

The path from Aztlan to Mexico

On visual narration in Mesoamerican codices

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The aim of this article is to examine certain graphic conventions used to represent time and space in sixteenth-century Mesoamerican pictographic codices dealing with the history of the Mexica migration.¹ This will, in turn, lead to an analysis of such documents as visual narratives.

The most remarkable of these conventions is a set of lines or blocks marking distance and duration that unites the towns of Aztlan and Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the beginning and the end of the Mexica migration, and that appears in different guises in all the codices dealing with that historical event.

Perhaps the best known codex dealing with the Mexica migration is the Codex Boturini (also called *Tira de la Peregrinación*, Codex Boturini 1975). In this beautiful sixteenth-century pictorial history, the distance between Aztlan and Mexico is marked by two different lines (fig. 1).² The first is a row of footprints representing the path followed by the Mexica in their migration; the second is a continuous line that unites the rectangular year signs that represent the time elapsed during the migration.

These two lines are carefully intertwined throughout the codex: the footprints always begin near a year sign, clearly establishing the date of the departure of the Mexica from each place, and they lead to a place sign, the next stopping point in their migration. Each place sign, in turn, is followed by a meandering block of year frames that represents the length of the sojourn of the Mexica in that place. In this way, time and space are integrated into a single narrative of the journey of the

Mexica from Aztlan (a given place at a given time) to Mexico (a different place at a later time).

As will be seen below, all the other Mexica codices dealing with the migration employ similar devices for depicting space and time, and all of them combine these devices in a fashion that is deliberate and systematic. The use of these conventions reflects the existence of highly developed visual narrative traditions in Mesoamerica. A comparison with other visual narrative genres, such as modern comics and film, will allow for a better understanding of the Mexica codices as narrative discourses. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope will, in turn, clarify the role of the space and time lines as devices used to organize and structure narrative genres (Bakhtin 1981). This approach will lead to a new definition of native historical genres that differs from the traditionally accepted classification, based on categories borrowed from the Western tradition, such as annals and maps. The fact that the pictographic documents belonging to, and narrating the history of, other Mesoamerican peoples, such as the Acolhua, Cuauhtinchantlaca, or Mixtec, use markedly different ways of representing space and time, while also managing to incorporate them into a single visual narrative discourse, points to a relationship between these genres and specific ethnic groups. The final line of analysis will concern the colonial adaptation of these traditions, which preserved their narrative foundations while incorporating many of the conventions of European art.

I will not deal with the pictographic reading of the codices, nor with the traditional art-historical analysis of style, figure, and form, not because I reject their usefulness or validity, but because I am proposing a different, complementary road of analysis: reading the codices as visual narratives.

The path from Aztlan to Mexico-Tenochtitlan

There are six pictographic manuscripts that deal with the Mexica migration: the already mentioned Codex Boturini, the Codex Mexicanus, the Codex Azcatitlan,

1. Throughout this article, I will use the term Mexica, rather than Aztec, to refer to the Nahuatl-speaking people who lived in Mexico-Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco in order to clearly distinguish them from their neighbors in the Valley of Mexico.

2. My drawings of the codices dealing with the migration were inspired by Robertson's scheme of the year sign and footprint lines of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis. I have omitted many details to isolate the elements used for depicting time and space, plus some figures that are clearly linked to them. This allows one to better perceive their complexity and their systematic nature.

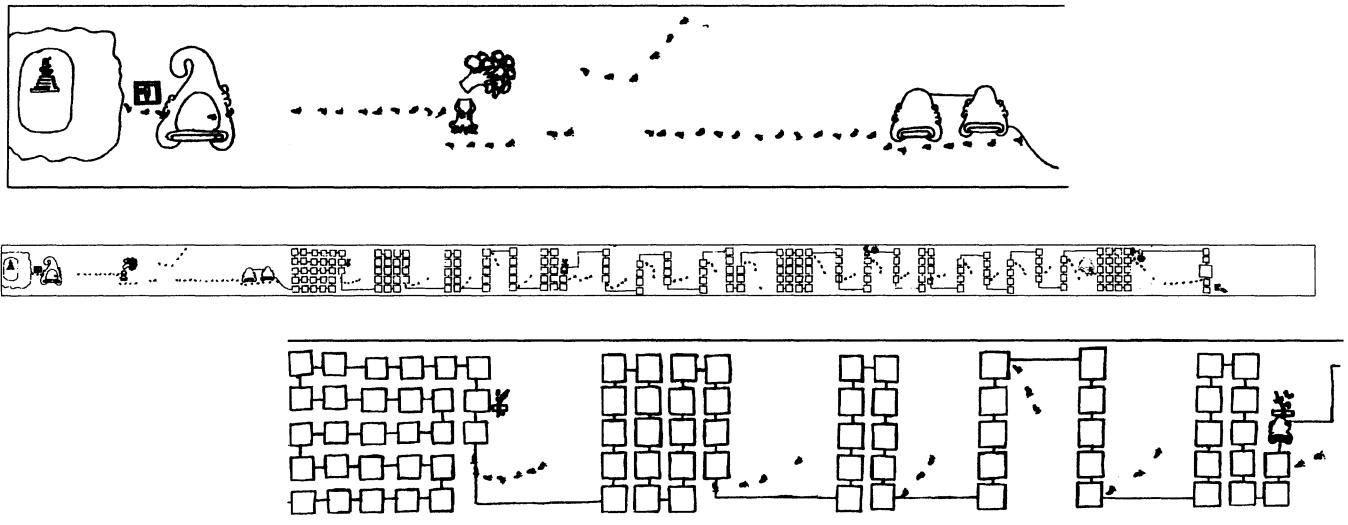


Figure 1. The lines depicting time and space in the Codex Boturini. Drawing: Federico Navarrete.

the Sigüenza Map, and two related documents, the Codex Telleriano-Remensis and the Codex Vaticano-Ríos (also known as Codex Vaticano-3738 and Vaticanus A); a seventh manuscript, known as the Codex Aubin, combines pictographic elements with text written in Latin script. All of these documents use some kind of lines, or other devices, to represent space and time in the path followed by the Mexica, but they implement them in different ways and insert them in radically diverging visual contexts.

Of all of them, the Codex Boturini, would appear, at first sight, to be the closest to pre-Hispanic conventions, because it has the traditional shape of a long foldout and depicts a “spaceless landscape,” lacking horizon line or any other method to ground the characters, as defined by Donald Robertson (1959:61). The only elements that join the series of events and toponyms depicted in the codex are the footprints that represent the path followed by the Mexica and the continuous line uniting the year signs or frames. However, this utter simplification may well be a colonial elaboration, as will be seen below.

The Codex Mexicanus (1952) presents a very different implementation of the space and time lines (fig. 2). First and foremost, in this document, the continuity of these lines faces a new challenge, because it is not a continuous foldout, like the Boturini, but a codex (in the European usage of the word, Chartier 1995: 256–257).

However, the artist or *tlacuilo*³ took great care to draw the time lines and the footprint lines on each page at exactly the same height as on the previous one, maintaining the illusion that the book was a continuous unit. If we analyze this image as such, the year signs form an uninterrupted row in the center of the page. The footprints always start from a year sign (springing from a thick line planted on the year frames) and always go as far as the next toponymic glyph.

Because of the centrality accorded to the year signs, this codex has been likened to the *Tira de Tepechpan*, which Robertson considered a prime example of the original time-oriented style of Mesoamerican codices (1959:62–64). As we shall see below, this form was assimilated to the European genre of the annals, considered as the earliest and least developed form of historiography.

However, the Mexicanus is more complex than the annals genre. First, the row of year signs begins at a specific place in space: the river crossed by the Mexica when they departed from Aztlan. Another time line, sometimes painted pink, joins the place signs to the year sign for the year in which the Mexica arrived and to the

3. I will employ the Nahuatl term for “artist,” pluralized *tlacuilome*, because it means both painter and writer, and thus conveys the dual nature of the codices as images and narratives, and provides an accurate description of the complex craft of their creators.

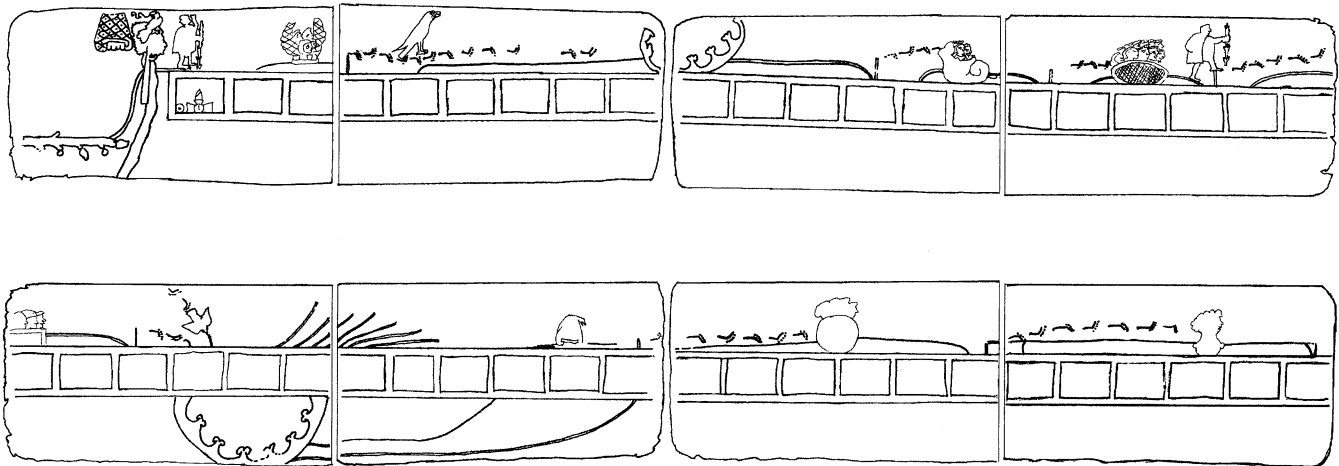


Figure 2. The lines depicting time and space in the Codex Mexicanus, pages 18 to 25. Drawing: Federico Navarrete.

year sign for the year in which they departed, thus marking the length of their stay. The fact that the place sign is always placed near the middle of the period defined by this second time line makes the footprint line longer than would be strictly “necessary” if this document were indeed depicting time alone. In that case, the place sign should be put above the year of arrival, marking the time at which the Mexica got there; and the footprints should go from the year of departure to the year of arrival in the next place, marking the time they spent on the road. Yet, in this case, the footprints are clearly depicting the distance in space between the places visited by the Mexica.

In fact, throughout the section dealing with the migration in the Mexicanus, the interaction between the depiction of time and space is so elaborate that sometimes the *tlacuilo* seems to be make puns with it. For instance, there is always a human figure at the beginning of the footprint line: he is placed above the thick line marking the moment of departure of the Mexica. Sometimes, he actually appears to be standing on this line, as if it were a physical object in space (see fig. 2).

The most elaborate play with this ambiguity takes place when the Mexica arrive at a location called Chicomoztoc, the Seven Caves (fig. 3). Because this is the only place sign in the whole migration history that is placed below the central row of year signs, both the footprint line and the second time line also are shifted. Thus we see the footprints going under the central time line as if the path followed by the Mexica actually went “below.”

Furthermore, we see the reappearance of the bird that sang to the Mexica when they were leaving Aztlan (very likely a *nahualli*, or animal manifestation, of the god Huitzilopochtli [Del Castillo 1991:135], and that was seen walking with them as they left their first stopping place, Tlatzallan (see fig. 2). This divine bird is now shown diving from the top margin of the page, toward Chicomoztoc, an idea that is stressed by the presence of a second footprint line representing its flight. Its reappearance seems to suggest that it had been flying above the Mexica all along, and above the top margin of the page. This indicates that the row of year signs is being used as a horizon line and that Chicomoztoc is placed in the underworld, an interpretation that is strengthened by the presence of a tree growing out of Chicomoztoc and rising to the sky.

There is another line, starting from the bird’s beak and diving below the main time line. Both lines (the human and the divine) reappear on the other side of the large glyph of Chicomoztoc and then stay below the time line until the Mexica reach Coatepec. There they go under the time line again and reemerge on the top, transformed into the original pink time line and the thick marker for the departure, on both of which a human character is seen standing.

The interaction between the lines in this scene is so complex and systematic that it should be considered intentional. The fact that this upheaval takes place in the sacred spot of Chicomoztoc is no accident, as we shall see below.

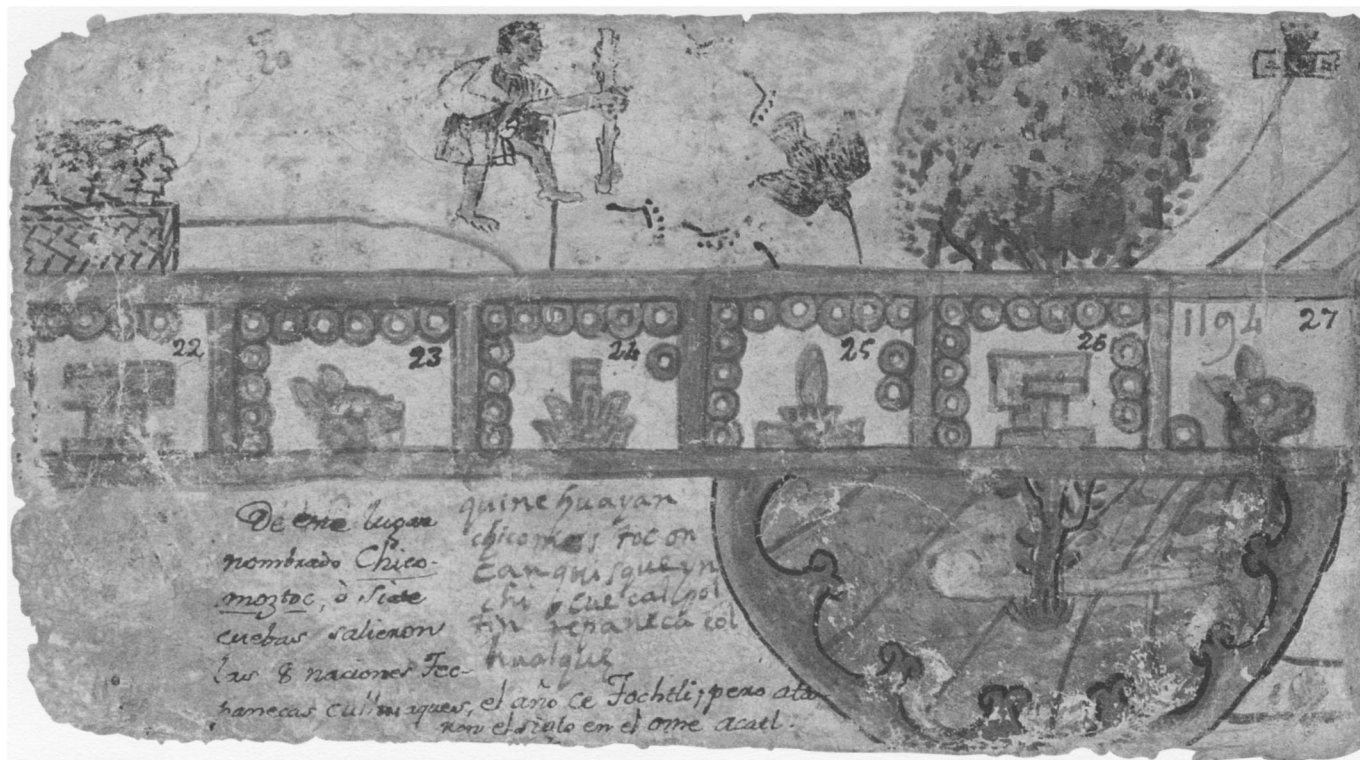


Figure 3. The second Chicomoztoc, Codex Mexicanus, pages 22 and 23. Photo: © Bibliothèque National de France.

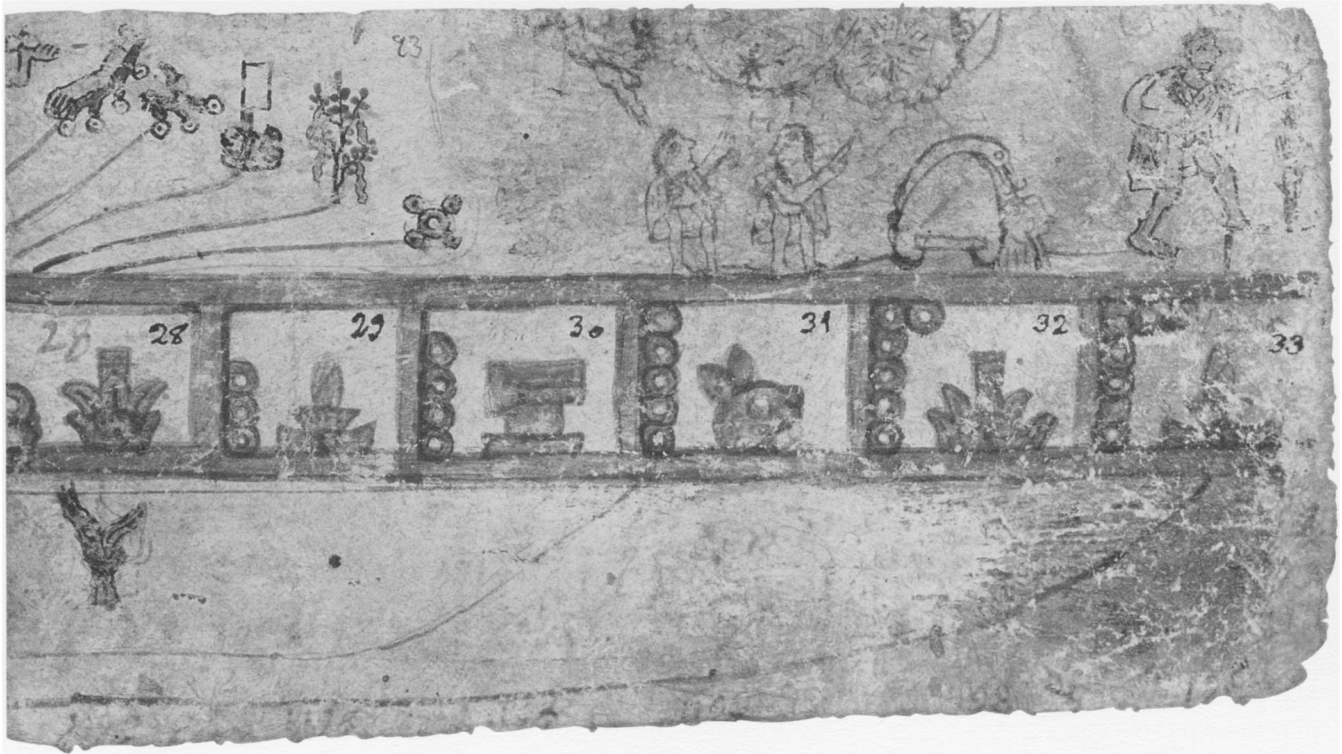
Another variation on these conventions is found in the Codex Azcatitlan (Barlow and Graulich 1995) (fig. 4). This book-shaped document, like the Mexicanus, has preserved the continuity of the line uniting Aztlan and Mexico. Yet here there is only one line, consisting of footprints inside a path in the beginning, and becoming a simpler continuous line after plate 6. In the first 5 plates, this continuity is not so apparent, because each double page depicts a single independent scene, but it becomes systematic from page 8 of the codex until the arrival in Mexico.

The emphasis on the footprint line would seem to indicate that the Codex Azcatitlan is "place-oriented" (Robertson 1959:64), and thus different from the Boturini and Mexicanus. However, it must be stressed that time is still present, because near each place sign there is a row, or a block, of year signs representing the length of the stay of the Mexica at that spot. This way of representing time is very similar to the one used in the Codex Boturini, except that the continuous line uniting the year frames is absent.

Like the *tlacuilo* of the Mexicanus, the author of the Azcatitlan likes to play visual games. Space is transformed into landscape: beside the place signs and the human figures, we see mountains, trees, buildings, and rivers. The path of the Mexica is fully integrated into this "naturalistic" space, as can be seen where it disappears behind a mountain and reappears again (fig. 4).

The use of artificial, depicted space is linked with a very interesting exception to the continuity of the footprint line. In figure 5, the Mexica are shown walking away inside a beautiful wild landscape. Their path moves among the mountains up the page and leaves it at the top, bearing right. In the opposite page, the path enters the page from the top but moves leftward (fig. 6).

On first inspection of the actual codex page, the continuity of the line appears to be broken, but if we look through the page against the light we can see that it is actually making a loop. This effect is presented in figure 6, which shows the two pages and then superimposes them.



As in the case of the *Mexicanus* it seems that this complex play with the continuity of the line is intentional. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that the wilderness surrounding this mysterious loop can also be associated with *Chicomoztoc*.

The fourth document depicting the Mexica migration, the *Sigüenza Map* (1964) (fig. 7), appears to be completely “place-centered,” according to Robertson’s typology. Mesoamerican codices have traditionally been divided into place-oriented “maps,” time-oriented “annals,” and event-oriented histories. This classification was conceived by Robertson (1959:64), and has been further elaborated by Nicholson (1971:45–50) and more recently by Boone (1994:68). However, the exact same conventions are used in this “map” as are used in the “time-oriented” codices. First, a continuous line unites *Aztlan* and *Mexico*, and it is made of footprints. In addition, as in the *Azcatitlan* and the *Boturini*, year signs are placed in blocks beside each place sign, marking the length of the Mexica’s stay in each place. The *Sigüenza Map*, however, uses circles instead of

frames for the year signs and provides no year names or numbers, simply signaling the number of years spent at each place. Thus despite the different shape of this document, if we follow the line as it meanders from corner to corner, we perceive the same sense of linear duration, uniting time and space into a single whole, as in the other codices. Furthermore, the places depicted are not organized according to a spatial graticule or a geometric projection, but rather as part of the itinerary of the migration, as in the other three codices.

The other two pictographic documents dealing with the Mexica migration, the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (Quiñones-Keber 1995) and the *Codex Vaticanus A* or *Vaticano-Ríos* (1979), are related, the latter being quite likely a copy of the former (Quiñones-Keber 1995:130). Together, they present a different variation of the same conventions: the year signs are aligned in a continuous row on the lower half of the page, but the footprint lines above them do not follow its chronological order but rather move back and forward in a complicated pattern. Robertson, who reconstructed this pattern, attributed

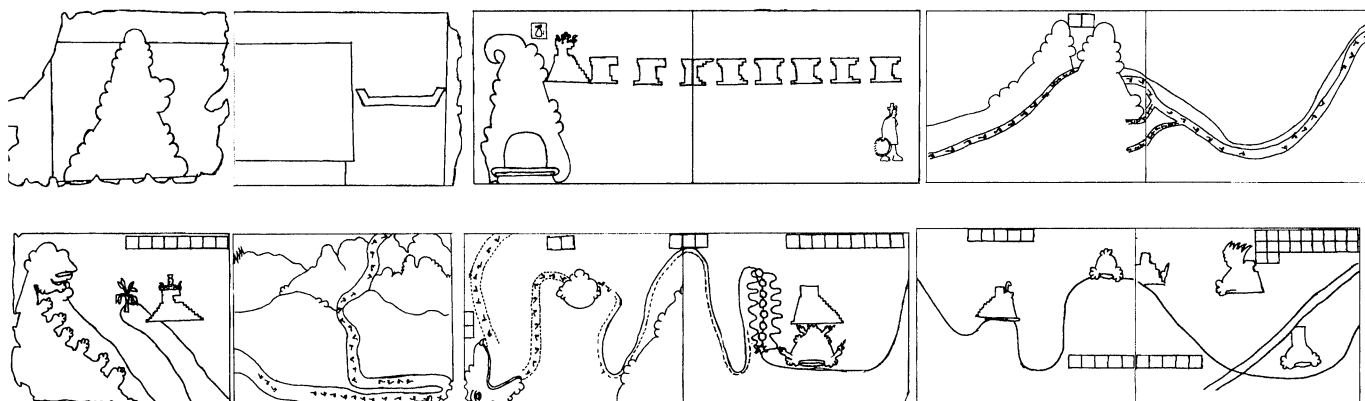


Figure 4. The depiction of time and space in the Codex Azcatitlan, plates 2–7. Drawing: Federico Navarrete.

this variation to an unsuccessful synthesis of Texcocan and Mexica historical traditions (1959:109–115).

Quiñones-Keber holds that this is an anomalous version of the Mexica migration, and that it may not be Mexica at all (1995:196–197). However, it must be stressed that these two documents combine a line representing time with one depicting space.

Finally, the Codex Aubin (1963) presents an interesting variation on these conventions, because it consists mainly of text written in Latin script, complemented with certain pictographic elements that illustrate the text (fig. 8). Upon closer examination, one finds the same elements in the Codex Aubin as in the other Mexica pictographic histories: (1) all year signs are represented as rectangular frames, and are grouped into blocks that represent the time spent by the Mexica in each place, just like in the Boturini, Azcatitlan, and Sigüenza; and (2) the footprint line is also present in the beginning of the migration: in one scene the four leaders of the Mexica are seen walking away from Aztlan, right below the year sign for *1-tecpatl* (as in the other codices); later the Mexica are shown walking again, dressed as Chichimecas. Afterward, the footprints disappear, but their role is taken over by the written text: a small paragraph placed always beside the first frame of each block of year signs reads “In this year the Mexica moved to such place,” and a second paragraph, always placed below the block of years reads “In this year the Mexica had spent so many years in such place” (fig. 8).

Thus the Aubin provides a clue as to how the other codices were read aloud. However, what interests us here is the way in which the text performs the same visual and narrative function as the footprint lines.

The codices as visual narratives

If the lines depicting time and space in Mexica pictographic histories were so deliberately and carefully maintained, even in codex form, they must have been used as visual narrative devices that provided a framework for the whole migration story; it is helpful here to take a detour into narrative theory.

Surprisingly, few historians have analyzed Mesoamerican codices systematically as visual narratives, although parallels with other similar genres, such as comic strips, film, or even animation storyboards, have been suggested by several authors, including Byland and Pohl (1994:9). The comparison with contemporary visual narrative genres, particularly comics, can be quite enlightening, as in the case of Smith’s analysis of the pictorial conventions for identifying characters in the Mixtec codices (1973). In this instance, I will concentrate on a single aspect of this subject: how visual narratives solve the problem of depicting time and movement by means of static drawings.

Modern comics represent time through the use of several narrative conventions. The first one is a method of compression: a frozen, privileged instant is used to represent a longer narrated time, a duration (Barbieri 1993:225–226). This same method is used in the codices: for example, the snapshot of a lone rower traversing the lake that surrounds the city of Aztlan, shown in the Boturini and in the Azcatitlan, is used to represent a much longer process, the crossing of those waters by the whole Mexica people.

In visual narratives, space and time become inextricably linked. Spatial contiguity usually represents

temporal contiguity, and movement in space can be used to represent movement in time (Gubern 1994: 311–313). This is the case, of course, in the migration codices and also in the famous Bayeux Tapestry, a long strip narrating the Norman conquest of Britain, in which, for instance, the boats crossing the English channel are shown moving both in space and in time.

Perspective, adding depth to space, can also be used to represent duration within a static image. Such is the case of many vignettes in comics in which a character is seen walking away, with his back turned toward the viewer (Barbieri 1993:101). This narrative use of perspective was frequent in Renaissance painting as well, where different scenes in different planes of the painting were read as taking place in different times. Interestingly, though perspective was not used in pre-Hispanic codices, plate 5 of the *Codex Azcatitlan* (fig. 5) shows a beautiful example of how it could be integrated into narrative discourse, as the path followed by the Mexica migrants penetrates a mountain landscape. Escalante points out that this artificial space is created, not by perspective or shadows, but by placing characters with their back turned toward the viewer (1996:347–348). However, I would argue that although the painter did not use linear perspective, he may have been using a type of aerial perspective, because the more distant characters and mountains are smaller and painted in clearer colors (Da Vinci 1980). In any case, the effect of depth was successfully achieved, and it had a clear narrative meaning. The Nahuatl text to the left of the page states “There the Mexica got lost, among the mountains, the woods and the rocks, and they wandered around.” It appears that the spatial depth of the landscape is used to represent both the length of time that the Mexica were there and the fact that they were lost.

Another device employed by visual narratives is the use of a metonym to represent a whole trajectory through one of its parts (Barbieri 1993:224–234). Such is the case for one of the main conventions of Mexica, and Mesoamerican, codices: the line of footprints that stands for a path or a journey. This convention has deep roots in Mesoamerican tradition: one of the earliest example dates back to the Olmec Monument 13 from La Venta, and other instances can be found at Teotihuacan in the Tetitla Murals, and in the Palace Stone at Xochicalco (Nicholson 1976:163–164). In all of these cases, the footprints are used to represent traveling. The fact that the reading of this metonymy has become automatic for

us should not make us forget that it is a complex narrative convention, not a natural representation.

Visual narrative genres usually combine images with other narrative elements, such as sound, music, and dialogue, in the case of film, or written words, in the case of comics. In Mesoamerican codices, this role was played by accompanying oral narrative. In all these instances, the accompanying elements create a parallel narrative that complements and enriches the visual narrative: the narrative discourse is the result of the combination of elements (Metz 1973:215). Thus in modern comics, the presence of long dialogues or comments prolongs certain scenes and underlines their importance (Barbieri 1993:247–248). The same thing may have happened in Mesoamerican codices, where we can imagine the oral narrator describing at some length important scenes such as the departure from Aztlan, or the events at Chicomoztoc, while moving faster over the succession of places visited by the Mexica during the rest of their migration. This variable rhythm of reading can be seen clearly in the *Codex Aubin*, where some scenes are accompanied by large texts, while others merit only brief comments. Similar differences in rhythm can also be found in written sources, such as Tezozomoc’s *Crónica Mexicáyotl* ([1949] 1992).

Finally, in most forms of visual narrative, there is an established direction of reading that provides a natural temporal organization to the story. This basic framework is further elaborated by means of highly complex narrative devices. In modern Western genres, such as film and comics, the basic unity of narrative is the frame or shot. It defines a point of view and establishes a meaningful distinction between what is shown and what is not shown (Barbieri 1993:135). In turn, the frames are assembled within a larger narrative framework, using techniques of montage that give the whole narrative a coherent unity and that allow for effects such as ellipsis or simultaneity. These narrative devices originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in film and in comics (Fell 1974). In the migration codices, there are no frames and no use of montage. In fact, as we will see below, the space and time lines provided the narrative framework that articulated the whole story, giving it both unity and sequence.

The chronotope of the migration

From a narrative point of view, then, the lines representing time and space in the Mexica codices were

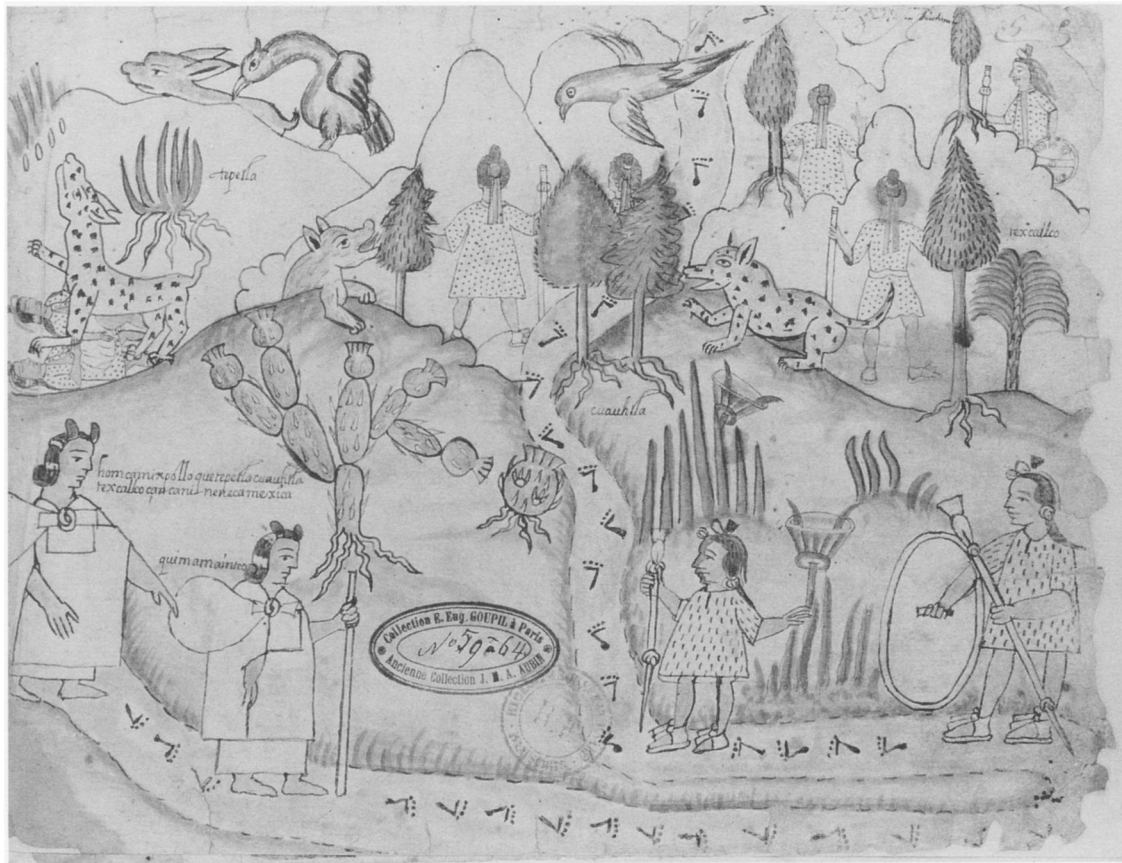


Figure 5. The mountain landscape at Chicomoztoc, Codex Azcatitlan, plate 5, right. Photo: © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

neither “natural” depictions of those dimensions nor simple chronological or spatial grids to which the events of the migration were added. In fact, they shaped the whole migration, giving it a unity and a meaning, a peculiar chronotope.

Mikhail Bakhtin devised the concept of the chronotope for literary analysis, stating:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. . . . What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature. . . . In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole.

Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. . . . The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.

Bakhtin 1981:84–85

Following Bakhtin’s definition, it can be argued that these lines were meant to represent the specific shape of time and space within the migration, and thus they defined the nature of this journey itself.

In this case, time and space move in parallel, because the Mexica leave Aztlan behind, both temporally and spatially, and advance toward Mexico, which is placed at the end of their path and in their future. This all seems very natural: when we are traveling the passage of time

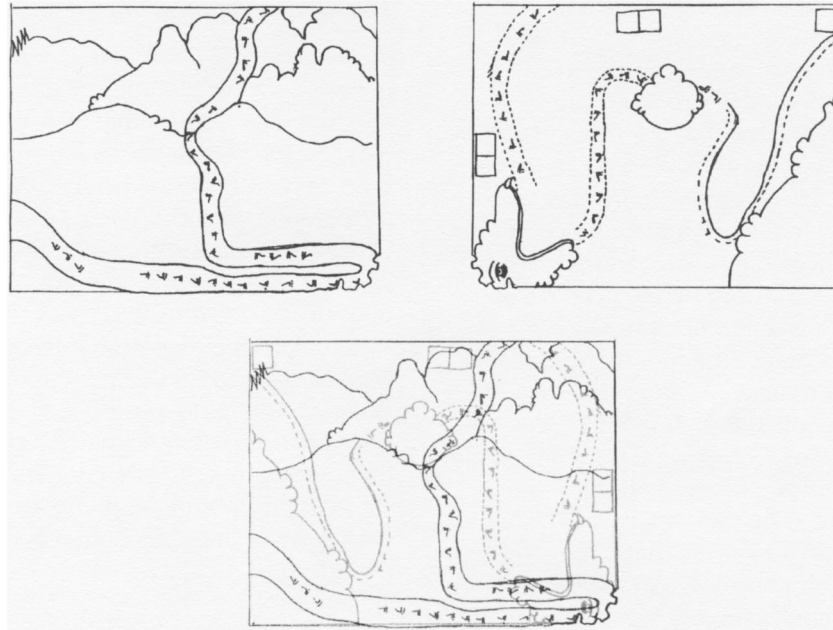


Figure 6. The loop in the path followed by the Mexica, Codex Azcatitlan, plate 5, right, and plate 6, left. Drawing: Federico Navarrete.

is parallel to our movement in space. As Bakhtin pointed out, “in the chronotope of the road, the unity of time and space markers is exhibited with exceptional precision and clarity” (1981:98–110).

But the chronotope of the migration is more complex, because it involves not only the displacement of the Mexica in space and time but also the many stopovers in their journey. Each place where the Mexica stop has a spatial dimension (its location in an itinerary) and a temporal dimension (the length of time the Mexica spent there). Thus the chronotope describes the rhythm of a single, yet discontinuous, journey. Not surprisingly, the same rhythm is clearly expressed in the written histories of the migration. For example, the Dominican friar Diego Durán wrote:

The Aztecs left the Seven Caves and embarked upon their journey in order to seek the land promised them by their gods, according to traditions left by their priests. I find in their painted manuscripts and in their oral traditions that the people made long stops on the migration and lived for years at a time in peaceful, fertile places abounding in water and forests. In some places they stayed twenty years, in others fifteen, and in others ten, more or less. . . .

Durán 1994:21–22

In this way, the chronotope establishes the unity of the journey of the Mexica over and beyond the many stopovers made by them. By drawing a continuous line uniting Aztlan and Mexico, the artists defined these spots as the only departure and arrival points of the journey, automatically demoting all the other places along the way (Chicomoztoc, Coatepec, and Chapultepec, to mention the most important) to mere stopovers, to temporary homes that could not, and should not, be compared to the original homeland they left behind and the new, definitive one they would find in the Valley of Mexico. The importance of this ideological argument for the Mexica lies in the fact that it legitimized their possession of Mexico, and that it denied the legitimacy of other possible homelands, such as Coatepec or Chapultepec, where apparently many of them had wanted to stay (Navarrete 1998).

The lines show that there was a single journey from Aztlan to Mexico and that during all the time elapsed between their departure and arrival, the history of the Mexica consisted of nothing but traveling, following their god and guide, Hutzilopochtli, in a quest for the land he had promised them. Thus they convey a complex narrative message that gives sense and unity to the whole history of the migration.

This can help explain the meaning of the two exceptions to the continuity of the lines in the Codex Mexicanus and the Codex Azcatitlan. It is no accident, to begin with, that these apparent violations of the convention take place in or near Chicomoztoc.⁴ This place was mentioned in the histories of many different Mesoamerican peoples⁵ and was considered a place of origin and transformation in which migrating peoples acquired new identities. It could be argued that this idea of transformation is expressed by the position of the place sign, and the movement of the time and footprint lines, below the main time line in the Codex Mexicanus, which could indicate a trip to the underworld (fig. 3). Similarly, the loop made by the path in the Codex Azcatitlan between plates 5 and 6 (fig. 6) may be interpreted as a representation of the metamorphosis experienced by the Mexica when they were lost in Chicomoztoc: they leave that page in one direction and enter the following page in the opposite direction, because they have been transformed by their wanderings in the wild lands. This loop can also be read in a more "literal" fashion as representing the fact that the Mexica traversed the mountain range and emerged on its opposite side. This reading, however, involves a complex pun with the materiality of the page, which is used to represent the materiality of the mountain range.

The complexity of this visual pun should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the Mesoamerican tradition. In Maya art and writing, for example, there is a continuous play between metaphor and literal meaning (Schele 1986:326), between representation and identity; and the same is evident in the esoteric Zuyua language from colonial times (Roys 1967). Of course, this punning had deep roots in Mesoamerican cosmology, which considered that no similitude was accidental and that beings in different cosmic levels (including signs and images) were magically related to, and influenced by, their counterparts.

4. The mountain landscape in the *Azcatitlan* is placed right after the page depicting Chicomoztoc, though Robert Barlow and Michel Graulich have suggested that there is a page missing between them (1995:58–60). However, the wild landscape depicted in this codex corresponds to Tezozómoc's description of Chicomoztoc as a wild, mountainous place (1992:17–18).

5. See, for example, the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1989) from Cuauhtinchan, and the Maya Quiché *Popol Vuh*, in which it is called Uucub Pec (meaning seven caves) (Tedlock 1985: 360).

The imperial chronotope

The meaning of the space and time lines in these codices as a chronotope specific to the migration is confirmed by the fact that after the foundation of Mexico, the conventions used for depicting space and time were modified radically in all the Mexica pictographic histories (the Codex Boturini and the Sigüenza Map deal only with the migration period).

In the case of the Codex Azcatitlan, the year signs disappear altogether, and a new temporal organization centered on the ascension and death of each successive Mexica *tlatoani* is adopted: the reign of each sovereign is depicted in a double page. The footprint lines also disappear, and the only place signs shown are those of the towns conquered by the Mexica. The exact same conventions representing the crowning and death of each *tlatoani* and the conquests of the Mexica are employed in the Codex Mexicanus, and in the Telleriano-Remensis and Vaticano-Ríos. Interestingly, the latter two documents preserve the year signs but place them first on three sides around the page (during the period in which the Mexica were subject to Azcapotzalco) and then in rows at the top of the page: they are no longer at the bottom of the page as they were in the migration period. They also are painted red and blue, and not red and yellow, as before (fig. 9). The Codex Aubin, in turn, rearranges the years in vertical rows placed at the left of each page, and no longer in blocks, and depicts the ascension and death of each *tlatoani* and the conquests of the Mexica (fig. 10). Significantly, the Codex Mendoza, a document dealing only with this period of Mexica history, uses the exact same conventions.

These changes reflect and confirm the historical transformation experienced by the Mexica after the foundation of Mexico. From that moment onward, their history was no longer that of a people wandering in search of homeland, but that of a people firmly implanted in their new city and reaching out to combat with and conquer other cities; the protagonists of this history were also different, no longer the migrating people and their guiding god, but the rulers.

In fact, these conventions define a new "imperial" chronotope for Mexica history. A comparison between it and the migration chronotope elucidates more fully the meaning of both. When they lived in Aztlan, the Mexica (or their predecessors) had a cosmic center, symbolized in the codices by the temple in the middle of the island of Aztlan or by a tree growing on it (both symbols of an

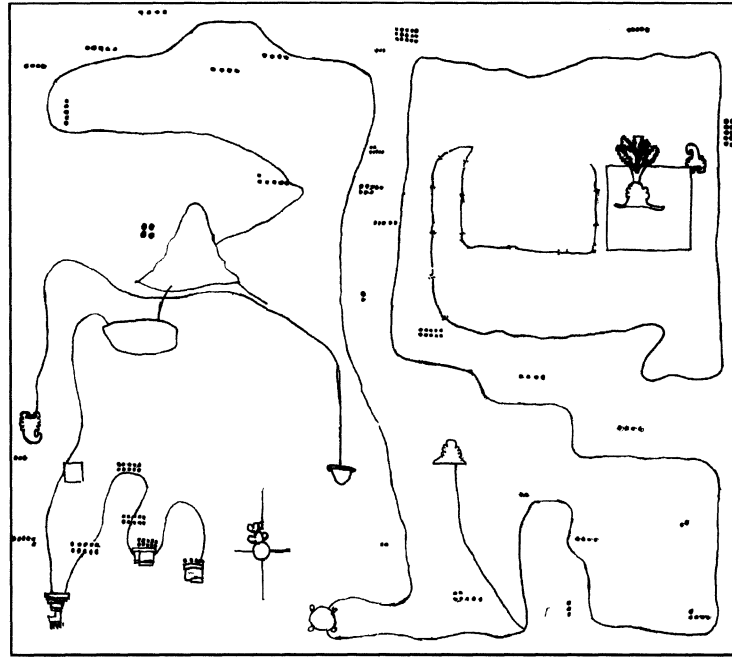


Figure 7. The depiction of time and space in the Sigüenza Map.
Drawing: Federico Navarrete.

axis mundi). When they left that town, the Mexica lost their center, so the objective of their migration was to find a new one; hence the migration is represented as a continuous journey. That the foundation of Mexico was seen as the establishment of the new cosmic center of the Mexica is confirmed by its well-known depiction in the Codex Mendoza, in which the city is clearly depicted as an *axis mundi*. The Codex Aubin includes a similar representation of Mexico and then, significantly, begins a new year count (with vertical rows of years) beside the image of a temple (fig. 10). Once their center had been established again, the task of the Mexica was to expand their dominions around it and to increase its magnificence, which is why the codices depict the towns they conquered and why they also represent the successive expansions of the Templo Mayor (the main temple of Mexico and the physical manifestation of the *axis mundi*).⁶

6. Boone proposes a similar interpretation of the ideological message of Mexica history: "What the Aztecs have effectively done by using the year-count annals is to make the Tenochca and later their empire central to all that occurs. In the Tenochca annals, the Mexica and the city of Tenochtitlan are the unmarked categories, they are considered so fundamental to the history that they need not be named

All this has the ring of a highly elaborated, and ideological, version of the past. The codices do not present a direct depiction of the facts (no history ever does) but do present a coherent, highly complex narrative. And, as Hayden White has pointed out, narrative histories provide an image of life that has a coherence, an integrity, a fullness and a closure that can only be imaginary (1992:38).

In this sense, it can be argued that the lines depicting time and space actually construct the migration: by linking directly its beginning and its end, they establish the unity of an event that lasted several centuries, involved many generations (none of the migrants that left Aztlan were alive when Mexico was founded), and included many stopovers, some of them lasting decades (and quite likely considered by many Mexica at the time to be their definite homeland). It could be argued that if, to this day, we speak of the Mexica migration as a single

or specifically indicated" (Boone 1996:204). Her reflection applies perfectly to the imperial period, but clearly not to the migration period, which she considers to be an "exception." However, I would argue that it is more fruitful to see Mexica history as an aggregation of different chronotopes.

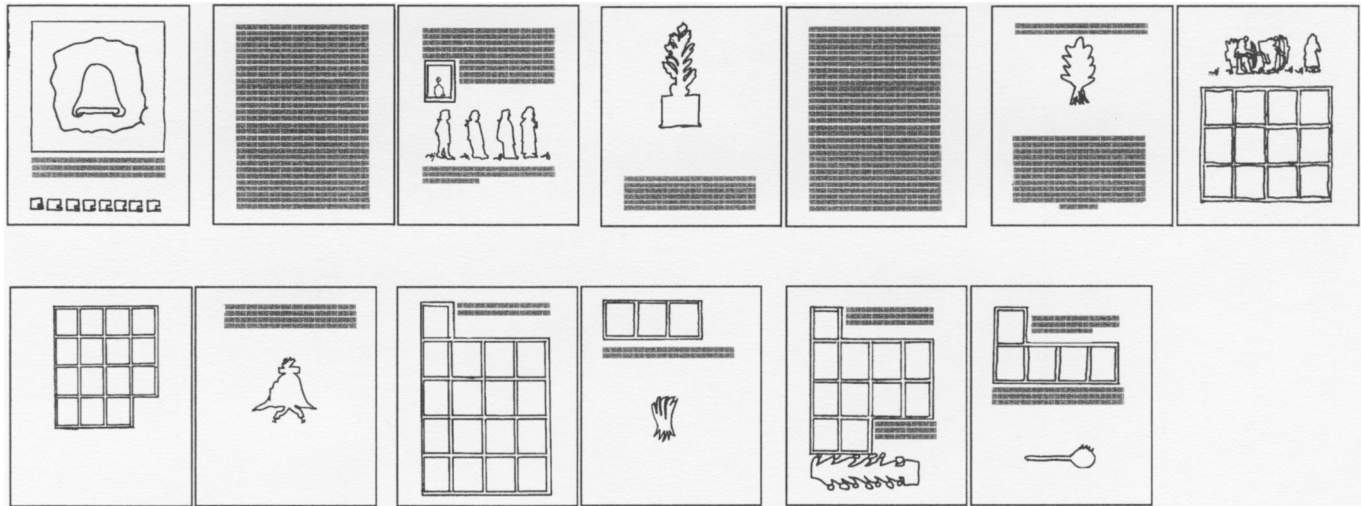


Figure 8. The depiction of time and space in the Codex Aubin. Drawing: Federico Navarrete.

event, it is because of the narrative effectiveness of this chronotope. This is, of course, the ultimate success of a narrative history: to become so transparent that its reconstruction and organization of the past is indistinguishable from the past itself.

Chronotopes and genres

A narrative analysis of the codices, and Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, have allowed us to understand both the function and the meaning of the devices used to represent time and space in the migration. This line of analysis can also lead us to question the traditional classification of historical genres in Mesoamerica.

Bakhtin himself stressed the importance of the chronotope in the definition of genres: "The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions" (1981:84–85).⁷

7. In his article, Bakhtin defined several specific chronotopes pertaining to different genres, from the Greek adventure novel, to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, to Rabelais's anthropocentric chronotope. It is interesting to point out that his definition of the chronotope of the Greek adventure novels, in which an endless series of incidents takes place in a frozen time in which the characters never age or experience transformations, is very close to the description of the plot structure of most modern comics by Fresnault-Deruelle (1977).

And indeed, the chronotope of the Mexica migration seems to invalidate the traditional division of Mesoamerican codices into place-oriented "maps," time-oriented "annals" and event-oriented histories. The codices dealing with the migration, however, combine the depiction of time, space, and events into a single whole: to separate the Sigüenza Map from the other documents just because it is square in shape, and not oblong, seems quite arbitrary. Therefore, I would argue that if we call this document a "map," we should also call the other Mexica histories "maps," because they depict space as well; or if we call the others annals, then we could also speak of the *Sigüenza Annals*.

The fact that historical codices were called *xihuahmatl* in Nahuatl, literally meaning "paper of years," should not lead us to consider them as equivalent to annals, in the traditional Western sense of the word: simple lists of events organized chronologically with no further narrative elaboration (White 1992:20). We are dealing with a fully narrative genre that organizes and gives coherence to the events it describes, and not with a simple collection of events placed along a fixed time line. Therefore, the codices dealing with the migration should be considered as a specific genre, which combines our Western genres of maps, annals, and event-oriented histories.

If we accept that the chronotope of the migration defines a specific historical genre, then the imperial chronotope should define another one. Hinting at this,



Figure 9. The imperial chronotope in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, folio 31r. Photo: © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

several authors, such as Nicholson (1971:47–48), have pointed out that Mexica histories seem to be collections of heterogeneous parts.

However, the plurality of chronotopes, and genres, within Mexica history does not mean that these formed an incoherent whole. Bakhtin pointed out that several chronotopes could coexist, and interact, within a single literary work (1981:252). In fact, this heterogeneity gave the whole of Mexica history its meaning: the shift from the migration chronotope to the imperial chronotope did not mark an absolute discontinuity but a historical transformation, a change of eras. The ideological sense of this transformation is clear, and it was in the Mexica's interest to maintain that it was irreversible: having found their home at last, they were not going to lose it again. So the Mexica may have conceived their whole history as a series of eras, each defined by a peculiar chronotope and necessitating a distinct historical genre for its expression.⁸

If we look beyond the Mexica, we also find different genres in the histories of other Mesoamerican groups. Robertson recognized these differences and suggested that Acolhua (Texcocan) history was more place-oriented and more "rational" (1959:62–64). Once again, his classification should be qualified: though the Codex Xolotl and the Quinatzin and Tlotzin Maps are organized around depictions of space, they are not necessarily maps, according to our definition (synchronic, isometric, emphasizing topography and human settlements), because they include depictions of time. In the codex that bears his name, Xolotl moves along the map as he moves along the events of his glorious life, and so does Nezahualcoyotl as he flees from the evil Tepanecans. The same thing can be said for other Mesoamerican "maps," such as those from Cuauhtinchan and the many extant *lienzos* from the Mixtec region.⁹

8. On the division of Nahuatl history into eras, see the reflections of Graulich (1982) and Guilhem Olivier (1997) based on mythical analysis.

9. Mundy has proposed that Mesoamerican maps use a "human" or "social" projection, because they depict the relation among humans, their history, and the territory (that is, a chronotope) and not just spatial relationships (Mundy 1996). Leibsohn, in turn, proposes that "the map establishes a nexus where history and landscape conjoin" (1995:270). Byland and Pohl have demonstrated how the "event-oriented" Mixtec codices include very accurate depictions of landscapes and very precise dates (1990).

Interestingly, other migration histories, such as the one depicted in the Codex Xicotepec (Stresser-Pean 1995), from the highlands of Puebla, use conventions different from the Mexica codices. In this case, there are no footprint lines, and the stops in the migration are organized in frames (marked by red lines) with a year sign on their top left corner and the place sign on the bottom.

As for the already mentioned *Tira de Tepechpan* (Noguez 1978), which combines local Tepechpan history with that of the Mexica, presented above and below a central row of year signs, respectively, it is possible that the time line is used to create a common, neutral chronotope for the parallel depiction of two distinct histories. Significantly, the part dealing with the Mexica migration uses none of the conventions we have discussed above.

A systematic analysis would quite likely reveal that each historical tradition, belonging to a specific ethnic group and lineage, had its peculiar chronotope, its peculiar way of solving the conundrum of representing time in space and space in time. One possible explanation for this plurality is that the holders of each historical tradition developed their own solutions and distinguished them from those of neighboring and rival traditions as a sign of particularity and authenticity. This would help explain the plurality and ethnocentricity of Mesoamerican histories, which have been well known since the sixteenth century.

The resilience of the chronotopes

Another problem that deserves attention is the nature of the adaptation of the Mesoamerican tradition to Spanish colonization during the sixteenth century. Though all the codices analyzed in this article were made after the conquest, I assume that the chronotopes of Mexica history are of pre-Hispanic origin for two reasons. The first one is that their deep coherence and systematic nature does not correspond to the piecemeal experimentation and adoption of European styles, forms, and conventions that took place during the sixteenth century. The second one is that I have not found any equivalent visual narrative devices in the Western tradition. The Bayeux Tapestry and other European visual histories use completely different conventions (Smith 1973:20–21).

The analysis of the codices as visual narratives provides a new perspective for understanding the

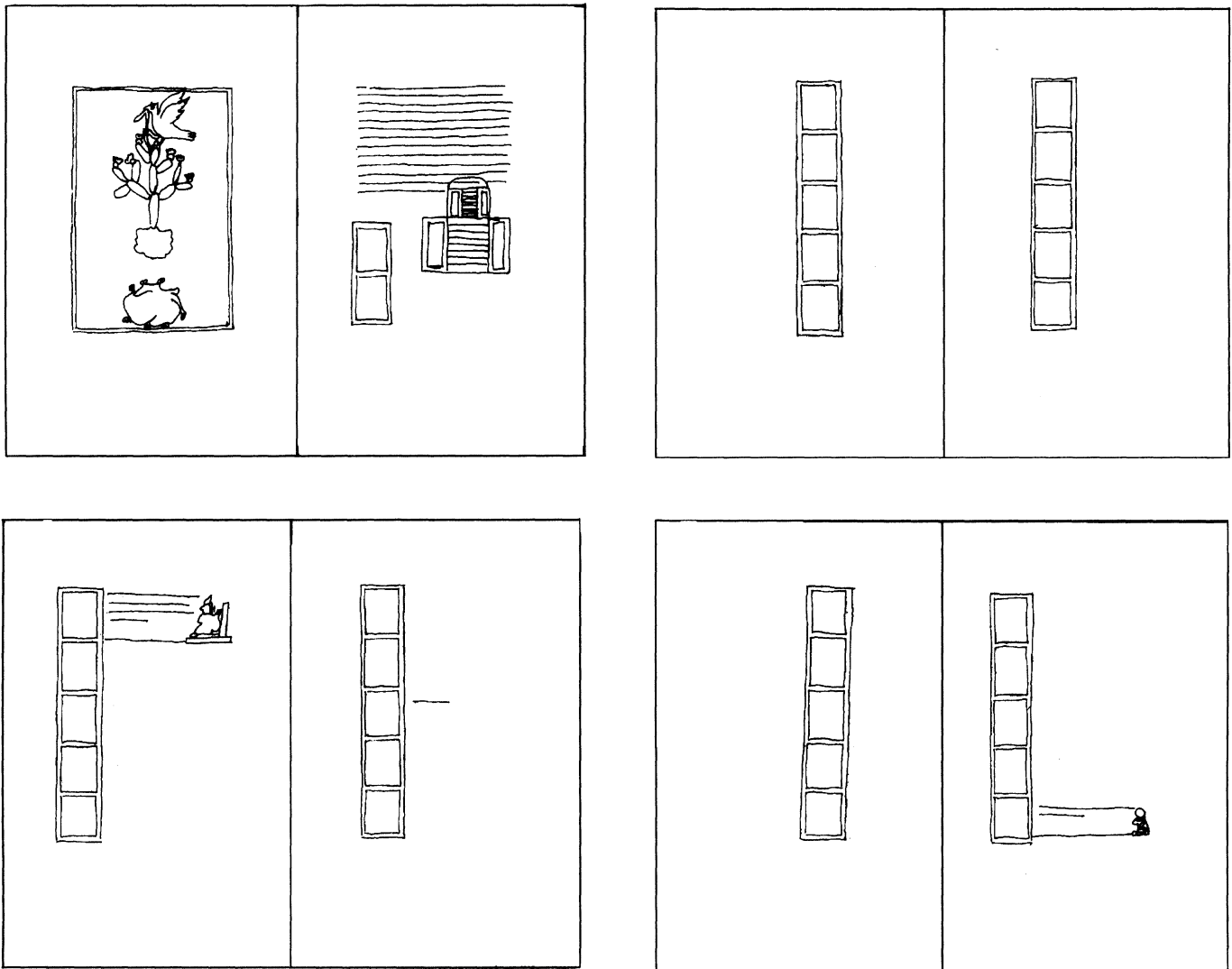


Figure 10. The foundation of Mexico and the beginning of the imperial chronotope, Codex Aubin, pages 48 to 55. Drawing: Federico Navarrete.

colonial changes in style, and in the conventions for the depiction of space, landscape, and the human body, that have been so meticulously documented by Robertson (1959) and more recently by Escalante (1996). It is my contention that, at least in the case of Mexica histories, the adoption of European forms and techniques was subordinated to the chronotope that gave them generic validity.

This is quite clear in the case of the *Codex Boturini*. Though this document has been considered a pre-Hispanic document, several authors, such as Escalante

(1996:166–169), have pointed out that it has elements of colonial origin: the lack of color and the extreme simplification of the human figures. It could be argued that this simplification was meant to stress the basic message of the history: the chronotope. Indeed, it is even possible that the continuous line uniting the year frames was a colonial innovation used to stress the unity and linearity of time during the migration.¹⁰

10. Carmen Aguilera suggested this possibility to me.

On the other hand, the Codex Mexicanus and the Codex Azcatitlan prove that the adoption of the European codex format did not lead to the abandonment or fragmentation of the time and space lines but to a painstaking effort by the *tlacuilome* to maintain the lines' continuity around the new page breaks. However, the new format did lead to the emergence of a new narrative unit, the double-page, which became a sort of vignette. The *tlacuilome* sometimes used this frame to emphasize the unity of certain scenes. In the Codex Mexicanus, the divisions between pages were sometimes awkward, as in the first Chicomoztoc, which was divided in two; nevertheless, the clearly more important second Chicomoztoc appears in a double page, so that the unity of the whole scene is not lost. In the Azcatitlan, the *tlacuilo* exploited this resource to the fullest, and all important scenes were assigned a double page.¹¹ It must be stressed, nevertheless, that this new unit did not entail the dissolution of the chronotope but gave it a new rhythm.

The ability of the *tlacuilome* to adopt European visual conventions and techniques and to use them to strengthen their narrative message is particularly clear in the mountain landscape in plate 5, right, of the Codex Azcatitlan (fig. 5). In this instance, the depiction of an artificial space in a full-fledged landscape serves several purposes deeply rooted in the indigenous chronotope and narrative tradition. Thus it could be said that the *tlacuilo* of the Azcatitlan was willing to experiment formally but remained loyal to the traditional meanings and conventions of his genre. Similar examples of experimentation with traditionalism are found in the maps of the *Relaciones geográficas*, where the *tlacuilome* used European techniques, such as perspective, to better render their traditional symbols (Mundy 1996:78–80).

Equally impressive, from this point of view, is the way in which the Codex Aubin managed to incorporate written text while preserving the main conventions of the pictographic chronotope. This proves, beyond doubt, the importance attributed by the Mexica *tlacuilome* to these conventions and, naturally, to their deep meaning.

So strong was this loyalty, that it could be said that the genres of Mexica pictographic history died whole, instead of dissolving gradually into the genres of European painting, or visual narratives, as has been traditionally argued. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Mexica stopped drawing codices altogether, but the last ones they made preserved the fundamental elements of the pre-Hispanic chronotopes.

In this article, my intention was to present a new way of looking at and understanding Mexica pictographic histories. I hope that this proposal may inspire a renewed interest in the codices as visual narratives and lead to a healthy debate about their nature and working as narrative genres.

Naturally, I have raised many more issues than I could hope to address fully. One of them is the relationship between the codices and the oral tradition that accompanied them. I stated that the whole historical discourse was the result of the combination of the visual documents and the oral traditions, but the way in which they were articulated deserves a much deeper analysis. However, I hope that this article has made clear that the codices were full-fledged narratives and not merely mnemonic aides used as prompts for oral discourse. Indeed, the showing of these visual histories may have been as important as the reciting of the oral lore.

Another important subject is the transformation of the pictographic and oral histories into texts written in Latin script. The modifications to the chronotopes during this metamorphosis and their eventual assimilation to the conventions and chronotopes of European Christian history, exemplified by the works of Alva Ixtlilxochitl, deserve a full study.

Finally, I would like to stress that the kind of narrative analysis I am proposing does not invalidate or contradict the pictographic and art-historical analyses of these documents but adds a new dimension to our understanding of the Mesoamerican codices. Indeed, this perspective does not reveal any hidden aspects of the Mexica codices so much as it allows us to perceive in a different way, and perhaps to comprehend more fully, some features that had been so evident as to escape our attention.

By adding a further level of complexity to our understanding of the Mesoamerican pictographic histories, I hope to be doing justice to a highly sophisticated and ancient tradition and to aid in the appreciation of the ingenuity, skill, and sense of humor of the *tlacuilome* who painted these visual stories.

11. This unit became so important, in fact, that one of the arguments adduced by Graulich to demonstrate that there is a page missing in the *Azcatitlan* in plate 5 between the left page depicting Chicomoztoc and the one depicting the mountain landscape is precisely the fact that these two pages do not seem to constitute a single scene (Barlow and Graulich 1995:58–60).

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