

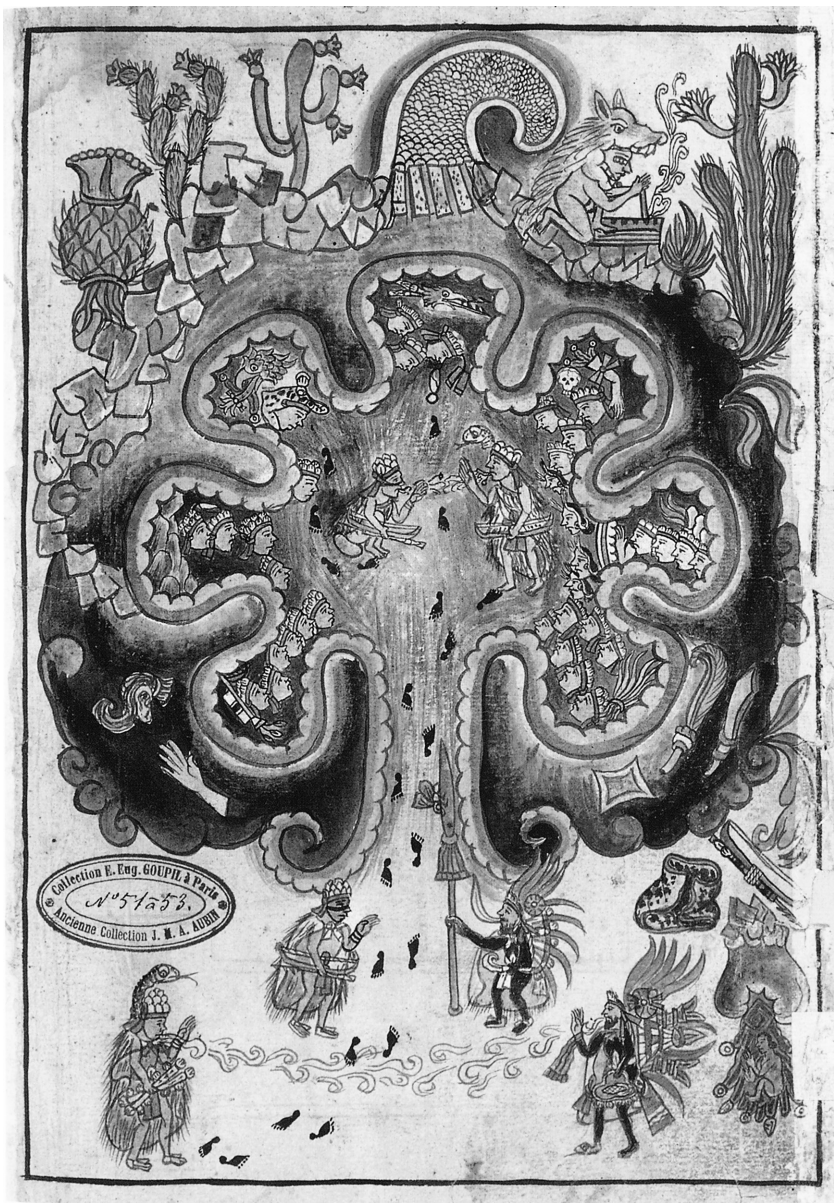
ANNALS OF NATIVE AMERICA

*How the Nahuas of Colonial Mexico
Kept Their History Alive*



Camilla Townsend

Annals of Native America



Historia Tolteca Chichimeca, folio 16. The people depart from Chicomoztoc (Seven Caves). Courtesy Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

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*Dedicated to the memory
of James Lockhart
and Luis Reyes García*

There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand forever,
do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an
inheritance to keep forever, does the flood-time of rivers endure?
It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees
the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

With sad flower tears [with poet's tears], I the singer set my song in
order, remembering the princes who lie shattered, who lie enslaved
in the place where all are shorn, they who were lords, who were
kings on earth, who lie like withered feathers, like shattered jades.
If only this [world] could have been before these princes' eyes: if
only they could have seen what is now seen and known on earth.

Cantares Mexicanos

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GLOSSARY

These terms may be originally from Nahuatl (N) or Spanish (S). Here follows the usage as seen in Nahuatl texts of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Alcalde (S). First-instance judge who is at the same time a leading member of the indigenous cabildo.

Alcalde Mayor (S). Chief Spanish judicial and administrative official, governing over a large area including several different altepetl.

Alguacil (S). Indigenous constable.

Altepetl (A). Nahuatl term for any state, no matter how large or complex, but most frequently used to refer to a local ethnic state.

Audiencia (S). The high court of New Spain, residing in Mexico City. Often called the Royal Audiencia.

Cabildo (S). A town council in the Spanish style. Used to describe a session of any governing assembly, such as a municipal government or cathedral chapter, but most frequently to refer to the local indigenous council governing their community's internal affairs.

Cacicazgo (S, based on “cacique”). An inherited indigenous rulership, including title and accompanying lands.

Cacique (S, from Arawak). Indigenous ruler, the equivalent of “tla-toani.” Eventually, it was used to describe any prominent indigenous person of a noble line.

Calli (N). Literally, house or household. Often an important metaphor for larger bodies, also one of the four rotating names for years.

Calpolli (N). In the central valley, a key constituent part or subdistrict of an altepetl. In the Tlaxcala-Puebla valley, sometimes an inserted or added-on subdistrict of an altepetl.

Cihuapilli (N). Noblewoman, lady, even “queen.”

Congregación (S). A resettlement of indigenous people by the Spanish state to achieve greater nucleation, and hence control.

Doctrina (S). Spanish for Christian indoctrination, but used to refer to an indigenous parish.

Don/doña. High title attached to a first name, like “Sir” or “Lady” in English. Applied by Nahuas in this period only to titled nobility from Spain and their own highest-status local indigenous nobility.

Encomienda (S). Grant, nearly always to a Spaniard, of the right to receive tribute and originally labor from an altepetl.

Escribano (S). Notary, clerk. An important position attached to the indigenous cabildo.

Fiscal (S). Chief steward of an indigenous church.

Gobernador (S). Governor and head of the indigenous cabildo. Early on, the position was filled by the tlatoani, but later, elections were held among all noblemen. Sometimes called a “judge-governor.”

Guardián (S). The prior of a monastic establishment.

Macehualli (pl. macehualtin) (N). Indigenous commoner.

Marqués (S). Marquess, lord of a border region. Several viceroys bore the title, but when Nahuas used it without a name, they meant either Hernando Cortés or his eldest legitimate son.

Merino (S). Name sometimes given to minor officials within the altepetl government. Seems to have been the equivalent of “tepixqui.”

Mestizo (S). Person of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent.

Nahualli (N). A highly complex term, but translatable as “sorcerer” or “shaman” in most documents.

Oficial (S). Generally used to mean craftsman, artisan.

Oidor (S). A sitting judge on the audiencia. Together the oidores formed the council who advised the Viceroy.

Pilli (pl. pipiltin) (N). Indigenous nobleman.

Principal (S). A Spanish term for an indigenous nobleman, often adopted by the pipiltin themselves.

Quauhpilli (N). Literally, an “eagle nobleman.” A nobleman by virtue of deeds or merit rather than by virtue of birth.

Real (S). A silver coin worth one-eighth of a peso (hence “Spanish pieces of eight”). Also the word for “royal.”

Regidor (S). Councilman, member of the indigenous cabildo.

Rotary labor. Translation of “coatequitl,” rotating public labor drafts.

Teccalli (N). Lordly house, containing related nobles, dependents and lands. Among the eastern Nahuas, it was close in meaning to the “calpolli” of the central valley, a key subunit of the altepetl.

Tecpan (N). Literally, “place where the lord is.” Originally, the palace or establishment of a local lord. Later, a community house where the indigenous cabildo and other municipal offices resided.

Teniente (S). A term adopted in certain Nahuatl-speaking localities to refer to an assistant to the gobernador who actually handled much of the day-to-day business.

Teopantlaca (N). Literally, “church people.” Seems to have been used to refer to people educated as Christians more than to people who attended or worked in a church.

Teuctli (pl. teteuctin) (N). Lord, head of a dynastic household, with lands and followers.

Tlacuilo (N). Painter or writer, sometimes used interchangeably with “escribano.”

Tlalli (N). Land.

Tlatoani (N). Literally, “he who speaks.” A dynastic ruler of an altepetl, in this book translated as “king.” Sometimes applied to a high Spanish authority, such as a viceroy or alcalde mayor.

Tlatoque (N). Plural of “tlatoani.” From very early on, used to refer to the councilmen of the cabildo as a unit.

Tollan (N). Often called “Tula” in English, literally meaning “Place of Reeds.” A real town in Central Mexico but, in ancient stories, often used to refer to a utopian community of the distant past.

Traza (S). Specifically delineated downtown area in a city governed by Spaniards.

Tomin (S). A coin valued as the equivalent of a real. Often used to refer to any coin or cash.

Virrey (S). Viceroy, highest royal official in New Spain, resident in Mexico City.

Visitador (S). Inspector. These were sent regularly by the Spanish Crown to investigate local government in the Americas in a system of checks and balances.

Annals of Native America

|| Introduction ||

In the preconquest communities of central Mexico, the people gathered on certain evenings to celebrate their lives together. Drums beat. Voices rose and fell. Children who were present would remember in later years how the throbbing music stirred their blood, and how the song-poems made their eyes shine with pride and dim with tears, as they reveled in the great deeds of their people and mourned their losses. Sometimes in the wake of the musicians, the history tellers would also perform, one after another stepping forward to tell of this part of the past or that, sometimes with a great painted record to guide them, sometimes with only their own well-trained memories to keep them on course. Together, they brought to life the story of the making of a great mutual commitment, a pact made by the listeners' ancestors—and renewed among the people as they sat together as an audience—to protect their community and its ways against all comers, to bend with changing times, but never break. Life on earth was fleeting, but in remembering the past and renewing promises to posterity, they could render aspects of it eternal.

The Nahuas had long preserved their histories. In the early sixteenth century, when the Spaniards appeared upon the scene, they were the guardians of an already centuries-old tradition known as the *xiuhpohualli* (SHOO-po-wa-lee). The word has tended to be translated as “year count,” faintly redolent of a charming primitivism, but it would perhaps better be rendered as “yearly account.” Spanish investigators were puzzled by the superabundance of words that sometimes were mentioned instead of *xiuhpohualli*, such as *xiuhlapohualli*, *huehuetlatolli*, *huehuenemiliztlatolli*, *altepetlacuilolli*, or *huehuenemilizamoxtli*. These Europeans were in some ways wasting their time when they struggled to find minute variations in meaning. Nahuatl is a highly productive and flexible language: new nouns can be constructed with ease, at an individual

speaker's will, by stringing other nouns together. There was, however, a significant two-part division within the nomenclature. All the words that were occasionally used can be categorized in one of two ways. On the one hand are the words whose root is either *amoxtli* (the paper on which painting appears) or *-icuiloa* (to write or to paint, the two activities being largely synonymous); on the other hand are the words stemming from a speech act, either *pohua* (to count or give an account, the two possibilities being tightly tied together in usage) or *-ittoa* (to utter). The use of words stemming from two different arenas is indicative of the dual nature of history preservation among the Nahuas: there were pictorial texts, and there were oral performances.

The first set of words referred to a custom of painting timelines on long rolls of maguey paper or bark, where the traditional yearly calendar was marked out with well-known glyphs (reed year, flint-knife year, house year, rabbit year, and then again reed year, and so on), and pictographic writing along the line referred to the major events of each period. These writings, like other types of writings (including those organizing religious ceremonies, or tax collection, or landholdings), were called *in tlilli in tlapalli*. Literally, the phrase meant, "the black ink, the colored pigments," but the Nahuas seemed to have meant primarily "the black and the red," the two colors used most often in all their writings. Black ink alone was not understood as a metaphor for writing: it was more likely to be indicative of face painting for war, or markings for sacrifice. Black ink and red taken together, however, became not just a symbol of writing, but the very term for it.

The painted histories were rich texts in their own right. They were able to convey not only lists of subjects but also actions—in other words, a true narrative. They harbored the beginnings of a systematic phonetic orthography. They boasted complex glyphs that cross-referenced each other and sometimes changed each other's meanings when placed in certain pairings, in the same way that two different spoken words, like *in tlilli in tlapalli*, became a third entity when placed together. However, the paintings were never, no matter how complex or beautiful or worthy of attention, the whole story. The audience might crane their necks to see the undulating lines that marked the well-known and sometimes treacherous rivers, or to get a better view of the flaring flames that marked the

conquests their grandfathers had made, but even at such visually exciting moments, they were also poised to listen, waiting for the speaker to proceed. The words, the flowing narrations, were the heart of the matter.

The speaker's tone and purport varied, depending on the occasion and the place in the performance—hence the varied terms related to *xiuhpohualli*, perhaps. He might give a litany of ancestors if he was emphasizing continuity, or break out at a certain point and perform a miniature one-man play to illustrate a past political predicament. Sometimes the dialogue was funny and made the people smirk or even laugh outright. Sometimes it was enraging, and when a historical figure asked a certain question, the audience was ready to shout a response. Soon it was another history teller's turn to step forward and represent the perspective of a different lineage or clan. People turned expectantly to hear the alternate view.

Or so it seems to have been.¹ In fact, none of the preconquest pictorials survive, and of course, no one made a secret recording. In reconstructing the Nahuas' methods of preserving their history in an oral arena, scholars have been forced to use indirect evidence of various types. First, a variety of Spanish and indigenous commentators described and even categorized texts and performances. Second, records of court cases heard within the newly established Spanish apparatus occasionally contain descriptions of how the painted records were used, and in one particular case, even lengthy transcriptions of performances. Finally—and most significantly—there exist dozens, even hundreds, of post-conquest histories. As young Nahuas learned the roman alphabet from the friars and took lessons in European-style drawing, they soon recognized the possibilities of using their new accomplishments for purposes other than those originally imagined by their teachers.

Scholars have made excellent progress in their studies of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century historical pictorials. Elizabeth Hill Boone and those who have followed in her footsteps have successfully grappled with the ways in which colonial realities shaped the extant texts, as well as with the ways in which they retrospectively illuminate past generations' assumptions and expectations.² Significantly less work has been done with what are called the "alphabetic texts."³ These were most often initially produced when the friars' students, who had become adept at

using the roman alphabet to transcribe speech, asked elders in their community to tell them the histories of old and then wrote down whatever they heard in the original Nahuatl. In a few cases, public performances were officially transcribed by order of community elders. These written pieces were subsequently handed on, copied and recopied by interested parties, and often added to as the years passed. Sometimes in later years a young writer held an old pictorial in his hands rather than a written transcription of a performance; then he did his best to reconstruct what a traditional performer would have said, but the results in such cases were usually extremely terse, as he was operating without much knowledge of the glyphs. Possession of these texts was not a clandestine affair—as the possession of old prayers or incantations was⁴—for the Spaniards saw nothing wrong in the people's recording their histories. Yet if it was not a secret activity, it was not exactly a public one, either. Spanish authorities generally knew nothing about it. The keeping of these written histories was not done at their behest, or even with their knowledge. In short, these were not texts being carefully prepared under European tutelage to be sent back to the crowned heads of Europe, like some of the more famous codices;⁵ the alphabetic histories that survived to the present day did so in varied and serendipitous ways.

The historical writings were largely in black ink, now faded to brown. A handful of particularly ambitious or talented individuals combined transcriptions of the ancient performances with arresting old-style visual imagery, but most did not. By the end of the sixteenth century, all traces of *in tlapalli*, the bright red ink of former times, had disappeared from the work being produced, even in those cases where black line drawings of calendrical symbols survived. But if the colors were fading, the words of the *xiuhpohualli* were not, at least not yet. Rich sentences and leaner ones, fascinating stories and duller ones, tumbled out upon the pages, as hand after hand copied them out and added to them. Writing without red did not diminish the Nahuas' joy in words.

What did these histories contain? Universally, they clung as tenaciously as they could to the traditional calendar. This was no small feat, for the ancient Nahua calendar was complex.⁶ There were two ongoing cycles of time. One was a solar calendar and consisted of eighteen months of twenty days each, plus five blank or unnamed days at the end, for a

total of 365 days. The other was a purely ceremonial calendar containing thirteen groupings of twenty days each, for a total of 260. The two wheels of time both reached their starting point at the same moment every fifty-two years. Thus the Nahua symbolic equivalent of a century was a period (or “bundle,” as they said) of fifty-two years. The events in the annals were categorized within solar years, probably because a history that was dominated by warfare had to follow rainy seasons and harvests, but the solar years had to be connected to the other calendar to be meaningful, and so they were named in four groupings of thirteen each, to reach the total of fifty-two years (One Reed, Two Flint-knife, Three House, Four Rabbit, Five Reed, Six Flint-knife, Seven House, Eight Rabbit, Nine Reed, Ten Flint-knife, Eleven House, Twelve Rabbit, Thirteen Reed, One Flint-knife, and so on). Some of the later authors may have been aware only of the latter listing, and not its complex origins, but many knew more than this, judging by the frequency with which they referred to the names of the months. They certainly understood that the names of their forebears stemmed from the ceremonial calendar’s twenty days signs, and not the solar months. In any case, the use of the fifty-two-year calendar lasted throughout the colonial period, though often authors added the Christian labels for the solar year as well (“1299” or “the year of Our Lord 1519”).

The texts’ themes were more malleable than the calendrical system they employed, though in this regard, too, they exhibited significant commonality. What they recorded was what was deemed important to the *altepetl* (the ethnic state, the community) of which they were a product. So they primarily included the rise and fall of political authorities, wars and land settlements, epidemics and natural phenomena. However, the *altepetl* was itself a complex structure, containing at the very least multiple lineages who had chosen generations ago to throw their lot in together, and sometimes even including various sub-*altepetls* that had come together, each with its own *tlatoani* (ruler, or king) to forge a larger and stronger nation. Thus the performing of history in the old days was almost always in some senses a political act, intended to reify certain alliances, and this pattern continued in the colonial era, when a writer might be attempting, for instance, to underscore a particular traditional alliance or erase it, depending on his present-day concerns. So it was that

shifting political and economic realities led to shifting *xiuhpohualli*, even when texts included some words taken verbatim from other texts. Furthermore, as time passed, less and less was remembered about the significance of certain glyphs, or the meaning of certain references in the alphabetic texts. Gradually the knowledge was lost that a *xiuhpohualli* should offer the testimony of multiple speakers representing varied lineages; eventually even the inclusion of dialogue became rare. Instead, the writers increasingly chose to include personal experiences or observations as the texts became very specifically theirs.

Given their richness as sources, it at first seems odd that the colonial alphabetic histories have not been studied more assiduously in the recent era, in which indigenous perspectives and voices have been sought after. The explanation itself has a long history. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when European scholars first saw some of the documents, they noted an interesting resemblance to early medieval European “annals,” as the genre is called.⁷ That tradition, too, moved forward through time year by year, recounting events that were of interest to the whole community—the births and deaths of rulers, wars, meteorological phenomena, plagues, and so on. To this day, scholars continue to call the indigenous genre in question the “Mexican historical annals” rather than “*xiuhpohualli*” or some other fitting Nahuatl term, perhaps because relatively few people would feel confident of the pronunciation of a Nahuatl label. The practice has created substantial confusion. Scholars of other specialties have understandably tended to assume that these were histories written under the guidance of the Franciscans in semi-European style, as many other texts produced in that period were. But these histories were in fact written by Nahuas in their own homes, for their own circle of friends and relatives, with their own posterity in mind; they were written in Nahuatl, without gloss or translation, entirely without regard to European interests.

The earlier scholars who looked at the annals not only determined the misleading name by which such texts would henceforth be known, but also largely set the tone for subsequent dealings with them. Some early cultural products of the Nahuas—such as the calendar wheel—were treated with near-reverence by Europeans who, for reasons of their own, were interested in glorifying America’s ancient past,⁸ but not the

annals. The influential nineteenth-century writer William Prescott (he who advertized and rendered permanent the notion of the panicked Montezuma) wrote: "Clumsy as it was, the Aztec picture-writing seems to have been adequate to the demands of the nation, in their imperfect state of civilization. . . . The few brief sentences [of their histories] were quite long enough for the annals of barbarians." Only the noted Enlightenment scholar Alexander von Humboldt saw that the histories actually exhibited "the greatest method and most astonishing minuteness." His opinion on this was dismissed by others.⁹

Counterintuitively, perhaps, the histories have continued to be marginalized by the very postmodern and multicultural trends that recent generations might have counted on to rescue them from the rigid and judgmental past. Such renowned scholars as Serge Gruzinski and Enrique Florescano have insisted—with some justification, of course—that the very act of converting flexible indigenous performances into fixed texts radically transformed and reduced them. They have argued that their complexity could not be imprisoned within a few frozen fragments without doing irreparable harm, and that attempting to study the results only furthers the processes of colonialism.¹⁰ This is undoubtedly true to some extent. But if modern scholars leave the matter there, secure in their conviction that it would only be imperialistic to study such texts, do they not themselves become party to another kind of imperialism—that which silences? Miguel Leon Portilla, one of the accused, has responded with humor whenever he can. "Such a conclusion is dramatic for those of us who, patiently applying available linguistic and philological resources, have translated some of those texts into European languages. In dealing with them, translating them, or quoting them . . . we have not understood what they in fact are. Instead of being testimonies of the ancient Native word, they reflect the forced answers of the vanquished vis-à-vis the imposed attitudes of the invaders and foreign lords. . . ."¹¹

There can be no question that the scholarly world of past decades needed to confront the idea that many early indigenous written texts are the products of a painful and traumatic encounter. Yet they are not therefore all to be dismissed as the distorted products of European imaginations and cast aside as somehow unworthy of study. Many are clearly also the products of indigenous imaginations and intended for

indigenous audiences. Scholars who study Native American history and culture are increasingly aware of this; the past generation has seen a florescence of revealing scholarship based on such Nahuatl sources.¹² The historical annals are probably the texts most removed from Spanish production or interference, but they have not hitherto generated the dedicated scholarship one might have expected. Even the most sympathetic of souls and most active investigators of the annals have lamented the annals' "repetitiveness" and "disorderliness."¹³ In an earlier day, Günter Zimmermann, who spent much of his life studying the work of the most prolific indigenous annalist, Chimalpahin, was so alienated by what he saw as the repetitiveness and disorderliness of his beloved subject's text that he decided to dismantle it and reorganize it himself in his published edition.¹⁴ Only since then has it become clear that the tradition of the *xiuhpohualli* is necessarily repetitive and disorderly to untrained Western eyes, as it required that multiple speakers each give an account of the same events, and no markers separated their accounts in the alphabetic transcriptions.¹⁵

In truth, the annals are difficult for outsiders to understand. Their style and format are their very own, and even their Nahuatl may be considered difficult, in the sense that no subject is excluded and the vocabulary is therefore highly variable and occasionally even unique to individual texts. It is necessary to read a great many of them before the broader contours of the genre as well as its remarkable specificities come into focus. Yet they reward the effort: they are inordinately valuable texts, rare in that they were written not only *by* but also *for* indigenous people. For that reason, they are with increasing frequency being marshalled as evidence in scholarly work treating other subjects. This is sometimes problematic, as quoting them without fully understanding their nature sometimes leads to their being misused. Treating them together, for instance, or separately but in no particular order, as if they were sources of one origin, erases the specific historical circumstances that gave rise to them.

This book takes seriously the texts' specificities and cuts away the anonymity in which they have largely been shrouded until now. Because the tradition of the *xiuhpohualli* was never intended to showcase the artistry of a particular history teller, but rather to commemorate the life of the

altepetl as a whole, the names of the speakers were almost never included in the early transcriptions; the expectation of anonymity carried over into the years when other men copied and expanded and wrote segments of their own. The prolific Chimalpahin was one of the very few to mention his own name. Perhaps partly out of respect for the indigenous tradition, scholars have tended to accept the anonymity of the texts. In fact, however, the authors almost always left unintended clues as to their identities within the texts themselves; when these are combined with other clues found in legal documents of the era, it is possible in most cases to deduce authorship, narrowing it down at least to a particular family and sometimes even to a precise individual. Knowing who wrote a text affects readers in concrete ways, in that they understand references that might otherwise elude them; the context of the work's production takes on more of an air of reality and lends itself to comparisons with other moments. In hearing the words of individual artists, rather than the echoing voices of multitudes, readers suddenly come face to face with a group of real and vibrant people, who treasured books and mended quill pens, and who sometimes wrote literature.

In examining each set of annals, this work begins by exploring the life of the writer of a particular text and the context in which he lived before turning to the meaning of the text itself. This book is not a study of Nahua history as found *in* the annals. For that, I refer readers to other excellent works.¹⁶ What I have tried to write here is a history *of* the annals. Who wrote them, and what were the authors' reasons for writing at the time they did? How did they pass down their texts? What were their deepest beliefs, as manifested in their works? Most especially, what notions of history, both their own and the world's, did they uphold, and how did these change?

The answers to these questions are multi-stranded, and will emerge more fully over the pages to come. Briefly, these writers believed in a complex history, in which more than one perspective had to be accounted for. Theirs was a history that prioritized humanity. Although they valued their land, their rivers, and their wealth, the history that mattered most to them was the history of their people, or of the peoples who together constituted their world. It was they who made the land and the water and the jewels matter, not the other way around. And this human history

was the story not merely of well-known individuals but of relationships. Primarily, these writers told of alliances and rivalries between communities, both the bonds and rifts largely being constituted through the politics of marriage. Secondly, they spoke of the relations, sometimes supportive and sometimes tense, between the families who constituted the nobility (*pilli*, plural *pipiltin*) and those who composed the ranks of the commoners (*macehualli*, plural *macehualtin*).

Nahua historians were always concerned with the survival of their people; they dreaded being subsumed in their relations with others. The arrival of the Spaniards made that issue all the more pressing. Their work reveals two profoundly different schools of thought as to the strategies most likely to ensure survival. Most believed deeply in adopting the new without obliterating the old, and they applied this to the writing of history as much as to agriculture or religion. But just as in ages past, there were some individuals who were more aware of feeling anger—or at least something akin to that emotion—in their dealings with the powerful outsiders. They prized a version of their history that they deemed pure and attempted to isolate it from contaminating European influences. Both groups were in many ways much like modern historians. They scouted for sources, read them over the course of years, and often showed a deep understanding of them. They then preserved the knowledge they had gleaned in a form other people could understand, or so they hoped. They used their work to exhort others to hold to certain ideals—most of all, to try to protect their people's future. For they believed passionately that knowledge of the past held the key to their people's future sense of self.

These Nahua historians fit squarely within the world of indigenous intellectuals in early America to whom scholars have been increasingly drawn in the last decade. There has been a florescence of scholarly work treating indigenous authors from colonial South America, Mesoamerica, and North America.¹⁷ The writers of annals certainly belong among their number: they are of central importance, in that they have the capacity to move us forward in our understanding of complex indigenous intellectual traditions as they existed before the arrival of Old World peoples. Probably in the colonial period under consideration in this work some of the Native American writers would have been startled to find

themselves presented together; theirs was not an epoch that dwelt on pan-Indian experience. But the work of some of the authors in this book indicates that they would have been pleased at the thought.

This book's organization takes its inspiration from an unlikely source: not the work of a Nahuatl scholar, but rather, the work of a scholar dedicated to the study of the West even at its darkest hour. In 1935, the philologist Eric Auerbach was discharged by the Nazi government from his position at the University of Marburg. He went to Istanbul and stayed there for the duration of World War II. Writing *Mimesis* with relatively few books at hand, he began each section with a lengthy quotation from a great classic, then opened his discussion of the words before the reader.¹⁸ He traversed time in an orderly way, and by the end, the reader had learned how the representation of reality had changed—or not changed—in Western literature over the course of centuries, and that, at its core, a greatness in the West's artistry had prevailed over times of horror. Drawing from Auerbach's model, I present segments of texts that readers otherwise might not have access to, and enough information to be able to make sense of the original authors' hopes and intentions.

Each chapter opens with a lengthy segment from a set of annals. The text appears in English, the language of the majority of my intended audience, in the hope that readers may connect directly with the stories found within. Nahuatl speakers and scholars (as well as inquisitive neophytes) can consult the same text in the original Nahuatl in the appendices.¹⁹ The opening pages are followed by a study of the author and his context, then finally by an analysis of the text itself; in the case of two chapters, this pattern is repeated twice. This splicing together of genres (anthology/social history/literary criticism) is unusual, but it seems necessary in this case. With one exception, the texts are available nowhere else in English; with two exceptions, the authorships have not previously been attributed. It would have been impossible to proceed with analyzing the texts without rectifying the other circumstances first: humanizing the authors had to be step one.

One other element that is somewhat unusual requires an explanation. In the analytical sections, I occasionally speak in the first person plural.

This is not a “royal we.” I specifically use the word *we* to refer to people alive now, in the early twenty-first century. We moderns, however different we may be in other regards, may find ourselves similarly confused by the assumptions of the past. There were moments in writing, when the evidence was at its thinnest and potential confusion greatest, when I felt that I could do no other than allow for an implicit dialogue with the Nahuas of generations gone.

The first chapter is entitled “Old Stories in New Letters (1520s–1550s).” In Central Mexico, the generation in power at the time of the conquest faced repeated crises as the Spaniards arrived and began to attempt to reorganize the political landscape. Such leaders also, however, met with extraordinary opportunities. This chapter follows a remarkable individual, a Cuauhtinchan chief named Chimalpopoca, who later took the name “don Alonso de Castañeda,” eventually orchestrating the production of the most beautifully painted set of Nahuatl annals in existence, the *Historia Tolteca Chichimeca*. He saw the ways in which the new roman letters might be put to good use and tried desperately to protect his people’s knowledge of the past, apparently foreseeing that the changes occurring might bring social amnesia. His work is also placed in the context of the other great set of annals of his generation, the *Annals of Tlatelolco*. Interestingly, though certain scholars have been worried by the imperialistic tendencies intrinsic to the act of transferring indigenous knowledge to a written page, the Nahua historians themselves were apparently not perturbed by the thought of transitioning to a phonetic system to record their speeches. They seem to have been no more concerned about imperialist overtones than ancient Mediterranean peoples ever were when phoneticism displaced cuneiform writing. They simply seized a useful tool.

The second chapter, “Becoming Conquered,” focuses on the decade of the 1560s, pivotal in the experience of the indigenous people of Mexico City. Until then, it might be argued that the urban Nahuas had been treated relatively well by the Spaniards, as they were needed allies in the conquest and governance of other territories, and the Europeans did not yet have enough power to be abusive in their extraction of wealth. All

that changed in the 1560s. Exorbitant tribute payments were demanded of them, threatening to change their lifestyles forever. The city's native people wrote histories about their efforts to stem the tide and defend themselves. Their political efforts turned out to be futile, but recording all that they attempted would, they believed, vindicate them in the eyes of posterity. The rich and revealing texts they produced during this time of crisis include the *Codex Aubin*, the *Codex Osuna*, and the *Annals of Juan Bautista*. Through the latter more than any other text, we can learn about Nahua historians' commitment to multivocality and to dialogue. It contains all the linguistic elegance of the works of prior times, but it pertains to a period whose history and politics we can fully understand; it is thus a sort of conceptual Rosetta Stone.

The third chapter, "Forging Friendship with Franciscans (1560–1580s)," examines annals written by two indigenous men, don Mateo Sánchez of Tecamachalco and don Pedro de San Buenaventura of Cuauhtitlan. As some of the friars' earliest native students attained adulthood and became intellectuals in their own right, they found themselves talking to, writing to, and sometimes even arguing with their former mentors. Their works reveal not only their own knowledge, but also their participation in dialogue with Europeans. If sometimes they felt enriched and sometimes bereft, there can be no question that the passage of time and the profundity of their connections with Europeans had changed them. Of course, they had changed the friars as well. But in the end, they seemed uncertain of the future. This segment underscores the positive and negative aspects of indigenous intellectuals' relationships with Europeans: in all times and places, intermediaries who live in close proximity to the powerful both benefit and suffer in subtle ways.

The fourth chapter is entitled "The Riches of Twilight (c. 1600)." By about the year 1600, indigenous intellectuals began to fear that knowledge of the old histories was truly being lost. Their conviction seems to have led to an outpouring of historical writing. Chimalpahin from Chalco, the best-known writer of Nahuatl annals, lived and worked during this period, and a number of other important histories date from this era as well. Chimalpahin did not work anonymously and he produced a large corpus, so it is possible to study him particularly closely. The cosmopolitanism of his vision is breathtaking: he was easily able to fit the

history of America's native peoples into his sense of the history of the world. His confidence in his people was matched only by his concern that they were losing their knowledge of their past. It was his mission to prevent that loss. Most remarkably, Chimalpahin got his wish: he kept his people's history alive to an extent that no European ever could have managed. Without his work as a centerpiece, the remaining Nahuatl annals preserved here and there would not be numerous and rich enough to tell us much.

The fifth chapter, "Renaissance in the East (the Seventeenth Century)" homes in on Tlaxcala, just to the east of the Central Basin, where Spanish language and culture were kept at bay longer than in most other places. As a reward for their help in bringing down the Tenochca, the Spaniards made certain promises to the Tlaxcalans which they largely kept for more than a century; few Spaniards settled among them for many years. One result was that knowledge of the tradition of the *xiuhpohualli* lasted longer here than anywhere else. More than two dozen texts survive from the seventeenth century, among them, most importantly, the work of a fascinating man named don Juan Buenaventura Zapata y Mendoza. He proudly and assertively worked to preserve Nahuatl language and culture; his statements are sometimes almost eerily anticipatory of the ethnic pride movements of later centuries. A young friend of his, don Manuel de los Santos Salazar, an indigenous man who contrary to expectation became a priest, worked tirelessly to preserve don Juan Zapata's work and that of other Nahuas; through him, their texts entered European libraries. There is a kind of irony here: it was the work of Zapata, the annalist most dedicated to maintaining the purity of all things Nahuatl and to living a life relatively isolated from Christian Spaniards, that most directly affected Hispanic historiography, through his young friend don Manuel. This may be somewhat surprising, yet it is hardly the only historical context in which disempowered peoples have found that separatism sometimes helps their voices gather strength.

The epilogue, "Postscript from a Golden Age," closes the history of the Nahuatl annals in the 1690s. Don Miguel Santos, a remarkable indigenous craftsman, a house builder and head of his lineage, produced the most eloquent and expressive set of Nahuatl annals in existence, now most often called the *Annals of Puebla*. His immediate ancestors were Tlaxcalans