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

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

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

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2 The ten pages of the Codex Xolotl are labeled Mexicain 1-10, and are currently held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.
Past scholarship rightly treats the *Codex Xolotl* as a prime example of a cartographic history, meaning the codex effectively combines geographic space with historical narrative. This conclusion is based on a close analysis of the first page of the codex, which emphasizes place and movement through the land and allots more detail to the topographic features of the landscape compared to the other pages (Figure 1). However, a critical analysis of all ten pages of the document forcibly acknowledges its shifting narrative structures as the codex progresses through time. A study of the changes and continuities in the natural landscape throughout the pages of the *Xolotl* reveals how the indigenous artist strategically uses (and at times omits) place to express historical narrative.

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

The date of the *Codex Xolotl* does not survive in the historical record. Whereas some, including Fernando de Alva Ixtlixochitl, Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci, and Joseph Marius Alexis Aubin, have identified the *Xolotl* as a pre-Hispanic manuscript, subtle pictorial conventions reveal that the document’s *tlacuiloque* (indigenous artist-scribes) were exposed to European

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stylistic conventions. For instance, banners are depicted as curved, two-pronged pennants, and animate faces sit within the middle of the sun glyphs, both indices of European artistic influences upon the artists. The Xolotl likely was created in early 1540’s Texcoco, based on its similarities in subject matter to the Mapa Tlotzin and the Mapa Quinatzin, two works on paper deriving from Texcoco that have clear dates associated with their creation (1541 for the Tlotzin, and 1542-1543 for the Quinatzin).

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

As previously mentioned, the early colonial order saw a proliferation in indigenous-made visual documents in a moment of political tension between the nascent colonial bureaucracy and the surviving indigenous royal dynasties, especially in Xolotl’s place of creation, Texcoco. These

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5 Douglas, In the Palace, 24-26.


7 Dibble, Códice Xolotl, 12.
documents served as a mode of visually delineating the ancient history of the indigenous ruling class, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy within the colonial order. Although the codex lacks a firm historical context of its date and commissioner, a visual analysis of the codex’s narrative structures suggests the reason for the document’s creation, as a means of representing the collective memory and ancient lineage of the Texcocan rulers within the fluctuating colonial order. The comparative study of the landscape outlined in this paper elucidates and supports this assertion.

The Xolotl’s narrative is cast across ten sheets of native paper, each painted on one side, all but one depicting a projection of Central Mexico. Oriented to the east, four then-extant lakes of the Valley of Mexico stretch horizontally across the lower portions of the pages (Xaltocan, Texcoco, Xochimilco, and Chalco from left to right). The eastern mountain range dominates the upper half of the page, concluding with the volcanoes of Popocatepétl and Iztaccihuatl to the south (or to the right side of the range). Across the pages, green or outlined hill signs litter the landscape. Although a number of these signs indicate orography, the majority function as toponyms, or formalized symbols of place. The conventional signs are composed of a nominal glyph attached to a topographical feature, evinced in the glyphic representation of Chapultepec, which comprises of a grasshopper (chapul-) sitting atop a hill glyph (tepec) (Figure 2). Serving to spatially relate the places to one another by fixing the toponyms in their approximately correct location in physical space, the artist does not arbitrarily situate the place signs onto the page. Instead, the toponyms possess geographic significance.

Thus, there is a cartographic correlation between the Xolotl and geographic reality. The bumpy eastern mountain range separates the flat lakeshore region from the polities to the east of the range, culminating in the great volcanoes to the south. The outline of the four lakes
approximately mimics the lake system’s true shoreline boundaries, although there is a degree of stylization between the codex’s pages (see Figure 4). At times, the Xolotl takes liberties from spatial reality, particularly in the arrangement of the boundary toponyms that hug the margins of the Xolotl’s first page, which eschew geographic reality in order to condense the signs into the map’s vantage point.8 Thus, this document functions as a close suggestion of the Valley of Mexico’s geography to the reader, a projected screen of landscape upon which narrative occurs.

Xolotl, the leader of the Chichimecs and namesake of the codex, and his partner Nopaltzin reappear throughout the first page, both wearing textured capes of animal hair, knotted at the neck connected by indigenous styled footprints (Figure 3). Affixed to their bodies are their identifying name glyphs: for Xolotl a dog head in profile, and for Nopaltzin a nopal cactus. The reoccurring figures are linked by a string of footprints, indicators of their movement across the landscape. They begin in the lower left corner of the Valley, moving east passing through various places and toward ancient ruins, which they observe and discuss. The two then separate, Nopaltzin surveying the eastern expanse of land between the lakes and the mountain range, while the leader Xolotl returns west, establishing a community kingdom called Tenayuca. He concludes his journeys by circumambulating the margins of the plan as an act of ritual exploration and understanding of the land.9 Thus, the landscape allows for a sequential series of events, the footprints acting as a guide for the reader as to the sequential order of the protagonist’s travels.

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8 Mundy, “Mesoamerican Cartography,” 206.

9 This summary is based on Dibble’s (Códice Xolotl, 18-27) interpretation of document, in which he heavily draws on the seventeenth-century historian Alva Ixtilxóchitl’s chronicle of events (Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, Obras históricas, ed. Edmundo O’Gorman, (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1985).
This first page of the Codex Xolotl is a recognized example of a cartographic history, a mode of visually representing history within the pre-conquest Mexican pictorial tradition.\textsuperscript{10} The artist strategically located the narrative on a backdrop of the Valley of Mexico and its environs to serve the needs of the narrative being told: a story of a migration and the first encounter with the landscape that they would eventually settle and civilize. Thus, the narrator’s intent dictates the document’s structure, requiring a map-like, geographically-motivated narrative format. Beyond the necessity to demonstrate movement, this format requires an action on the part of the viewer. By creating a cartographic history depicting movement through the landscape, the artist requires the viewer to follow along on the journey, thereby recreating the ancient Chichimec migration in the present viewer’s mind, as an act of engagement.

As the Chichimec’s story progresses, the topographical features of the region expand and contract to accommodate the narrative taking place upon the paper’s surface. In the sixth page of the codex, the geographic features morph and adhere to the narrative in new ways, the location of the toponyms sliding to mere suggestions of true place (Figure 4). Page six notes the genealogies of the Texcocan ruling family and their allies; connecting lines and footprints demonstrate marriages and progeny between the members of the ruling families across space. Although the uncolored mountains and lakes continue to stretch horizontally across the page, the spatial relationship between the place signs adheres more to a desire for linear order rather than to geographic reality. In a series of four reoccurring place-signs, Texcoco, Huexotla, Cohuatlichan, and Coatepec, from left to right, the place signs are evened horizontally, creating a straight, linear formation (Figure 5). This pictorial distribution deviates from the true spatial distribution

\textsuperscript{10} Other examples of cartographic histories from Mexico include the Mapa Sigüenza, the map of Cuauhtinchan from the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, and the Lienzo de Zacatepec.
of the community-kingdoms; instead, the artists organize the sites as an orderly list in order to accommodate better the proliferating genealogical information registered below each sign.

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

Page 8 is an anomaly, as it completely departs from the geographic orientation of its preceding seven pages (Figure 6). Instead, it adopts an approximate annals format, structuring the narrative by the continuous passage of time. The page isolates individual scenes into registers, then subdivides the registers by Aztec calendrical years, which are notated by a numerical value and a pictorial icon (Figure 7). The reader begins in the top left corner, reads left to right, and then proceeds onto the next register, associating each independent scene with a year glyph. Beginning in the top left corner, the year date 4 Rabbit (which equates to 1418 in the Gregorian calendar) indicates that in that year (the year after Ixtlilxochitl’s murder), Tezozomoc addressed over a dozen polities at Cuauhyacac Hill. This scene occupies the space to the left of

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the fold. To the right of the fold is a scene that represents Nezahualcoyotl grasping a woman’s hair under maguey fields, taking place in the year 5 Reed (or 1419). Another set of events is pictured to the right of 6 Flint, where Tezozomoc divides his newly conquered territories between himself, Chimalpopoca of Tenochtitlan, and Tlacateotzin of Tlatelolco. This reading pattern continues in the second register with the events of the years 7 House to 12 Rabbit (or the years 1421-1426) grouped together to the left of the fold, followed by 13 Reed with the death of Tezozomoc. The annals format then breaks down, as there are no more year signs after 13 Reed, and thus, it is assumed that all of the subsequent events take place in 13 Reed, or 1427, which was an active year in the history of Texcoco.

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

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

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

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

Through this recollection of migration and movement in pages nine and ten of the Codex Xolotl, the artist strategically elicits the narrative structure of the first page to display a
significant aspect of Nezahualcoyotl’s legitimacy in a moment of ambiguity and adversity for the Texcocans. Nezahualcoyotl’s exodus from his home and his resulting wanderings through eastern valley foreshadows the ultimate predominance of Texcoco under his reign. As the Chichimec king Xolotl entered the valley with little more than the wooly cape on his back, he established a dynasty through local alliances, marriages, and military victories through the subsequent pages of the document. His migration ushered in an age of settlement and eventual civilization for the Chichimecs. Similarly, as Nezahualcoyotl had been stripped of his throne, left to roam through the land while evading enemy forces, his parallel migration to his ancestor leader Xolotl promised to culminate in a victorious re-entry into Texcoco, ushering in an ultimate age of political and military predominance in the region. Thus, the first and final pages of the Xolotl are complementary bookends, pages that utilize the same geographically-motivated narrative structures and themes to convey parallel messages of the preeminence of the Chichimecs and their heirs, the Texcocans. Historical sources support this postulation; in 1428, the Tepanec ruler was defeated by an alliance of Texcocans and other neighboring city-states. In that year, Nezahualcoyotl took back his father’s throne as the rightful king of Texcoco and began his nearly fifty-year reign.

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

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

Figure 2: Detail of Chapultepec place glyph, page 1 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 centimeters. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.
Figure 3: Detail of Xolotl and Nopaltzin, page 1 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 centimeters. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 4: Page 6 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 centimeters. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.
Figure 5: Detail of linear toponyms, page 6 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 centimeters. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 6: Page 8 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 centimeters. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.
Figure 7: Page 8 of *Codex Xolotl*, divided by years, *c.* 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 centimeters. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.
Figure 8: Page 9 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 centimeters. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 9: Page 10 of *Codex Xolotl*, c. 1541, *amatl* paper, 42 x 48 centimeters. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.
Figure 10: Detail of Nezahualcoyotl’s travels, page 1 of Codex Xolotl, c. 1541, amatl paper, 42 x 48 centimeters. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.
References


