one another, which proves that the strips of paper were intended to be viewed as a composite whole in their original context. The paper will then address the relationship between the narratives of the fragments and the complete Codex Xolotl. This analysis reveals that the fragments are assuredly not integral of the complete Xolotl’s uninterrupted, linear narrative, as the fragments compress historical events from multiple pages of the Xolotl into their geographic scope. Given this fact, this paper will conclude by taking a step back from the findings of the previous two sections in order to theorize how indigenous

¹ The ten pages of the Codex Xolotl are labeled as follows: Mexicain 1-10 in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The Nahua referring to Nahuatl-speaking people.
manuscript painting practices are made manifest in the fragments of the Xolotl. Given their incongruence in temporal scope but their consistency in geographic arrangement, the fragmentary sheets of the Xolotl likely constitute what I term a “process” document, or a space on which painter-scribes could work through the practice of portraying history within a template of geography. This is significant, as no other Nahua “process document” survives from the sixteenth-century. Thus, the fragments speak to Nahua artistic modes of production which have, until now, been largely obscured by the lack of material evidence.

**Introduction to Nahua Pictorial Historiography and the Codex Xolotl**

The Codex Xolotl represents a prime example of an indigenous-made historiography, one created by tlacuiloque (or Nahua painter-scribes) to depict the corporate histories of altepeme (or community kingdoms, altepetl singular) in Central Mexico. Although pre-Hispanic in style and composition, the tlacuiloque painted the Xolotl—along with many other painted books from the region—in the early colonial period, indicating the survival of this mode of recording history after the Encounter.² The books recorded historical events important to community identity, such as foundation scenes, scenes in a ruler’s life, and conquests of other polities. As Elizabeth Hill Boone contends, these histories served as corporate primers of identity; she states, “These are altepetl stories, concerned with events pertinent to the community at large, and they view the world as the people of the altepetl viewed it.”³

Although certain iconographic elements in the painted corpus denote names or places phonetically, the Nahua predominately recorded information through conventionalized, painted

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² Only twelve painted codices survive from before the Spanish arrival in Mesoamerica, none of which derive from the Valley of Mexico.
signs. The tlacuiloque portrayed people as painted representations of individuals with name glyphs, places as toponyms (or place signs or glyphs), and events through standardized arrangements of people and signs. For example, in the Xolotl, the ruler Xolotl (the codex’s namesake) is depicted as a male wearing a knotted, hirsute cape, carrying a bow and arrow, and nominally identified by his name glyph, the head of a dog (Figure 4a). His name glyph and implements differentiate his figure from others on the page, identifying him as the Chichimec king Xolotl. Likewise, a place called Texcoco is represented as a place sign composed of a hill with an olla atop a stone (Figure 4b) and events such as conversation are symbolized by two figures facing each other with speak scrolls emulating from their mouths and their fingers pointing to one another (Figure 4c). Thus, picture writing sufficiently achieved the task of recording history for the Nahua.

Four examples of painted histories present the pre-Hispanic history of Texcoco, a city at its pinnacle was the second largest altepetl in the Valley of Mexico after the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. These Texcocoan painted histories include the Codex Xolotl, the Mapa Quinatzin, the Mapa Tlotzin, and the Codex en Cruz. The first three, the Xolotl, Quinatzin, and Tlotzin, arrange their histories within a painted landscape, each oriented to the east. All three focus on the early history of the Texcoco, beginning with the entry of the Chichimec ethnic group into the valley. According to the painted and textual sources, the Chichimecs were considered to be infantile newcomers on the cultural spectrum of pre-Hispanic Mexico; the Quinatzin, Tlotzin, and Xolotl depict the Chichimecs wearing rough animal skins as cloaks, carrying bows and

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4 Ibid., 34-37.
5 See ibid., 28-63 for more information on the picture writing in Central Mexico and its relationship to recording history.
6 The history of the Codex en Cruz extends into the colonial era as well.
arrows with quivers on their backs, and living within caves. These histories starkly juxtapose the archetypal characteristics of the nomadic Chichimecs with those of their civilized counterparts, the Toltecs, who migrated to the southern lakeshore region and established the *altepetl* of Culhuacon on the jut of land between Lakes Texcoco and Xochimilco. The intermarriage of the Chichimecs and Toltecs is the central theme of the Texcocan painted histories; eventually, the Chichimecs eschew their animal hides and bows and arrows in favor of the *tilmatl* and shields of the Toltecs. This process of gradual acculturation is crucial to their histories, as when the main personages of the pages begin to adopt the Toltec customs, Texcoco simultaneously rises to prominence in the intra-regional political landscape of the valley. Thus, the corporate history and memory of Texcoco revolved around a process of development towards Toltec cultural norms.

Compared to the *Quinatzin* and the *Tlotzin*, the historical narrative of the *Xolotl* is the most encyclopedic in nature of the Texcocan histories; it spans two centuries, seven rulers, and involves hundreds of personages and scenes. The codex begins with the Chichimec migratory group’s entry into the Valley of Mexico under the guidance of their legendary king Xolotl (the codex’s namesake) (Figure 5). They subsequently settle and cultivate the eastern valley. Through intermarrying with Toltec families, forming strategic alliances, and warring with equally powerful enemies, the Chichimecs and their descendants established a hereditary line of kings in Texcoco in the early fifteenth century. Where surface area allows, the *tlacuiloque* include the events of contemporaneous groups in the valley, expanding the narrative beyond the immediate scope of Texcoco and its rulers. Its final pages (page 7-10) revolve the Tepanec war, a conflict

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which eventuated in the establishment of the Triple Alliance between Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan.

Although the *Codex Xolotl* has the broadest temporal scope of narrative compared to the other Texcocan documents, what makes it unique compared to other Nahua pictorial documents is its consistent spatial organization across nine of the codex’s ten pages. The *tlacuiloque* consistently orient the top of the geographically-motivated pages (pages 1-7 and 9-10) to the east, an orientation not uncommon to indigenous-made maps. Four of the five lakes of the pre-Hispanic Valley of Mexico (Xaltocan, Texcoco, Xochimilco, and Chalco from north to south) stretch horizontally across the lower portions of the pages, painted a brilliant blue in some pages and left uncolored in others (compared Figure 5 and 6). The eastern mountain range of the basin dominates the upper portion of the *Xolotl*’s pages, the continuous stretch of mountains concluding with the volcanoes of Iztaccihuatl and Popocatépetl on the far right of the range. Across the pages, green or outlined toponyms dot the landscape, which represent inhabited, *altepetl*. Thus, the markers of the physical landscape (mountains, lakes, and hills) combine with the political landscape (toponyms indicating *altepetl*) to construct a comprehensive view of the Valley of Mexico as it pertained to Chichimec/Texcocan history.

The geographic and toponymic features of the *Xolotl* emulate the true, lived physical landscape of the pre-Hispanic Basin of Mexico. A comparison of the first page of the *Codex Xolotl* (Figure 5) to a modern map of the sixteenth-century Valley of Mexico elucidates the manuscript’s geographic motivation (Figure 7). Orienting both documents to the east reveals the

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9 Page 8 is the only page which does not arrange history through geography. Instead, it employs a time-based, annals structure (Hayley Woodward, “Marking Place, Making History: The Shifting Narrative Structures of the *Codex Xolotl*.” *Athanor* 35 (2017): 51).

approximate correlation between the two representations’ geographic features. The rolling
mountain range hugs the eastern edge of the valley, culminating in the great volcanoes to the
south. The outline of the four lakes resembles the true shoreline boundaries, with the southern
hook of Lakes Xochimilco and Chalco extending from the vast Lake Texcoco. The artists
spatially positioned the glyphs and topographic features on paper according to their approximate
locations in physical space, creating a visual diagram of geography.

Although the Codex Xolotl is rich with historical information, it lacks a firm date of
creation in the historical record. Visual study of the document demonstrates that its tlacuiloque
were exposed to European artistic styles through subtle pictorial conventions, such as European
pendant flags, trees, suns, and the modeling of the human form.11 Eduardo Douglas contends the
Xolotl responded to the colonial concerns of early 1540s Texcoco, based on its similarities in
subject matter to the Mapa Tlotzin and the Mapa Quinatzin, both which display Nahuatl
alphabetic text alluding to their production in the early 1540s: 1541 for the Tlotzin, and 1542-
1543 for the Quinatzin.12 Although the Xolotl lacks the scribal notation of any date, Douglas
groups the Tlotzin, Quinatzin, and Xolotl into a cohesive group of documents, created in the same
time period and most likely responding to the uncertain position of the indigenous rulers of
Texcoco after one member of the hereditary family was executed by the Spanish for sedition and
heresy.13 As there is no other evidence for a date of the Xolotl (or its fragments), it is assumed
that the Xolotl was created along with the Quinatzin and Tlotzin in the 1540s.

11 Walter Lehmann, Methods and Results in Mexican Research, trans. Seymour de Ricci (Paris: H. Clarke, 1909),
13; Charles E. Dibble, Códice Xolotl, 2 vol. (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1980), 11-12;
Donald Robertson, Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1959), 143; Eduardo Douglas, In the Palace of Nezahualcoyotl: Painting Manuscripts, Writing the Pre-Hispanic
Past in Early Colonial Period Tetzcoco, Mexico (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 25.
Although the *Xolotl* is ripe with information about the pre-Hispanic history and geography of the valley, it has received relatively little scholarly attention until recent years. While a number of censuses of Mexican pictorial manuscripts mentioned the *Xolotl* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,\(^\text{14}\) productive and analytical study of the *Xolotl* did not truly begin until Charles Dibble’s seminal two-volume *Códice Xolotl* was published in 1951 (reissued in 1980).\(^\text{15}\) Dibble completed the daunting task of “translating” the imagery of the codex, providing a detailed and enduring interpretation of the *Xolotl*’s complex visual language. He meticulously examined each page in order to identify events, people, and places through a close comparison of individual scenes to Alva Ixtlilxochitl’s *Obras históricas.*\(^\text{16}\) Dibble offered a cursory interpretation of two of the fragments (1a and 1b), but his analysis was minimal since the fragments did not fit into his goal of understanding the linear, complete narrative. Continuing this work, Marc Thouvenot provided in his 1987 doctoral thesis an in-depth reading of the glyphic inscriptions and created a notational system to break down each page of the document; however, he did not address the fragments in his analysis.\(^\text{17}\)

With the work of understanding the history completed by Dibble, scholars such as Donald Robertson, Susan Spitler, and Eduardo Douglas have worked to contextualize the *Xolotl* within the corpus of other pictorial documents created in Texcoco in the 1540s.\(^\text{18}\) Jongsoo Lee

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\(^{15}\) Dibble, *Códice Xolotl*.

\(^{16}\) Dibble also cites the chroniclers Veytia, Torquemada, and Orozco y Berra in his interpretations; however, he finds Ixtlilxochitl’s text most credible and relies on it the most.


Even as the complete Xolotl continues to be an enigma in many respects, the fragments are even more so, as previous scholarship often relegates their inclusion as a cursory mention or a footnote. This project aims to remedy this gap in scholarship, while offering new information as to the relationship between the fragments and the complete pages of the Xolotl.
The Fragments

The Bibliothèque nationale de France holds three fragments related to the *Codex Xolotl* in its *Manuscrits Orientaux* collection, catalogued as “Mexicain 1A, 1B, and 1C” (Figures 1, 2 and 3). While Fragments 1A and 1B represent a recognizable tableau of information (to be discussed in detail below), Fragment 1C only includes five figures and one toponym, which in its deteriorated state cannot be related to the overall narratives of 1A, 1B, or the other ten pages of the *Xolotl*. Therefore, this paper will not examine 1C.

If the *Xolotl* and its fragments were painted in the 1540s, the first 350 years of the fragments’ history went unnoticed by scholars who passed the document between them. This negligence occurred for a very specific reason, to be addressed below. After its creation in the mid-1500s, the *Codex Xolotl* passed between the hands of the mestizo chronicler Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl in the early seventeenth century to Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora after Alva Ixtlilxochitl’s death, eventually being absorbed into the collection of the Colegio de Jesuítas de México.23 For decades, the provenance record of the *Xolotl* and its fragments vanished, until the manuscript began to be circulated among European antiquarians living in New Spain in the eighteenth century. While living in Mexico City in 1746, Lorenzo Boturini Benaducci, the famed chronicler of New World history, included descriptions of the *Xolotl*’s ten painted pages in his *Catálogo del museo indiano*, and, between 1771 and 1788, Antonio de León y Gama made a copy of the *Xolotl* (which was in the Boturini collection at the time).24 However, Boturini did not

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23 Eduardo Douglas, *In the Palace*, 18, Dibble, *Códice Xolotl*, 13. Dibble refers to a passage from the *Códice Chimalpopoca*, p. XI, which was translated from Nahuatl into Spanish by don Primo Feliciano Velázquez, 1945.  
mention the fragments in his catalogue of the *Xolotl* and León y Gama did not copy the fragments; therefore their location in the late eighteenth century remains unknown.\(^{25}\)

Joseph Marius Alexis Aubin acquired pages 1 and 4-10 and the León y Gama copies in 1832, while Jean-Frédéric-Maximilien de Waldeck acquired pages 2 and 3 in 1831.\(^{26}\) After Aubin purchased pages 2 and 3 from Waldeck upon returning to France from Mexico City, Charles Eugène Espéridion Goupil purchased the compiled *Xolotl* from Aubin in 1889, to be catalogued by the French antiquarian Eugène Boban in 1891.\(^{27}\) Boban’s *catalogue raisonné* of Goupil’s collection grants us the first record of the fragments:

“To the rubbing, the wear of the edges caused two folds that were stuck together to detach a bit, causing them to separate a little in the upper right corner, made us realize that the second sheet had been painted on the inside: the chronicler-painter, who certainly was not happy with his work, transformed it into a cover. The part with the figural writing was found glued and adhered to the recto of painting no. 1; this protection caused part of the figures to be protected, and the colors are as vivid as if they had just been put on.”

(“El frotamiento, el desgaste de los bordes que provocó que se despegaran un poco los dos pliegues que se encontraban pegados el uno contra el otro, haciendo que se separaran un poco en el ángulo superior derecho, hizo que nos diéramos cuenta que la segunda lámina había sido pintada en la parte interior: el pintor cronista, que sin duda no estaba contento con su trabajo, la transformó en una cubierta. La parte sobre la que se encontraba la escritura figurativa la untaron de pegamento y la adhirieron al recto del cuadro N.1; dicha protección hizo que se resguardara una parte de las figuras, y los colores son tan vivos como si los acabaran de poner.”)\(^{28}\)

Thus, Boban’s record reveals why the fragments were never catalogued by Boturini or copied by León y Gama; until their matriculation into Goupil’s collection, fragments 1A and 1B were stuck to the verso of page 1.\(^{29}\) When the pages (page 1 and the fragments) began peeling away from

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\(^{25}\) León y Gama did not copy pages 2 or 3 either, which at this point were likely separated from Boturini’s collection (Thouvenot, *Codex Xolotl*, 40).

\(^{26}\) Aubin’s signature and the date “1832” are on the back of Fragment 1B. Ibid., 20, 201, fn. 20


\(^{28}\) Ibid., vol. I, 95. Translation by author.

\(^{29}\) No record exists of where Fragment 1C was preserved.
one another, Goupil or Boban recognized that two additional painted pieces of amatl were affixed to the backside of the first page of the Xolotl! How Goupil or Boban detached the fragments from the verso remains unknown, as are any losses in pigment that may have occurred, but, according to his account, Boban believed that the only reason that the fragments were preserved well was because they were appended and undisturbed to page 1’s verso. Upon Goupil’s death, his widow donated the Xolotl, its fragments, and the rest of his personal collection, to the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), where it resides today. Visual parallels between the richly colored verso of page 1 (Figure 8) and Fragments 1A and 1B corroborate Boban’s textual record, which notates that the fragments were once stuck to the backside of page 1. When placed together, the fragments appear to emulate the mirror image of the verso page, indicating that a transfer of paint occurred when the pages were initially affixed together. Upon the detachment of the fragmentary sheets from the verso, pigment remained, along with nearly illegible outlines of corresponding figures, place names, and dates.

Before his 1951 overview of the narrative, Dibble published a short article in which he argued that Fragments 1A and 1B were originally two halves of a single leaf. That is, Fragment 1A was half of one page, and Fragment 1B was half of separate page; the two were not of a single page, but rather Fragment 1A was to be one half of a front side of a page, and Fragment 1B was one half of the back side of the same page. Dibble then argues (without offering an

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30 Douglas, *In the Palace*, 201, fn. 21
31 Miguel Angel Ruz Barrio has argued that a singular iconographic deviation between fragment 1A and the verso of page 1 reveals that paint transfer did not take place, implying that the fragments and the verso were painted independently of one another (cited in Offner, “Ixtlilxochitl’s Ethnographic Encounter,” 110, fn. 4), based on his personal communication with Ruz Barrio. Offner agrees with this assertion.) The basis of his argument is a scene of interaction between two figures, which he believes were created by two different artistic hands, each figure accompanied by different nominal glyphs. However, compared to the overwhelming consistencies in structure and style, I find Ruz Barrio’s argument overly focused on the trees (perhaps even the bark) rather than the forest.
evidence) that this “missing” page was meant to go after page 1 of the Xolotl (Figure 5) and before page 2. He contends that the fragments would have been re-painted around 1600, then were pressed onto the back of page 1, where they stayed until Boban removed them, presumably in 1891. Oddly enough, he seems to backtrack this sentiment in his 1951 overview of the narrative, as he cursorily treats the two as independent fragments of an unrelated narrative, failing to draw connections between the two. Thouvenot contends that the fragments derive from a completely different pictorial document, evidenced by minor deviations in iconographic details.  

Offner argues that the Codex Xolotl itself is a compiled project, its individual pages erroneously accumulated as a “book” project by European and American scholars eager to apply an overly-Western historiographic lens to the document.  

In fact, Offner believes the fragments originated from a completely different artistic workshop than the rest of the Xolotl because of the different conventions employed by the fragment’s tlacuiloque compared to the already-varied hands of the ten complete pages of the Xolotl. Offner’s bold claim deviates from past scholarship, which assumes the Xolotl to be a holistic composition that records the developmental narrative of a singular people for a singular purpose.

However, although the Xolotl proves to be an enigma in many respects, the consistent geographical narrative structure between the complete pages and its fragments demonstrates the correlative nature of the document. This reading of the document is not incongruous with the intent of Offner’s argument, as he aims to disparage overly-Westernized readings of the Xolotl (i.e. the immediate assumption that the codex is a single, bound book to be read linearly).

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34 Offner, “Ixtlilxochitl’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: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 82-83.
35 Ibid., 78.
Offner’s argument takes into consideration the intrinsic difficulties and inconsistencies of the Xolotl and its fragments. However, the Xolotl builds its narrative from one page to the next and can be read in a linear, sequential order. Moreover, this developmental recording of Texcoco’s history is linked together by the depiction of the Valley of Mexico between the pages and the fragments, which suggests that the Xolotl was more likely composed as a singular, pre-meditated document.

Although a cursory study of the fragmented pages reveals a consistent employment of geography and a few reoccurring figures and geographic features between the fragments and the complete pages of the Xolotl, the degree of interdependence between the two sets of narrative content of the fragments and the Codex Xolotl requires further investigation. The frayed edges, losses from folds and wormholes, flaked paint, and constant re-working by the painter-scribe(s) obscures immediate recognition of whether the two were meant to be considered as a composite whole or were independent of one another, let alone how their narrative relates to that of the complete Xolotl pages. Thus, although the paint from the fragments was transferred to the verso of page 1 upon its application, it should not be assumed that the fragments were intended to be put together, that they create a holistic projection of history, or that they were a part of the complete Xolotl corpus. The remainder of this paper will examine the relationship of the fragments with each other and to the ten full pages of the Codex Xolotl to clarify if the paint transfer was intentional or accidental.

**Relationship of the Fragments to One Another**

First, the fragments’ relationship to one another must be determined: were the strips independent of one another, and unintentionally affixed to the backside of page 1, or were they
conceived of and created as a single sheet, which is reflected in the verso of page 1? In Figure 8, the verso page is inverted horizontally in order to orient it to the fragments; this reorientation demonstrates that before the fragments were affixed, 1B was on the left side, 1A to the right (Figure 9). The masses of green and blue correlate between the verso and the fragments, the green topographic features of the fragments corresponding to the amorphous, verdant traces of the verso as hills. The black outlines of the geographic features, figures, and glyphs present in the fragments are absent in the verso; thus, the black pigment was completely dry when the paint transfer occurred. However, comparing the inverted verso with the two fragments, their degree of connectivity is still obscured. Two of the topographic forms on the right margin of Fragment 1B end within the edge of the sheet, but the forms’ outlines in the verso of page 1 suggests that the mountain ranges were intended to continue across the fragments, creating a more complete projection than suggested by the fragments on their own.

Isolating the edges of the fragments using Photoshop demonstrates that the fragments were meant to slightly overlap one another by approximately one inch (Figure 10) in order to correspond to the inverted verso of page 1 (Figure 8). The most convincing example of overlap in color and line between the fragments is evident in the frayed edge of 1A which barely extends into the blue Lake Chalco (Figure 11); curved parallel black outlines delineate the lake shore to the left and the southern mountain range to the right, connecting the two fragments. The paint transfer present in the verso of page 1 reveals that Fragment 1A must have been affixed first, as the topographies that are confined to Fragment 1B appear elongated in the verso. Thus, the extended outlines of fragment 1A cover the closures of 1B’s mountain ranges.

Because there is a degree of overlap, the two sheets were never from a single page, ripped in two. They must have been conceived as two pieces of a composite puzzle, always intended to
be displayed together to some degree. Why the *tlacuiloque* split the narrative over two pieces of *amatl* is a mystery. However, the overarching structure of the fragments (and its consistency of the complete *Xolotl* pages) reinforces that the fragments were intended to be read together. Like nine of the ten pages of the *Xolotl*, a hilly, lacustrine landscape holds the narrative of fragments 1A and 1B in place. Oriented to the east, a rolling mountain range stretches across the top register of both fragments, emulating that of pages 1-7 and 9-10 of the *Xolotl*. To the far right (or south), the range culminates with the volcano of Popocatépetl, signified by light blue curls of smoke emanating from its peak. The painter-scribe filled in the orography with a light green pigment in both fragments, accentuating the green terrain with single, curved lines that indicate varying elevations within the range (a deviation from the mountains of the *Codex Xolotl*).36 A saturated blue lake extends across the lower half of fragment 1B and peaks into view of Fragment 1A, its undulating shorelines reworked multiples times with thick black outlines. Although at times the blue pigment extends beyond the black outlines, the general shape of the lake mirrors the southern hook of the complete pages, as a jut of land which holds the *altepetl* of Culhuacan separates the watery mass of Lake Texcoco from the narrow Lakes Chalco and Xochimilco. Thus, like the complete pages, the fragments organize their narrative with geographic features that parallel those found in the physical landscape of the Basin of Mexico.

However, the fragments display a more comprehensive topography of the Valley of Mexico. Curving masses of green orography fill negative space in Fragment 1B, and ridges of the eastern mountain range descend down from the range as veiny ridges. Waterways trickle down from the eastern mountain range as well, emulating the lake system’s water source, are absent in the complete pages. Additionally, if considered independently from 1B, it would be

36 The solid green pigment differs from the *cipactl* (earth crocodile) fill of page 1, and the green sprigs of pages 9-10.
difficult (if impossible) to locate the physical terrain of Fragment 1A. However, when the two fragments are considered together, it becomes clear that 1A’s topography mirrors the southern ridge of hills that frames the southern basin (Figure 7). A region of higher elevation encloses the southern lacustrine valley, which is absent in the complete pages of the Xolotl. Thus, Fragments 1A and 1B project a perspective that shifts the historical point of view from focalizing on the lake systems and the eastern valley in the complete pages to the southern valley in the fragments.

Thus, a similar projection of geography corroborates that Fragments 1A and 1B were two components intended to be put together as a holistic page; this analysis clarifies Dibble’s assertion that the fragments were not meant to be put together. One final piece of evidence indicates that the tlacuiloque planned the fragments together: their shared material and size. Like the ten pages of the Xolotl, the fragments are painted on amatl paper, the preferred canvas for indigenous tlacuiloque working in pre-Hispanic and early colonial contexts. The heights of fragments 1A and 1B measure comparably to the complete pages of the Xolotl, each approximately 42 centimeters high. Taken together, 1A and 1B approximate the width of the sheets, 48 centimeters (1A and 1B measure 20 and 28 centimeters in width respectively).37

The consolidation of the fragments into a unified projection of landscape demonstrates that the narratives of both sheets are cropped by the deteriorated state of the sheets’ edges. For instance, the lower right border of 1A, a Chichimec figure extends his arm over a glyph of teeth (Figure 13); following the conventions of the fragments and the other pages of the Xolotl, this figure must be interacting with another figure beyond the edge of the page, one figure likely demanding tribute from another. Likewise, the upper edge of 1B presents a male and a female at Cholula, but the upper halves of their bodies and their identifying name glyphs are missing. The

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complete left margin of 1B appears to be cut off, as the outlines of the orography and lake systems continue beyond the edge of the page. Finally, the lower margin of both 1A and 1B continues beyond the limits of the fragments. Thus, these scenes along the deteriorated edges in their full iteration would have extended beyond the 42 x 48 centimeters template of amatl paper of the other ten complete sheets of the Xolotl. As the ten sheets constitute a correlated, unitary narrative, composed on nearly identical sized sheets, the fragments in their original form must have been painted on larger sheets of amatl than survive today. This deviation from the Xolotl’s materiality suggests that the fragments were not intended to be a part of the linear narrative of the Xolotl, but they nonetheless were painted on the same type of paper. The following section will confirm this assertion, but through the study of fragment’s narrative compared to the complete pages of the Xolotl.

Relation of the Fragments to the Complete Codex Xolotl

Assuming the previous section correctly concludes that the fragments were meant to be displayed together, as one page of history, the next question to be answered is: how do the fragments relate to pages 1-10 of the Xolotl? As previously mentioned, Dibble argued that Fragments 1A and 1B constituted the second page of narrative of the Codex Xolotl.38 He based his assertion on isolated instances of narrative in the fragments which overlap with page 2, but the overlap itself negates his argument. Across the complete pages of narrative, events never repeat themselves; they progress chronologically through time, anchored in space. Each page builds off of its predecessor. Upon close examination of the fragments, 1A and 1B display elements and themes of the historical record recalled from pages 1, 2, and 3. Thus, the

38 Dibble, “Page Order,” 379.
who painted the fragments incorporated multiple strands of history into the fold of geography, compressing separate narratives across time and space into a single projection. The following section will visually and textually dissect the identifiable narrative elements of the fragments, and relate them back to the narrative of the complete pages.

Between the consistent geographic templates of the fragments and the complete pages, historical figures reappear, carrying out analogous scenes of foundation and marriage. For instance, the leader Xolotl (the codex’s namesake) and his associate Nopaltzin, both who wear wooly animal-hide cloaks characteristic of Chichimec males, travel and survey the landscape in pages 1 and 2; in Fragments 1A and 1B, the figures similarly observe various polities and people in the valley (Figure 14). These actions thematically correspond to page 1 of the Xolotl; although the two figures of page 1 do not correspond spatially to their iterations of the fragments, Xolotl and Nopaltzin consistently are depicted observing people, places, and events in the fragmentary sheets. Xolotl and Nopaltzin appear four times each on Fragment 1A, while Xolotl appears twice and Nopaltzin three times in Fragment 1B.

Although the scenes of Xolotl and Nopaltzin in the fragments do not correlate spatially to their iterations in the complete pages, many scenes correspond neatly in actors and locale with events that occur in pages 1, 2, and 3. Figure 15 highlights the individual elements of narrative present in Fragments 1A and 1B which derive from the first three pages of the Xolotl. For instance, the lower left corner of Fragment 1B displays Xolotl (who sits upon an icpalli, or a woven throne of rulership) surrounded by the same seven vassals who line around him on page 1; their names are Nopaltzin, Acatomatl, Cuauhatlapal, Cozcacuah, Iztacmitl, Tecpatl, and Iztaccuauhtli (Figure 16).39 Like the first page, Xolotl’s wife Toniyauh sits near him as well. In

the first page, these vassals linearly encompass Xolotl at his nascent court of Tenayuca, where he established a Chichimec dynasty which will eventuate in the royal line of Texcoco. In 1B, however, the vassals surround Xolotl more loosely, scattered across a hilly expanse. While in page 1, the vassals take part in a scene of foundation, in 1B, they serve as an audience for three Chichimec lords who are visiting Xolotl (Figure 17). These three lords, named Acolhua, Chiconcuauh, and Tzontecomatl, are present in page 2 of the codex; they visit Xolotl to ask permission to settle different areas of the valley. Thus, the tlacuiloque compressed narrative from pages 1 and 2 into Fragment 1B; each of these scenes were displayed independently in the complete pages of the Xolotl, but are brought together in the fragment, thereby conflating history.

Besides this scene, Figure 15 identifies repeating genealogies between pages 1, 2, and 3, represented by a mother and a father facing one another, with their progeny listed below (Figure 18). These familial units included in the fragments are surprising, as they do not represent the important families of the first three complete pages of narrative. Often, the fragment’s genealogies depict more marginal families from the complete pages, such as Tlaltepantzin and his wife Azcaxochitzin and their children; in the complete pages of narrative, the only significance of this family is that Azcaxochitzin is the daughter of Tlotzin, the third-generation ruler in Xolotl’s dynasty. Tlotzin is absent from the fragments, so it is unclear why his daughter, her husband, and their children are included.

A number of scenes in Fragments 1A and 1B do not correspond to the complete pages of narrative at all. For instance, the Toltec couples in the southern valley of Fragment 1A have no pictorial correlation with the complete pages. The chroniclers who address the Xolotl’s narrative

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40 Dibble, Códice Xolotl, 32-34.
most comprehensively—Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Torquemada, and the Anónimo Mexicano—lack any explanation of these events. Although Offner helpfully created a table with the correspondence between the events of the chronicler’s accounts and the pictorial history of the Xolotl (Table 1), consultation of these sources does not offer any new information as to the fragments’ esoteric narrative. This is not surprising, as the chroniclers likely utilized pictorial documents like the Xolotl as source material for their textual accounts. Thus, if the fragments were affixed to the backside of page 1 until 1891, the chroniclers could not consult them for their narrative content.

Thus, Fragments 1A and 1B compress historical events from three distinct pages of the Xolotl, pages that span nearly 100 years of narrative. Additionally, the fragments incorporate esoteric events into the geographic scope, ones not identifiable by the visual record of the Xolotl or the chronicler’s accounts. Unlike the complete pages of the Xolotl, these events do not seem to relate to one another in any narrative sense; the scenes are disjointed to one another and to the complete pages of the document, and no overall narrative theme can be discerned. The only element consistent with the complete pages of the Xolotl is the geographic template which holds these figures and events into place.

**Modes of Nahua Manuscript Production Present in the Fragments**

While the fragments’ incongruous narrative may be viewed as a dilemma, their incompatibility to the complete Xolotl project does not negate their significance to the study of Nahua pictorial documents. This paper contends that the compression of history evident in

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42 Offner, “Ixtlilxochitl’s Ethnographic Encounter,” 101, Table 3.1.
43 Dibble, *Códice Xolotl*, 7.
Fragments 1A and 1B, along with the incorporation of isolated events outside of extant visual and textual records into a representation of landscape, indicates that the fragments served as a space for the painter-scribes to work through the process of arranging and organizing history within geography. In essence, the fragments are more indicative of artistic and historiographic process over the final product.

When creating a cartographic history, such as the *Xolotl*, a *tlacuiloque* had to possess a thorough and nuanced understanding of the story’s relevant geography. Since people and events are organized spatially, it is likely that the first step to drawing a cartographic history was to sketch the framework of geography: the mountains, lake system, and major *altepeme* involved with the story. These features serve as “spatial anchors,” signs which determined the subsequent arrangement of figures and actions. In cartographic histories, events are intrinsically linked to their locales; place governs the depiction of events. Creating these documents in the reverse order—first depicting people and events, then filling in the topographic features around them—would make it difficult for the *tlacuiloque* to render a realistic projection of landscape (like the *Xolotl*); the historical actors would govern the sheet’s structure, and the mountains and lakes would likely be awkwardly squished and jammed around the unfolding scenes of history. Therefore, a need likely arose to train painter-scribes in the art of fitting pieces of narrative into an overarching system of geography.

Emblematized by the disproportionate quantity of pre-Hispanic and early colonial painted books in the early sixteenth century compared to those that survive to the present day, a problem of document survival has plagued scholars of Nahua visual culture and history. The documents that have survived over the past 500 years often do so because the books had fallen into the hands of European collectors; eventually, these books matriculated into the esteemed libraries of
Europe, where they continue to be preserved to the present day. European standards of valuation deemed the remaining codices, including the *Xolotl*, as “collectible;” antiquarians and collectors laden value upon the codices because their visual histories appeared to be complete and executed with a high degree of artistry. Therefore, even though practice or “process” sheets likely existed, they likely would not survive as frequently as finished documents. Thus, no “process” documents executed by a Nahua hand remain (as far as we know), except for the *Xolotl* fragments.

A number of factors indicate that Fragments 1A and 1B were considered a “process” document in their original context, and that they were created as a space of artistic practice working toward a final product. Considering that the scene of landscape expands across two sheets of *amatl*, which, when placed together are comparable to the rest of the *Xolotl*, but when separate are not large enough to constitute their own scenes of history, perhaps the painter-scribes utilized the two “defective” sheets, which otherwise would have gone to waste. The salvageable portions of these sheets, perhaps broken during the paper-making process, may have been remedied by re-using the sheets as “process” documents. In addition, many elements of the fragments exhibit re-working by the painter-scribes. For instance, the blue pigment of the lake extends beyond its multiple thick black outlines, and the veins of the eastern mountain range extends beyond the original black outline. The fragments’ identifying glyphs are oft reduced, abbreviated to their elemental parts and left achromic or partially-colored.

Most convincingly, the cramped nature of certain portions of the fragments’ narrative, such as the familial lineage of Tlaltepantzin, indicates that the painter-scribe had less of a priority

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44 *Amatl* paper is prepared by soaking bark from amate trees, then delicately beating the fibers out to create a sheet, to which a painter-scribe applied pigments before a layer of gesso (Sandstrom and Sandstrom, __). If the fibers are beaten too harshly, the paper may tear.
to convey events cleanly within the scope of the landscape as in the complete pages. In page 3, Tlaltepetzin and his wife face one another at the same level, while the *tlacuiloque* neatly registers their children below them, but in the fragment, the painter-scribe positions Tlaltepetzin’s wife above him and his lineage forms an arc above him (Figure 18). The eastern mountain range above the family limits the genealogy’s linearity, as it must curve to stay within the negative space of the valley; thus, the narrative is confined by the geography. This slightly-awkward delineation of genealogy indicates that the fragment may have been the painter-scribe’s first attempt at painting within the scaffolding of landscape. This, coupled with the fact that the *tlacuiloque* projected disparate, disjointed scenes of narrative onto the page, indicates that tidily expressing history was not the ultimate goal of these painter-scribes.

This paper contends that, because of the reasons listed above, Fragments 1A and 1B were intended to constitute a “process” document, one which served the purpose of preparing a *tlacuiloque* to deftly execute a final geographically-motivated historiographic project, like the *Xolotl*. This explanation accommodates the odd accumulation of narrative events into the fragment’s scope, along with the at times slightly-cluttered and cramped portrayal of history. Given the visual overlap between the *Xolotl* and its fragments, it is likely that the latter were intended as a “process” document for the former, and not another historiographic project. Since the fragments’ paint must have been wet when it was applied to the verso, page 1 (painted or not) must have been nearby when the fragments were painted. It is possible that the page 1’s *amatl* paper needed to be reinforced before or after being painted, and the *tlacuiloque* adhered the fragments’ to the verso in order to give the page a sturdier backing.45 But it also possible that the fragments served as a “process” document for another project which recounted similar tropes of

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45 Pages 4-10 are bound like a book, and each leaf is created from two sheets of painted *amatl* glued together.
history as the Xolotl, and that the fragments were affixed to the back of page 1 by mistake. Nonetheless, when considered in this light, the fragments represent a unique foray into the process of creating history, an area that Nahua scholars know next to nothing about.

The lack of other “process” documents and historical information on the practices of painter-scribes in the early colonial world obscures our knowledge of the methods of creating and painting Nahua manuscripts. According to Sahagún, tlacuiloque were trained at the calmecac, the elite school where young men and women were trained in the arts of their cultured predecessors, the Toltecs.46 Within the walls of the calmecac, students were taught both how to read and record histories in many different genres (annals, genealogies, and maps).47 Sahagún describes tlacuiloque as those with “special skills,” those who were dexterous, studious, and moral.48 However, neither Sahagún nor any of the other chroniclers of Nahua life recorded any information as to how the painter-scribes created their histories. Robertson comments on the role of the Franciscan friars in “assimilating” indigenous painters to European artistic styles through auto-didactic copying,49 but the Xolotl and its fragments display very little European influence and it is doubtful that the corpus was created under the guidance of an ecclesiastical order.

If Fragments 1A and 1B are assumed to be “process” documents of the Xolotl project, some form of free-hand mimeography likely took place in practicing the representation of landscape. Perhaps other “template” documents existed that portrayed a set screen of landscape, which only depicted the mountain ranges, lake systems, and major places without history. Then, figures and events could be added in and adapted as needed in separate “process” documents or

47 Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Obras históricas, vol. 1, 527.
48 Sahagún, Florentine Codex, bk. 10: 25-30.
49 Robertson, Mexican Manuscript Painting, 40-42.
final paintings, depending on the narrative requirements of the specific story being told. Thus, these proposed processes of painting history begin with a practiced understanding of how to abstract topographic and toponymic features from the physical landscape and represent them pictorially. Fragments 1A and 1B represented the liminal point between mental, intangible knowledge of a region’s physical features and the final, adeptly-painted pages of the complete Xolotl.

Conclusion

Although esoteric and understudied, the fragments associated with the Xolotl shed light on Nahua manuscript painting processes, specifically regarding the employment of geography to recount history. Visual overlap, material congruencies, and a consistently accurate geographic schema demonstrate that Fragments 1A and 1B were meant to be conceived together as a unified picture, not as independent, disjointed strips of amatl paper. Although the tlacuiloque shifted the geographic scope of the history’s focus slightly to the south, place nonetheless serves as the scaffolding which suspends the individual elements of narrative into a spatial schema, which itself mirrors the physical reality of the Basin of Mexico. Visual comparisons reveal that the fragments condense the history of multiple generations from the full, complete pages of the Xolotl into its geographic structure. This compression of different, disparate elements into a single projection while taking care to render a realistic representation of landscape indicates that these fragments were likely a space of practice, a space where painter-scribes worked through issues of fitting the puzzle pieces of narrative into an overall geographic template.

Thus, the fragments indicate that perhaps a larger corpus of “process” documents existed in the pre-Hispanic and early colonial worlds. As “final documents” served as fundamental
markers of communal history, identity, and memory, *tlacuiloque* were likely eager to expend resources of materials and time in order to seamlessly lay out the geographic scaffolding of the final product. Many further questions remain regarding “process” documents, including how many *tlacuiloque* contributed to the *Xolotl*’s fragments (which would reveal if this “process” document was intended for one painter-scribe, or if it was a collaborative project) and whether the fragments’ *amatl* paper was created by the same hand that created the complete pages of the *Xolotl*. These questions, along with further investigation into the arcane narrative content of the fragments, will improve the modern scholar’s understanding of the artistic techniques that allowed “final” pictorial documents, like the *Xolotl*, to come into existence. It shifts the focus of Nahua visual culture from product to practice, from finality to process.
Figures

Figure 1: Fragment 1A, Codex Xolotl
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Figure 18: Comparison of family of Tlatepantzin, *Codex Xolotl*
Table 1: Overlapping narratives between the complete pages and fragments of the Xolotl and the chronicler’s accounts (from Offner 2016: Table 3.1, 101).

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<tr>
<th>CODEX XOLOTL</th>
<th>IXTILXOCHITL'S OBRAS HISTÓRICAS*</th>
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Boturini Benaduci, Lorenzo. *Idea de una neuva historia general de la América septentrional*. Madrid: Juan de Zuñiga, 1746.


