Introduction

In 1602, a group of indigenous people sent a petition to the king of Spain and his Council of the Indies in Iberia. The petition, written on behalf of the group by Mexico City resident Alonso de Solís Aguirre, addressed several matters of concern for native communities. The first matter concerned a new method of collecting tribute from native people – the king mandated that part of the tribute be paid in chickens. The second matter concerned the policies of taking the Eucharist to sick Indians in their homes. The third and final matter – and of most interest here – dealt with the "sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, and legitimate descendants of the kings, caciques, and lords that were here in the time of their paganism, especially in the cities of Mexico, Tetzcoco, and Tlaxcala." These highborn folks, Solís Aguirre wrote, "are being registered as tribute-payers like the rest of the plebeian people and, like them, charged with personal service in the *repartimiento* [forced labor draft]." The indignation of these native nobles at having been forced to work and pay tribute as commoners is apparent even in Solís Aguirre's secondhand account of the affront. They demanded that the king and his council rectify the situation at once and "respect their preeminence and liberties as well-born people."[1]

In precontact times, the native nobility had had clearly defined responsibilities and privileges. In the illustrious precontact capitals mentioned in the letter – Mexico, Tetzcoco, and Tlaxcala – exemption

[1] AGI-M, 121:38.

from paying tribute was one of those privileges. Indigenous nobles received tribute; they did not render it. But in 1602, the lines between native commoner and native noble had been blurred. What was unthinkable eighty years earlier – that the aristocracy would be forced into a labor draft – was now a sad reality. The letter written to the monarch in faraway Castile was their last hope of rescue from such a cruel twist of fate.

It would be easy to suppose from this archival evidence that native leaders had suffered irreparable damage at the hands of the Spaniards and that viceregal policies devastated indigenous lords. But in 1855, centuries after the 1602 letter to the king and several decades after Mexico achieved independence from Spain, a curious lawsuit was winding its way through the legal channels of the new nation that challenges the idea of native noble collapse.[2] The lawsuit involved three women, all members of the same family from the city of Tetzcoco. Doña Guadalupe Carrillo y Pimentel and doña María Antonia Güemes y Pimentel were allied on one side of the dispute against doña Luz López y Uribe on the other. The use of the honorific title "doña" for all three women suggests some degree of superior social standing, and, indeed, the three were fighting over the possession of an estate. While the particulars of the suit have not survived, the women were collecting copies of documents from the colonial period – some of which were produced in the early sixteenth century – that pertained to the estate. What is noteworthy about the suit is that the estate in question was called the *cacicazgo* of Tetzcoco. Cacicazgos were entailed estates belonging to indigenous nobles; they had their origins in the great lordly houses of the precontact period. But why, some 300 years after the Spanish conquest and some three decades after Mexican independence, were the women still interested in the old lands of native nobles? Might the venerable Tetzcoco cacicazgo have survived for hundreds of years? Did the women think of themselves as members of the old Tetzcoco native ruling class? The very existence of the lawsuit suggests that, against all odds, both the estate and the Tetzcoca noble identity did, in fact, survive. And there was enough property and status at stake in the nineteenth century to warrant a thorough search of Mexico's colonial archives.

[2] AGN-T 3594:2, f. 1r–54v.

The evidence of the 1855 case runs counter to the earlier 1602 letter. If the nobility had collapsed by the early seventeenth century, how could they still be arguing with one another in the mid-nineteenth century? But where had this once-illustrious group of indigenous rulers been for the previous 250 years? What had really happened to them after the conquest? The native nobility of central Mexico had ceased to exercise much authority over local government relatively early in the colonial period, and historians have tended not to recognize them as significant players in elite colonial society. And yet here they are in the nineteenth century. Their identities as heirs of the great precontact leader Nezahualcoyotl had weathered not only three centuries of Spanish rule, but also the turmoil of independence, Iturbide's empire, the war with the United States, and the beginnings of the Liberal reform movement. That anyone should still remember and fight over the cacicazgo of Tetzcoco in 1855 is extraordinary.

The 1602 nobles' claims of forced labor and tribute payments, then, is not the full story of the indigenous nobility of central Mexico and of Tetzcoco. The sixteenth century was undoubtedly a time of unprecedented change: The conquest was violent and bloody; European diseases brought even more death and suffering; Spanish immigrants threatened native communities with their greed for native labor and land; and there were transformations in indigenous leadership that would shape the nobility for the duration of the colonial era. Some, as the 1602 letter demonstrates, were undoubtedly reduced to poverty and hard work. Yet, as the nineteenth-century lawsuit demonstrates, not all native lords were destroyed by the upheaval. Some of them adapted. Some of them made a place for themselves in the new society. Some of them survived.

THE ATHENS OF ANAHUAC

The present-day city of Texcoco – spelled with an *x* today instead of the *tz* used by the Nahuatl-(Aztec-)language speakers of central Mexico in the sixteenth century – sits in the eastern part of the Estado de México, nineteen miles from Mexico City's zócalo, just to the east of Benito Juárez International Airport and on the edge of the small marshy area that is all that remains of Lake Tetzcoco since it was drained in the late nineteenth century. Today, Texcoco is small and sleepy. Its principal

attractions are a yearly agricultural festival, a small colonial-era city center, and the precontact site known as the baths of Nezahualcoyotl, which, though delightful, is nearly impossible to reach without a fairly thorough knowledge of local geography and rural bus routes. Modern Texcoco does not attract the crowds that flock to the pyramids of nearby Teotihuacan or the international travelers that swarm the cosmopolitan offerings of Mexico City. Texcoco is infrequently visited and nearly forgotten.

Yet at the turn of the sixteenth century, after Columbus had landed in the Caribbean but before Cortés had landed on the eastern shores of Mexico, it was a much different place. Tetzcoco was impressive in 1500. The polity, called an *altepetl*, or ethnic state, in Nahuatl, was the foremost altepetl of Acolhuacan, a vast territory inhabited by the Acolhua ethnic group in the eastern basin. Acolhuacan was governed by seven *tlatoque*, or rulers (sing. *tlatoani*), from the altepetl of Acolman, Coatlinchan, Chiauhtla, Huexotla, Tepetlaoztoc, Tetzcoco, and Tezoyucan (see Figure 0.1). The tlatoani in Tetzcoco was dominant among the seven rulers, and the six remaining rulers rendered tribute to Tetzcoco each year. The Acolhuacan territory within the basin of Mexico constituted what has been called the "heartland" of Tetzcoca power, but Tetzcoca control penetrated the mountainous limits of the basin and extended eastward all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.[3] While Tetzcoco's allies occasionally aided in its efforts to exert control over the large region, on the whole, hegemony in the area was Tetzcoco's alone, and its extensive territory, taken together with the heartland, constituted a veritable Tetzcoca empire.[4]

The Tetzcoco altepetl proper appears to have included both urban and rural elements. The most urban part of the altepetl was clustered around the large ceremonial center – which included temples and palaces – at what is now downtown Texcoco. But the altepetl also included rural farmland and smaller settlements that could be located some distance from the center, such as the palace and baths complex at Tetzcotzinco, nearly five miles away (see Figure 0.2). The altepetl's combined urban-rural area was large, covering an area of around thirty square miles stretching from the shore of the lake in the west to the mountainous limit of the basin of Mexico in the east.[5]

[3] Offner 1983, 9. [4] Offner 1983, 112–113. [5] Hicks 1982, 231.

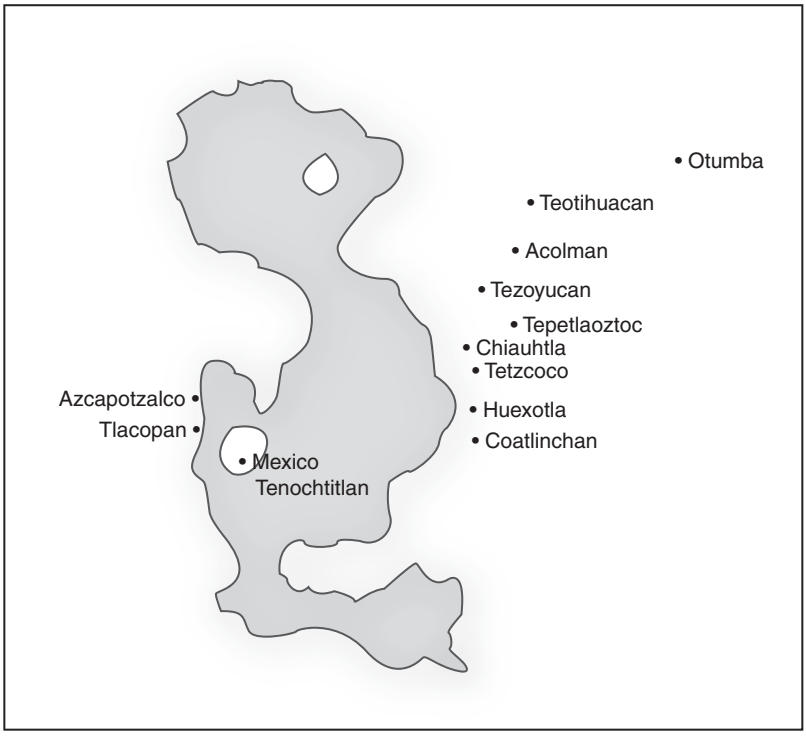

FIGURE 0.1 Basin of Mexico, ca. 1519, with Tetzcoco's territory in the east.

According to colonial-era sources, the altepetl was internally subdivided into six districts, called *parcialidades* or *barrios* in the Spanish-language texts, though almost certainly called *calpolli* or *tlaxilacalli* in Nahuatl. The six calpolli were named for six groups of migrants who settled Tetzcoco at various points in its history. They were called Mexicapan, Colhuacan, Tepanecapan, Huitznahuac (all settled by groups of migrants from the central basin), Chimalpan, and Tlailotlacan (settled by groups of migrants from the Chalco region to the south).[6]

The etymology of the word "Tetzcoco" is a bit murky. Juan Bautista de Pomar, who wrote in the 1580s and spoke Nahuatl fluently, records

[6] Carrasco 1999, 133–134.

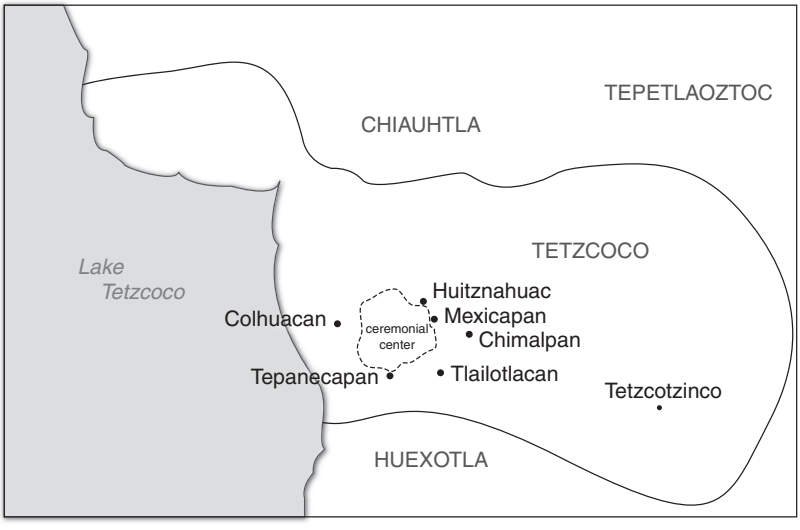

FIGURE 0.2 Altepetl of Tetzcoco with ceremonial center, six calpolli, and outlying area. Based on Hicks (1982, 232).

that Tetzcoco is a Culhua corruption of the Chichimeca word *tetzcotl*, but that "it has not been possible to learn its true meaning, because not only have the Chichimeca who first gave it its name disappeared, but there is no memory of their language nor anyone who knows how to interpret it."[7] Indeed, no colonial Nahuatl dictionaries or grammars appear to contain an entry for *tetzco-tl*, which would be the expected base morpheme for *tetzcoco*.[8] In the pictorial texts common in the pre-Hispanic and early colonial period, the sign for Tetzcoco often included stone (or stone mountain) and pot elements (see Figure 0.3). The word "Tetzcoco" does not mean "stone pot," however. Rather, these elements are pronunciation guides or mnemonic devices, approximations of the syllables that constitute the word "Tetzcoco." "Stone" in Nahuatl is *tetl*, while "pot" is *comitl*. The stone (or stone mountain) tells the reader that the first syllable, "tetz," sounds like

[7] Pomar 1975, 4.
[8] There are, however, morphemes with similar shapes, such as *te-tetz-tli* ("hard thing"), but they are missing the crucial internal *-co-* before the final locative *-co*. See Karttunen (1992, 235).

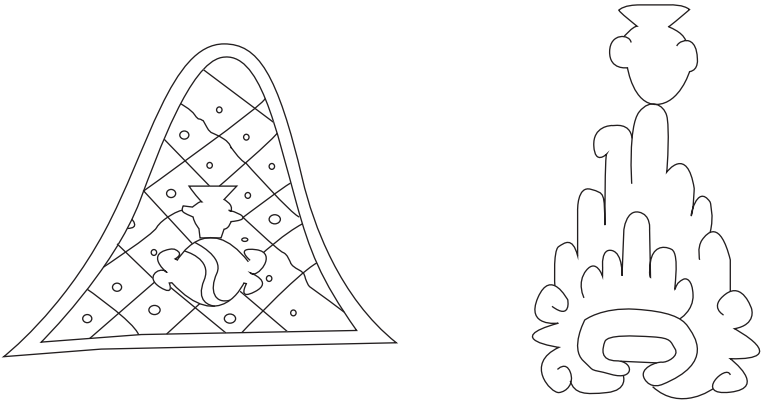

FIGURE 0.3 Signs for Tetzcoco from Codex Xolotl, map 5 (left), and Codex en Cruz (right). Line drawings by the author.

"tetl." The pot tells the reader that the second and third syllables, "coco," sound like "comitl."

In the period immediately preceding contact, the area was growing in population and increasingly urbanized. The altepetl of Tetzcoco proper had somewhere between 25,000 and 100,000 residents when the Spaniards arrived, and the Tetzcoca territory as a whole, both the Acolhua heartland and the more remote regions together, is estimated to have had around 500,000 inhabitants paying tribute to the Tetzcoca tlatoque.[9] Population growth was a sign of the economic prosperity that the region enjoyed, but the source of this prosperity was likely its more remote territories and their trade with and tribute to Tetzcoco, not the Acolhuacan region itself. Indeed, Leslie Lewis notes that "for all its eminence, Texcoco and the surrounding area lacked exploitable resources other than some agricultural products common to the entire Valley of Mexico and the Indian people who lived in the region."[10] The Acolhuacan heartland economy was based principally on food production, specifically maize.[11]

Tetzcoco's proximity to the lake did have economic benefits, however. In addition to being a source of food, the lake provided salt. When the saline waters of Lake Tetzcoco receded in dry periods, salts were left

[9] Offner 1983, 7, 17. Also Hicks 1982, 231.
[10] Lewis 1978, 126.
[11] Offner 1983, 17–18.

behind in the lakeshore soil that were extracted, formed into loaves, and traded widely.[12] Moreover, the lake provided an excellent means of transportation (by canoe) that was twenty-five times more efficient than transportation by land. According to Jerome Offner, "the lake system served as the major transportation artery of the Valley of Mexico."[13] Tetzcoco served as the entrepôt for trade from the east that sought to enter this artery.

While Tetzcoco's own dominions were sizable and prosperous, Tetzcoco is perhaps best known for its participation in the founding of the famed Triple Alliance with Mexico Tenochtitlan and Tlacopan, commonly known today as the "Aztec Empire." In the 1420s, leading Tetzcoca nobleman Nezahualcoyotl joined forces with these two polities against the then-dominant altepetl of Azcapotzalco in the western basin of Mexico (see Figure 0.1).[14] After an armed struggle the Azcapotzalca were defeated, and Nezahualcoyotl claimed the tlatoani title in Tetzcoco and ruled until his death in 1472. The alliance formed against Azcapotzalco proved to be lasting and profitable. Together, the members of the Triple Alliance militarily subdued vast expanses of central and coastal Mexico and constituted the greatest political entity in Mesoamerica at the time of European contact. Sources from the colonial period vary on the topic, but Mexico Tenochtitlan appears to have been militarily superior to the other two partners in the alliance. Tetzcoco's sphere of influence was limited to the northeastern quadrant of the Aztec dominions, and while Tetzcoco did receive tribute and other goods from joint conquests by the Triple Alliance, that tribute was funneled through Tenochtitlan.[15]

Though not Tenochtitlan's equal in matters of politics, Tetzcoco enjoys the reputation of having been the cultural and intellectual center of the Nahuatl-speaking world. Charles Gibson notes that "Nezahualcoyotl ... and his son and successor Nezahualpilli ... governed Acolhuacan with a cultural and imperial luxury described as surpassing even that of Tenochtitlan."[16] And the seventeenth-century

[12] Gibson 1964, 338. [13] Offner 1983, 8.
[14] Tlacopan, the third member of the alliance, was located in the western basin of Mexico near Azcapotzalco. And, like Azcapotzalco, Tlacopan was a member of the Tepaneca ethnic group. Tlacopan, however, resented the control of its more powerful Tepaneca neighbor and joined the Acolhuaque and Mexica to overthrow it.
[15] Offner 1983, 90. [16] Gibson 1964, 18.

mestizo chronicler of Tetzcoco, don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, asserts that in many matters, the tlatoque of Mexico Tenochtitlan and Tlacopan took their cue from Tetzcoco, "because the other two kings and heads of the empire were always accepting [Tetzcoco's] laws and form of government, because it seemed to them to be the best that had yet been created."[17]

Tetzcoco and its indigenous leaders occupied a central place in precontact Nahua Mesoamerica for over a century. Even today, Mexicans are cognizant of that greatness. The figure of Nezahualcoyotl, especially, is revered in modern Mexico, and his popularity stretches back centuries. As early as the sixteenth century, the Franciscan Motolinia [fray Toribio de Benavente] was heaping praise on Nezahualcoyotl as a gifted ruler. Alva Ixtlilxochitl continued in this vein in the early seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, the Jesuit Francisco Javier Clavijero described Nezahualcoyotl's Tetzcoco as the "Athens of Anahuac [central Mexico]." And in the nineteenth century, U.S. historian William H. Prescott equated Nezahualcoyotl with the biblical figures of David and Solomon. His reputation has only grown in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with scholars – including the eminent Mexican scholar Miguel León-Portilla – projecting an image of Nezahualcoyotl as a paragon of Mesoamerican cultural achievement.[18] In 1963, local leaders honored Nezahualcoyotl's memory by naming a newly incorporated suburb of Mexico City after him.[19] And his image has graced the one hundred peso note since the 1990s. Nezahualcoyotl and the Tetzcoca rulers loom large in the popular imagination even today.

[17] Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2:173. It should be noted, however, that Lee (2008, 96–97) convincingly argues that the idea that Nezahualcoyotl's Tetzcoco was culturally superior to Mexico Tenochtitlan is not a pre-Hispanic one, but comes instead from the colonial period and is a blatant misrepresentation of the pre-Hispanic past to serve colonial-era interests. Instead, he argues, Tetzcoco and Tenochtitlan were very similar in their "political, artistic, and legal institutions." Lee's reassessment of pre-Hispanic Tetzcoco has serious implications for our understanding of the precontact relationship between Tetzcoco and Tenochtitlan. Nevertheless, Tetzcoco was still a very powerful polity in Mesoamerica at the time of contact with Spaniards, even if it was not more powerful than Tenochtitlan.

[18] Lee 2008, 96–97.

[19] Sadly, Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl, adjacent to Mexico City's Benito Juárez International Airport in the Estado de México, is known today as a poor community plagued by gang violence.

While the precontact grandeur of Nezahualcoyotl's Tetzcoco has become legendary, colonial-era Tetzcoco is largely unknown to modern scholars. There exists substantial confusion over information as basic as the names of the nobles and when they were in power. Given Tetzcoco's prominent position in earlier times, this conspicuous lacuna in the historiography is surprising. Who were the heirs of Nezahualcoyotl, and how did his illustrious family fare under Spanish dominion? How did native leaders at the heart of the Spanish colonial system in Mexico survive the challenges of conquest and imperial control? What place in the Spanish order did they occupy, and did their financial fortunes endure?

Spanish authorities were quick to recognize Tetzcoco's importance as a precontact political center; it was one of only four indigenous communities in the basin of Mexico to be designated a *ciudad*, or city, in Spanish legal terms. The Spaniards also recognized the preeminence of Tetzcoco's precontact rulers; the names Nezahualcoyotl and Nezahualpilli were almost as familiar to colonial officials as the name of the Mexica ruler Moteucçoma (Montezuma). No one in the early years of the colony challenged Tetzcoco's eminence. But the forces unleashed by contact between Spaniards and the Tetzcoca were powerful. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, less than one hundred years after the Spaniards arrived, Tetzcoco was a mere shadow of its former self. As David Brading noted:

> By the close of the sixteenth century, [the indigenous nobles of Tetzcoco] could be observed ploughing the fields, obliged to gather a meager subsistence by the sweat of their brow, their sparse earnings reduced by demands for tribute from royal officials who refused to recognize their noble status.[20]

And Charles Gibson determined Tetzcoco to be the "most conspicuous case" of several in which "large and centrally located towns [in central Mexico] changed from an affluent condition to one of abject depression."[21]

The tragedy of European rule, then, was acutely felt in Tetzcoco in the sixteenth century. The altepetl suffered economic collapse, and its fortunes ebbed dramatically. But Brading's assertion that the hereditary nobility collapsed along with the city is untrue. The history of

[20] Brading 1991, 275. [21] Gibson 1964, 365.