PART I

SETTING THE STAGE

CHAPTER 1

DISCOVERING, UNCOVERING, AND INTERPRETING THE AZTEC WORLD

> Then he [King Ahuitzotl] called the stoneworkers and ordered them to finish the temple of their god as quickly as possible. Without delay they began to work on the stones that were lacking and carve the figures I saw in a painted manuscript, which were, in this manuscript, a sharp sacrificial stone and next to it an image of the goddess called Coyolxauh; and on the corners of the temple two statues with cruciform mantles, these made of rich feathers.
>
> Diego Durán 1994: 328; originally written 1581

This temple sat at the very heart of the Aztecs' empire, the *axis mundi* of their known world (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). Soon to be dedicated, in the year AD 1487, this version of the Huey Teocalli, or Great Temple, was the fifth full expansion of a humble construction erected in AD 1325. That first modest temple, built of reeds, wood, and mud, was the effort of a small, bedraggled, and unwelcome group of Mexica who had recently arrived in the Basin of Mexico in search of a new homeland and, in their eyes, their destiny.

The temple would experience one more expansion, in 1502. This was the temple seen and climbed by the Spaniard Hernán Cortés in his epic visit to the Mexica capital city of Tenochtitlan in November 1519 (Figure 1.3). Less than two years later, in August 1521, the great city fell to the Spanish conquerors, to be recast as Mexico City in the Spanish Empire's colonial jurisdiction of New Spain.

Those nearly two hundred years, from the settlement of Tenochtitlan in 1325 until its demise in 1521, saw the rapid growth of this immense urban center, from which radiated the greatest empire in the history of Mesoamerica. During its final hundred years this was a world politically and militarily dominated by the Mexica. Nonetheless, others in Mesoamerica (whether allies, subjects, or enemies) shared a similarly sophisticated civilization.

Drawing on their accomplished predecessors, the Mexica and their neighbors constructed massive temples and palaces, engineered astonishingly accurate public works such as aqueducts and a dike, and employed precise astronomical and mathematical knowledge in their city planning and architecture. They

created remarkable objects from stones, metals, feathers, shells, and myriad other materials for use in their personal and public lives. They applied clever cultivation techniques to increase food production and offset years of agricultural catastrophe. In addition to providing them with a cornucopia of useful resources, their knowledge of the natural world offered them a remarkable medical pharmacopoeia. These were a practical people, yet their beliefs extended well beyond the empirical universe into a teeming world of powerful gods and goddesses, enthralling myths and legends, and flamboyant public ceremonies. They wrote books based on a glyphic writing system and amassed impressive libraries. And the Mexica and their allies organized themselves socially, politically, and militarily to the extent that they dominated much of central and a part of southern Mexico by the time of Cortés's arrival.

With the Spanish conquest, this world was in part destroyed, in part transformed. Mexico City grew atop Tenochtitlan, viceroys supplanted Aztec kings, Spanish priests and ceremonies replaced their Aztec counterparts. Introduced Spanish industries, crops, and economic priorities took precedence over native ones. These and other traumatic events, impositions, and changes left only fragments of Aztec life behind to be discovered, uncovered, and interpreted over the successive five hundred years.

DISCOVERING AND UNCOVERING THE AZTEC WORLD

Those fragments of the Aztec world include pictorial codices, recorded oral histories and other accounts of the native survivors, massive and portable material objects, public and private architecture and engineering feats, and burials. Still today, about 1.5 million people speak the Nahuatl language, and additional features of native life have survived, some of them in remarkably sound fashion, most persistently in outlying areas of the Aztec realm. In all, these cultural elements experienced variable survival rates, depending initially on such factors as Spanish colonial policies, interests, and activities; native adaptations to the new lords of the land; geographical location; and happenstance. Later on in Mexican history, to the present time, more and more of the ancient Aztec world was uncovered and revealed through systematic archaeological, historical, epigraphic, art historical, linguistic, and ethnographic investigations based on evolving scientific techniques and theoretical approaches to understanding the past. And still, happenstance played (and continues to play) a role.

All of these approaches depend on a solid foundation of data, and the following section offers a brief (and necessarily selective) foray into the most important of these sources.[1] Students of Aztec civilization are particularly fortunate in having at their disposal a vast and diverse array of source material, ranging from primary written manuscripts, to stationary and portable physical remains, to the practices and beliefs of present-day Aztec descendants. It is,

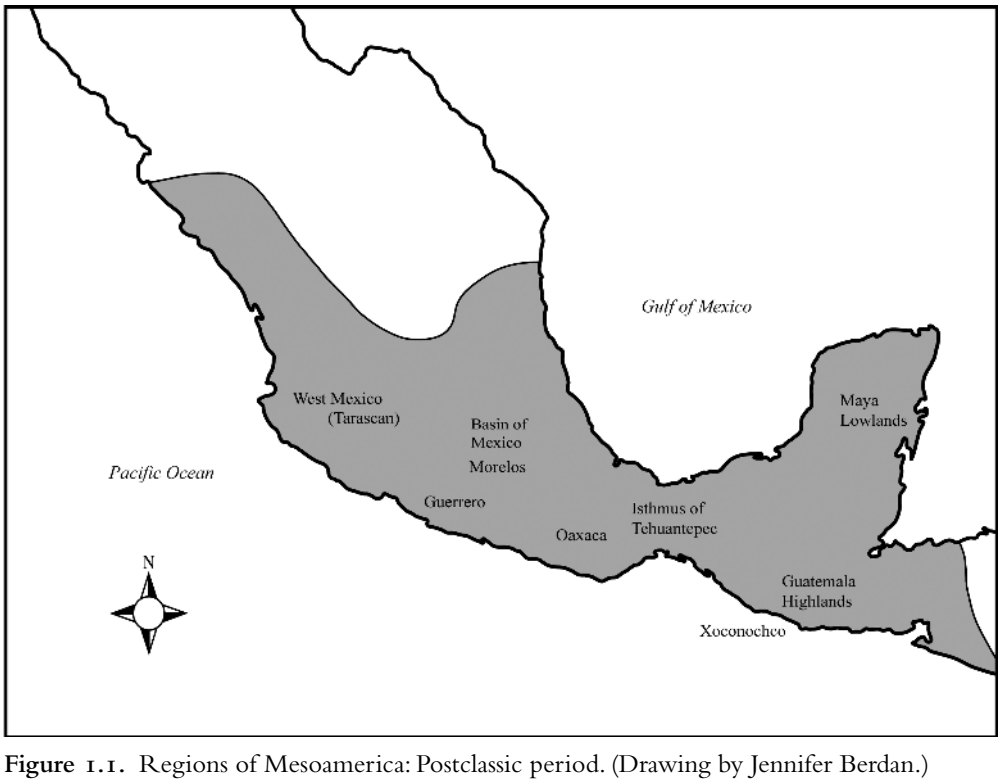

Figure 1.1. Regions of Mesoamerica: Postclassic period. (Drawing by Jennifer Berdan.)

indeed, a comforting reality that so many different sources of information can be pressed into service to unravel the intricacies and enigmas of Aztec life.

Pictorial Codices and Other Historical Documents

PICTORIAL CODICES

The Aztec elite were literate and produced vast numbers of pictorial codices. They had specialized books, professional scribes, and sophisticated techniques for recording their histories, cosmologies, ceremonies, calendrics, geography, royal genealogies, and economic matters. Only a handful of these pre-conquest manuscripts still exist, having survived the ravages of conquest and inquisition. In the Basin of Mexico, arguably only a single pictorial codex can claim a pre-conquest origin: the *Matrícula de Tributos* (Berdan 1980; Batalla Rosado 2007).[2] However, some other now-lost codices reappear, copied and modified, in the colonial period (such as the first two parts of the *Codex Mendoza*, the *Tira de la Peregrinación*, and the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*).[3] Innumerable others, now lost, peek through early colonial narratives and histories, having been seen and used by some of the most prolific sixteenth-century Spanish and native writers in Mexico. Diego Durán, quoted at the beginning of this

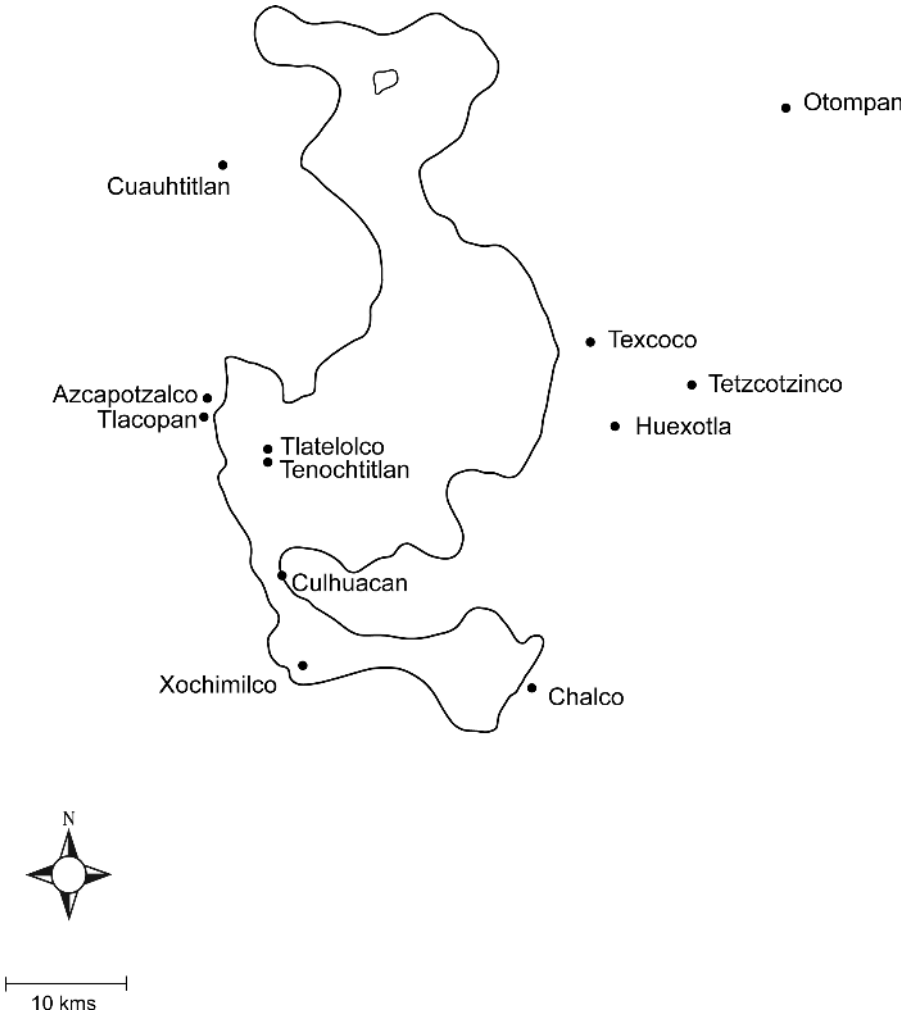

Figure 1.2. Aztec-period Basin of Mexico city-states mentioned in Chapter 1. (Drawing by Jennifer Berdan.)

chapter, is quite specific about his examination of such a codex, as are Juan de Torquemada (1969: vol. 1, 75, 77), Motolinía (1969: 2), Bernardino de Sahagún (León-Portilla 2002: 144–145, 163; Nicholson 1997: 4), and Alonso de Zorita[4] (1994: 87; see also Glass 1975: 20; Robertson 1994: 49). Native chroniclers of the colonial period such as Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1965: vol. 2, 173–181) and Chimalpahin (Schroeder 1991: 16, 21) also relied on these pictorial manuscripts for much of the content in their textual accounts.

The great majority of extant pictorial codices derive from colonial times, and there are scores of them (Boone 2000a: 11; Robertson 1994; Glass 1975; Glass and Robertson 1975). Although composed after the Spanish conquest, these manuscripts reveal much about the pre-Spanish Aztec world. Some explicitly recount Aztec life before the conquest, the historical ones moving almost seamlessly through

Figure 1.3. Existing steps of the final two stages of Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor. (Photograph by Frances Berdan.)

the conquest itself into the new colonial experience (e.g., Quiñones Keber 1995; Boone 2000a: 229, 247). Others record colonial matters that reflect continuing Aztec knowledge and practices concerning local histories, traditional community rights, maps and boundaries, family relations, naming, economic production, tribute duties, political order, herbal medicine, and even aspects of forbidden religious beliefs (e.g., Boone 2007, 2000a: 248; Glass 1975; Robertson 1994; Montes de Oca Vega et al. 2003; Prem 1974; Gates 1939; Berdan and Anawalt 1992; see Case 1.1). Most of these colonial pictorials are enhanced by the addition of handwritten glosses or explanations in Nahuatl and/or Spanish. These amplify and reinforce the glyphic presentation with textual details, although occasionally mistakes do creep in.[5] Nonetheless, the pictorial images themselves were composed largely by native scribes, trained in native traditions and projecting native styles (Robertson 1994: 9–10; Boone 2000a: 11–12). The extent of retention of native style and content is impressive considering the close Spanish supervision of the production of many of these codices. So, although composed in colonial times, this large pictorial corpus, viewed critically, offers valuable insights into pre-conquest Aztec life.

A particularly monumental colonial effort, resulting in an "ethnographic codex," was that produced by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and his Nahua collaborators and scribes during the middle to late sixteenth century. Combining Nahuatl text with pictorial imagery, this vast corpus of the *Florentine Codex* and *Primeros Memoriales* contains detailed information on matters such as gods and rituals, myths, rulership, kinship, ethnic groups, economic production, markets, natural history, and the Spanish conquest from the native point of view – indeed, anything (and more) that might be found in a modern-day ethnography (Sahagún 1950–1982, 1993; Baird 1993; León-Portilla 2002). While the images contain Spanish artistic and substantive elements (such as perspective and Spanish clothing and tools), they also are enriched throughout with Aztec glyphs that embellish the images with intriguing details[6] (Figure 1.4).

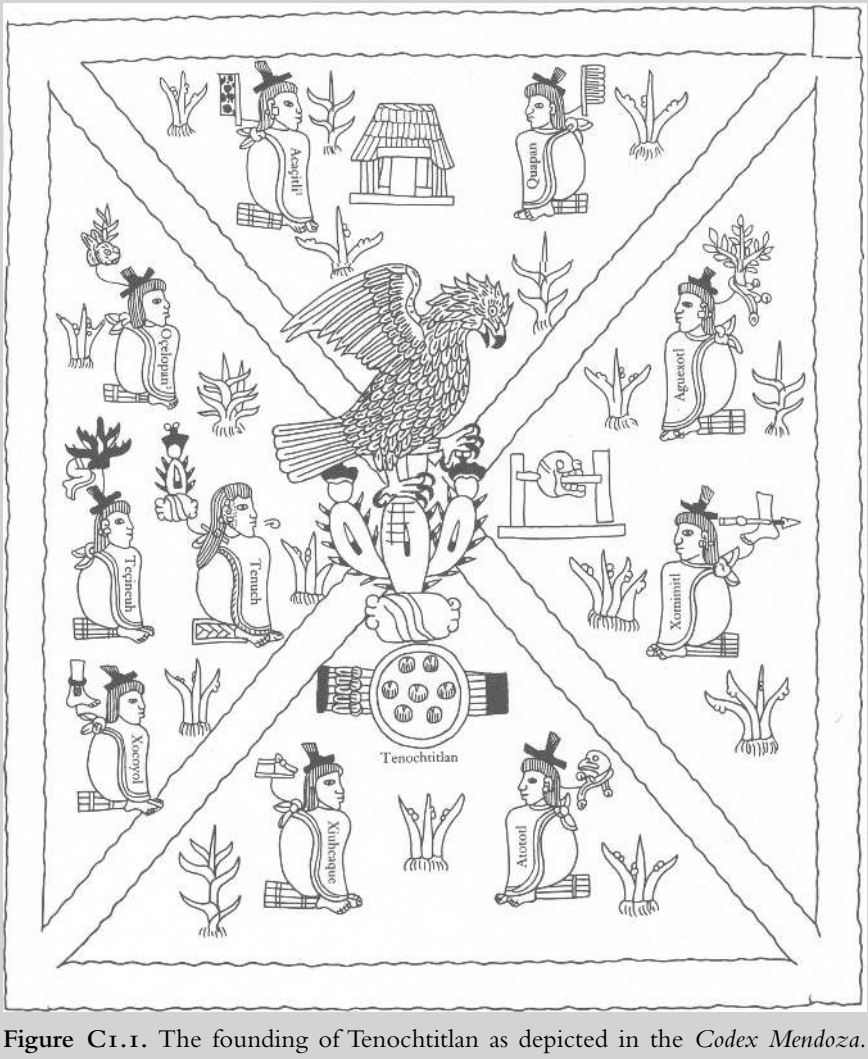

Figure C1.1. The founding of Tenochtitlan as depicted in the *Codex Mendoza*. (From Berdan and Anawalt 1992: vol. 4, folio 1r.)

CASE 1.1 *How It Survived 1: The* Codex Mendoza

Precious little is known of the provenience of any of the pre-Columbian and colonial codices. However, the partially known and rather haphazard history of one pictorial manuscript exemplifies the conditions under which such documents have survived – and highlights the astounding fact that any have survived at all.

It was twenty years after Tenochtitlan fell at the hands of Hernán Cortés and his thousands of native allies. King Charles I of Spain (Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor) demanded to know more precisely what his military forces had recently acquired. Like other conquered areas in the Americas, his new territory in central Mexico, now the colonial world of New Spain, must be governed, its

resources exploited, and its native people converted to Christianity. To obtain necessary information, the king's representative in New Spain (Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza) commissioned the production of a pictorial codex, which consisted of three parts: a history of Aztec conquests, tributes paid to the Aztecs by geographical province, and an account of Aztec daily life, from cradle to grave.

A probable history of this *Codex Mendoza* can be re-created, although "the evidence is often ambiguous and conflicting" (Nicholson 1992: 10). The year was most likely 1541, and the place was colonial Mexico City, built atop the vanquished Mexica capital city of Tenochtitlan. The manuscript's creation relied on several skilled native scribes, who copied the first two parts from preconquest pictorials but possibly developed the third part anew. Their efforts were overseen by one or more Spanish clerics, who discussed the pictorial content with the scribes and added glosses in Nahuatl and Spanish, and somewhat more extended explanations in Spanish.

As time passed, the job became more hurried, since it was necessary to send the document by mule train from the highland Basin of Mexico down to coastal Veracruz in time to catch the scheduled sailing of the treasure ships to Spain. As fate would have it, somewhere on the high seas the ship was set upon by French men-of-war; the French succeeded in taking the Spanish ship along with the *Codex Mendoza* and unknown other treasures. The next we know, the codex was in the hands of the French king's cosmographer, André Thevet, who twice signed the manuscript in 1553. It then appears that the codex was purchased in 1587 by the Englishman Richard Hakluyt for 20 French crowns – Thevet and Hakluyt were acquainted, both being avid collectors and disseminators of travelers' accounts. Hakluyt retained the codex until his death in 1616, willing it to Samuel Purchas. When Purchas died in 1626, his son inherited the document, which somehow passed by 1654 to Purchas's friend and collector, Englishman John Selden. Five years later it entered the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England, with two other of Selden's Mexican manuscripts. There it languished until seeing the light of publication in Lord Kingsborough's *Antiquities of Mexico* (1831–1848). It resides in the Bodleian still.

Beyond the pictorial, much of the oral and written record of this partially lost, partially transformed world became embedded in a variety of Spanish and Nahuatl documents produced in great abundance during the colonial period in Mexico. While sometimes augmented by pictorial images, these documents were primarily textual and were composed in the alphabetic writing introduced by the Spaniards.

SPANISH DOCUMENTS

Written sources reflecting Aztec life but composed in the Spanish language include eyewitness accounts of the Spanish conquest, early colonial chronicles and histories, and censuses and other administrative, legal, and economic documentation. The five letters of Hernán Cortés (1928) and the "true"[7] history of the conquest by one of his soldiers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1963), are well

known and have been heavily mined for information on the Aztecs. Cortés's letters-dispatches were written to the Spanish monarch as the conquest itself was going on; Díaz del Castillo's account was composed by memory by the aging *conquistador* more than forty years after the events he describes. Although both of these contain their own biases, they also provide the discerning reader with intriguing details of Aztec life at the point of contact with the Spaniards. These accounts are augmented by the shorter and less-used relations of Andrés de Tapia (1993), Francisco de Aguilar (1993), and an "Anonymous Conqueror" (1971), whose actual participation in the conquest has been questioned (Warren 1973: 67–68).

Shortly after the conquest and throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Spanish friars began accumulating and recording detailed information on indigenous history and culture, with the primary purpose of aiding their conversion activities. A pioneer among these was Andrés de Olmos, whose *huehuetlatolli*[8] and 1547 grammar (1972) are all that has survived – his compendious works were already lost in the sixteenth century. However, he provided the inspiration for later sixteenth-century writers such as Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía 1969, 1971), Jerónimo de Mendieta (1980), Juan de Torquemada (1969), and our renowned Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún, who also wrote an extended paraphrase of his monumental Nahuatl-language work (1956). Another track of sixteenth-century colonial writers who drew on each other's work (or some earlier sources) included Diego Durán (1971, 1994), a Dominican friar who compiled an Aztec imperial history as well as an account of native gods and rituals; Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc (1975a, 1975b); José de Acosta (2002); and Juan de Tovar (Kubler and Gibson 1951).[9]

A great deal of secular writing produced in the colonial sixteenth and seventeenth centuries considerably augments our understanding of pre-conquest Aztec life. These range from the lawyer and judge Alonso de Zorita's relation written "to give the Spanish Crown information regarding the government and tribute system of the Indians" (Warren 1973: 73) to the *protomédico general* Francisco Hernández's wide-ranging natural history (1959). This latter investigator traveled in New Spain from 1571 to 1577 recording descriptive information on native plants and animals, interspersing interesting details on native customs along the way.[10] Another particularly useful collection of documents is the *Relaciones geográficas* of the latter half of the sixteenth century (1578–1585); some of these textual sources include interesting and informative maps (Mundy 1996). The Spanish crown was understandably interested in the nature and value of its new holdings across the sea, and these geographic relations were designed to inform and enlighten the Spanish Council of the Indies. They consisted of a standard questionnaire carried by Spanish officials to communities throughout Spain's new realm. Some of the most relevant questions (and responses) pertained to local demography and history,

Figure 1.4. A feather prepared for an elaborate mosaic by a skilled featherworker is identified as that of a green *tzinitzcan* (trogonorus) bird by the inclusion of a human rear end, representing the sound *tzin-*. (After Sahagún 1950–1982: book 9, illus. 108. Drawing by Jennifer Berdan.)

others to regional resources and trade, and still others to religious inclinations (Acuña 1982–1988; Cline 1964). Beyond these relations, the archives are bursting with other official reports, tax records, and legal records that embed "the complaints and pleadings of indigenous litigants, drawings of domestic compounds, genealogies, wills, and the testimony of hundreds of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Indians" (Kellogg 1995: 36).

Some mestizos wrote important historical chronicles in Spanish in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Foremost among these were Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1965), a descendant of the pre-Hispanic rulers of Texcoco; Juan Bautista Pomar (1891), likewise a Texcocan royal descendant; and Diego Muñoz Camargo (1947), a Tlaxcallan noble. Each of these was interested chiefly in promoting the historical legitimacy and contemporary primacy of his own city-state under the new colonial political regime.

NAHUATL DOCUMENTS

The Spanish friars were diligent in teaching native nobles the alphabetic style of Spanish writing. By a decade following the conquest, literacy among the natives took a new form, many Aztec scribes having made the transition from glyph and oral rendition to alphabet. As a result, an impressively large and rich corpus of documents was composed alphabetically in the Nahuatl language. Major chronicles, histories, and oral literary forms were transcribed into this format, Christian catechisms and scripts were produced for purposes of conversion, and myriad Nahuatl-language documents recording day-to-day matters such as lawsuits, censuses, land disputes and other complaints, inheritance, town council meetings, market taxes, and even personal letters found useful niches in the colonial world.

Three particularly significant histories, as chronicles or annals, survive in the Nahuatl language. The most extensive of these was produced in a series of documents by a Chalcan with the formidable name of Don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin – Chimalpahin for short (Schroeder 1991; Lockhart et al. 2006). The *Codex Chimalpopoca*, hailing from the more northerly Basin of Mexico town of Cuauhtitlan, provides a year-count record from the perspective of that town (Bierhorst 1992), and Fernando