

Inception

Mixing Epistemologies

Narratives of the past are most often very different from the lines of evidence used to create them. Scholars from a variety of disciplines create narratives of past events and processes based on historical documents, archaeological artifacts, oral histories, paintings, and a variety of lines of evidence. Still, scholars interpret the evidence, identify actors, describe settings, and narrate plots that unfold just like a story, and they do it based on evidence that often hardly looks like a story. How do we formulate narratives of the past? How does an archaeologist look at a bag full of broken pots and plates and come up with a narrative about commensal politics in an indigenous town? How does a historian, or any other scholar working with written documents, find a few documents relating to indigenous land claims and come up with a description of ways that indigenous people thought about Spaniards? How can we combine the interpretive strategies used by archaeologists and historians to discover more about the past?

In this book, I examine the ways in which scholars in different disciplines move from evidence to narratives about the past. Much philosophical and theoretical work has focused on asking, how do we know which narrative of the past is true (or correct, or closer to the truth, or more acceptable, depending on what makes the scholar comfortable)? Instead, I ask not how we evaluate a narrative (or a hypothesis, for those more comfortable with scientific language) but rather how we come up with a narrative of the past in the first place. Scholars have pointed out that a distinction between a phase of discovery, in which one would formulate a narrative of the past, and a phase of justification, in which one would “test” a hypothesis, is untenable (e.g., Shelley 2003:85), and I agree. Still,

postprocessual archaeologists have argued that we need a description of how we do our work that is not just based on hypothesis testing, and this is an attempt at such a description by focusing on how we formulate narratives of the past.

The focus on archaeology as science and on hypothesis testing has led to productive discussions and healthy debates about the discipline, the nature, potential, and limitations of the evidence, and which explanatory models are more appropriate for archaeology (Fogelin 2007; Renfrew 1994; Wylie 2002). Perhaps historians have been less interested in describing history as science and in describing their craft as a matter of hypothesis testing, but descriptions of history as hypothesis testing exist (e.g., McCullagh 2004). The scientific model has been very powerful in shaping how many archaeologists discuss research and present their findings. Archaeologists who have championed hypothesis testing have explicitly argued against formulating models without the reputed rigor of the hypothetico-deductive model, and their position is summarized by Wiley (2002:4–5): “Explanatory hypotheses should stand at the beginning of inquiry, as its point of departure, rather than emerge inductively at the conclusion of the enterprise after all the data are collected and analyzed.”

Still, hypothesis testing is not the only model that can explain how archaeologists interpret data. Lars Fogelin (2007) writes about “inference to the best explanation” as a common process in which archaeologists take all their data and theoretical beliefs and make inferences that can best explain all, or as much of the data as possible. “Science does not have a monopoly on reasoning,” Fogelin (2007:610) argues, when explaining that inference to the best explanation is not dependent on testing hypotheses or empirical generalizations, but instead, it is a creative process of explaining data using many lines of evidence at once. In my experience – and I am quite aware that this is an unusual confession to make explicit in writing – I have at times come up with a hypothesis after having collected and studied the data. Data I obtained in the field rendered some of my original research questions entirely inadequate but fit new questions better, and I have adjusted the questions or rewrote them entirely to be able to come up with hypotheses that I could have tested. My point is that we can come up with descriptions of archaeology that do not depend on hypothesis testing as a model, and that may help us integrate our inferential practices and findings better. My goal in this book is to look for better ways of integrating data and findings across disciplines.

Many scholars have called for interdisciplinary research that combines evidence from history, archaeology, art history, and other fields. In fact,

the combination of evidence defines historical archaeology as a discipline. Samuel Wilson (1993) has pointed out that combining evidence is not simple, because it requires what he calls *mixing epistemologies*, or combining the interpretive processes, questions, criteria for evaluating evidence, and other aspects of knowledge that are particular to different disciplines. Given the disparate data, criteria for evaluating data, and questions in different disciplines, mixing epistemologies has been productive but also difficult (see also Postgate 1994:176; Stahl 2001:15–19). Patricia Galloway (2006:43) uses actor-network theory to argue that there are privileged passages of knowledge, or “habits of scientific practice, taken for granted by scientists, and completely invisible to a member of the public (or another discipline).” As researchers learn the habits and paradigms of their own discipline – in this case history or archaeology – the ways in which knowledge is generated become obscured for people outside their discipline, much like a black box that could explain the process of knowledge production, but remains inaccessible to those outside each discipline (see also Lucas 2012:16). This book is an attempt at opening the black box in archaeology and history of Spanish colonialism in Central Mexico to achieve a greater understanding of the disciplines and the substantive case studies.

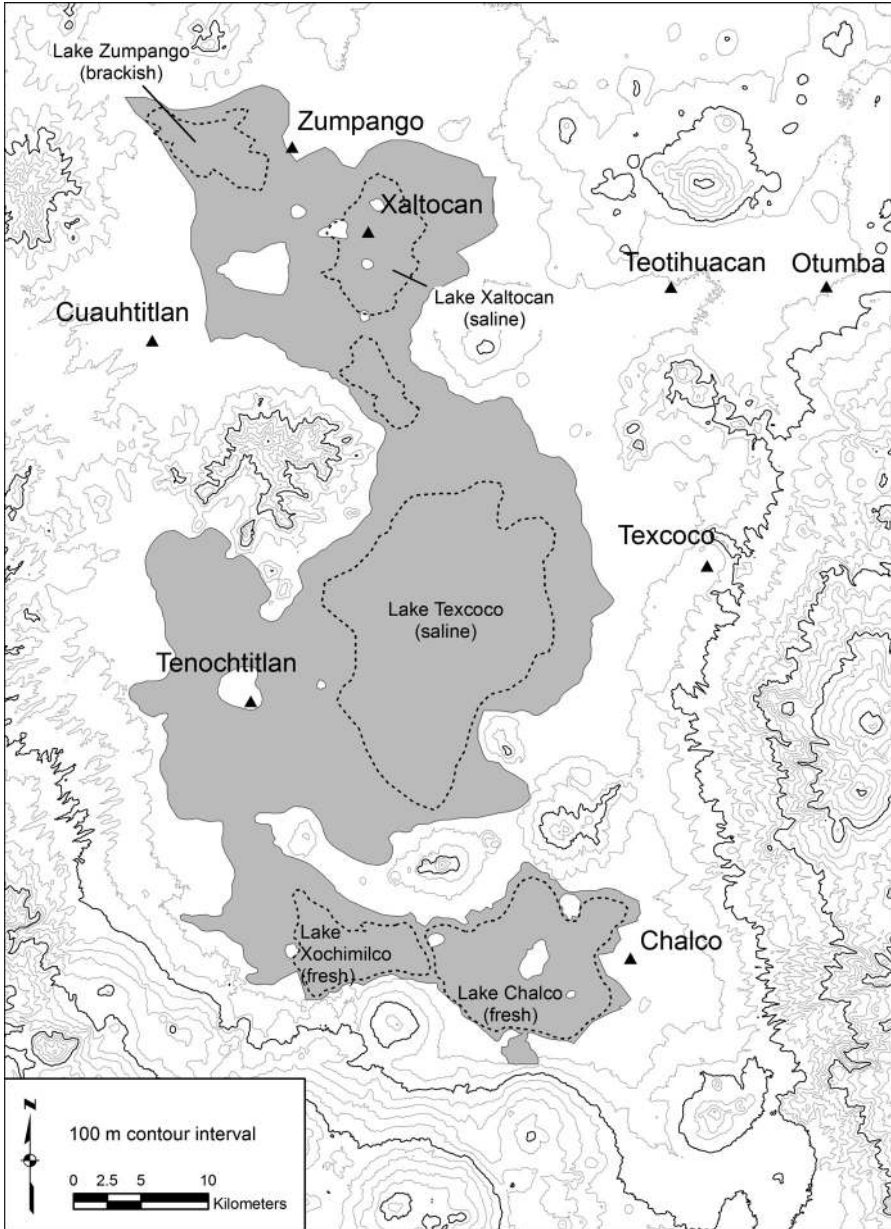
Social History and Anthropological Archaeology

My focus is mainly on social history and anthropological archaeology. Social history can be defined broadly as the historical study of the everyday life of all kinds of social groups (especially, but not exclusively, lower social classes) and of their long-term social, cultural, and economic patterns (Hobsbawm 1971). It has as a goal the study of people, their ideas or mentalities, the material aspects of their lives, and issues of power and politics. Ultimately, social history studies the link between those ideological, material, and political aspects of social life, which are said to change or persist over long periods of time (Cardoso and Pérez Brignoli 1999:289–296). For the purposes of this book, I narrow down the definition of history as a text-based discipline. The primary evidence used in history consists overwhelmingly of texts. The difference between reading about material culture, looking at images of objects, and holding an object in one’s hand to study it, is important; thus, reading documents that mention material culture falls under the definition of history in this book. Historians have developed an interest in material culture for many years, but they tend to “study material culture through texts – they do

not need to go to the things themselves” (Lucas 2012:22) for their study to be a historical study of material culture. I discuss the historical basis for the distinction between history and archaeology later.

Defining social history might seem unnecessary given that a lot of historiography, as it is currently practiced, clearly falls within the broad category of social history. But I draw attention to the definition of social history because its goals and topics are remarkably similar to the goals and topics of interest to most anthropological archaeologists. To study the daily life of people in the past, archaeologists focus, by definition, on material culture. Archaeologists are interested in the material aspects of daily life because material culture is the main source of evidence in archaeology, and also because many archaeologists and other scholars share the idea that material culture is important in social life, whether as part of economic life; as a medium to shape ideologies (e.g., DeMarrais et al. 1996); as a source of ideas (e.g., Renfrew 2004); or as a means for obtaining, challenging, and otherwise transforming power (e.g., A. Smith 2003). Material culture is an important part of how people experience the world. For the purposes of this book, archaeology is defined as the study of the past using primarily material remains instead of, or in addition to historical documents. Archaeologists often supplement their research with historical documents, but generally do not consider them as part of the archaeological record (Lucas 2012:22) or as a defining aspect of their discipline, except in the case of historical archaeology, defined by the combination of material evidence, texts, and even oral history.

To develop this description and model for archaeology and history, I draw from my own research on colonialism in two sites in Central Mexico: Mexico City (the main focus of Spanish colonization in Mexico, south of Xaltocan) and Xaltocan (an indigenous town, north of Mexico City) (Map I.1). Writing an archaeology and a history of Central Mexico is complex for many reasons related to the case study itself and to the evidence available. Although the Spanish conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlan took place in 1521, the conquest of the Aztec empire in many ways did not represent an absolute end point of an era and a clear beginning of another (Charlton 1968; Gibson 1964; Lockhart 1992; Restall 2003:64–76; Rodríguez-Alegría 2012a, 2012b; Schroeder 2007:9–13). Many of the narratives of what happened in the colonial period that are examined in this book begin decades, even centuries, before the conquest. Many do not have a clear starting point at all, leaving this book without a clear baseline.



MAP I.1. Basin of Mexico, showing some important Aztec sites. Map drawn by Wesley Stoner.

6 *The Archaeology and History of Colonial Mexico*

To write this history, we have a rich body of evidence. The written record is plentiful, consisting of innumerable documents found in archives in Mexico, Spain, and other countries. The documents contain information on legal matters, history, religion, politics, the economy, daily life, and a number of other subjects. The written record includes texts in Spanish, in indigenous languages (especially Nahuatl), and many images of people, places, deities, fauna, flora, and other aspects of daily life. Often the images and the text provide different kinds of information that complement or contradict each other (Boone 2008). Social history has proven very fruitful and productive through the use of this rich documentary record. The recent wave of studies that focus on sources written in indigenous languages has reshaped how we think about the conquest and the colonial period in Mexico, showing clearly the incalculable value of all kinds of textual records (Lockhart 1991, 1992, 1999; Restall 2003, 2012) and pictorial histories as well (e.g., Boone 2000).

Still, the extensive documentary record of the colonial period has some limitations. Some of the most important sources on indigenous daily life were written decades after the Spanish conquest and they include many references to daily life in the pre-Hispanic past (e.g., Durán 1994; Sahagún 2008), making it difficult to gauge change and continuity in indigenous life and society. Many of the comments about daily life and history in the pre-Hispanic period contained in these documents may in fact refer to postconquest developments. Historical sources tend to focus on instances in which people interacted with the state, or “where private lives crossed the public record” (Van Young 1999:238). As a result, historical sources often contain very limited information on indigenous towns that were not foci of Spanish colonization, as is the case of Xaltocan, a town that is of primary importance in this book. These limitations on the information included have made it difficult to understand life among indigenous people and other groups in rural areas (Hoberman and Socolow 1996). They also contain useful but limited information on aspects of daily life such as material culture (including items that were used daily: cutting tools, plates, bowls, items of clothing, etc.), activities and work (including cooking, housework, agriculture, eating practices, child rearing, etc.), technological change, and activities that were routine and taken for granted by those who wrote the documents. This book focuses in part on some of the aspects of colonial life in Mexico that are not well documented in the historical record, such as life in Xaltocan (a rural indigenous town), material culture, and eating practices. This book also focuses on some aspects of daily life that are well documented in the historical record but

that can be understood with more clarity by incorporating archaeological evidence into their study, such as the material lives of Spanish colonizers, and the relationship between colonizers and indigenous people in colonial Mexico City.

Archaeological data can enrich the body of evidence used to understand life in colonial Mexico. Archaeological material (including stone tools, ceramics, clay figurines, architecture, faunal and botanical remains, and others) from the colonial era can be found in urban and rural areas all over Central Mexico, including Mexico City (e.g., Charlton et al. 2005; Kepecs and Alexander 2005; Matos Moctezuma 2003; Rodríguez-Alegría 2005a, 2005b; Palka 2009). These remains give us an idea of the materiality of everyday life, and they serve as the basis for reconstructing daily life beyond the information that can be found in historical documents. Archaeological data also have a greater time depth than colonial documents, and they help extend our discussions of everyday life in the colonial period deep into the pre-Hispanic past (e.g., Brumfiel 1991, 2001; Rodríguez-Alegría 2008a, 2008b, 2012b). They also tend to include the remains of people from all social strata, ethnicities, and so forth, representing a wide variety of people.

Archaeological data have their limitations also. Sites are often disturbed or even destroyed by urban growth, making it difficult to recover information from undisturbed contexts. Some sites are currently buried under the sidewalks and modern architecture of Mexico City, and under rural houses and towns, making it difficult to excavate in these areas. It is often challenging to develop chronologies, given the constant destruction of archaeological contexts. It is also difficult to make inferences from archaeological material if the contexts are disturbed. Archaeologists often have a hard time understanding who owned and who used different kinds of material culture, making inference frustrating unless one can figure out how to tie material culture to people.

To overcome the limitations of the archaeological record and learn as much as possible about the sites where they are working and the material culture they recovered, archaeologists typically use historical sources. This is clearly one of the biggest strengths of archaeology: the incorporation of different lines of evidence. But all disciplines, not just archaeology, can benefit from the integration of information and insights from varied sources, and from a true integration rather than just sampling bits of data or insights cursorily. An excellent example of the possibilities of synergy between archaeology, history, as well as art history and ethnography is a recent volume titled *Ethnic Identity in Nahua Mesoamerica*

(Berdan et al. 2008), in which a variety of scholars deal with the complex topic of ethnicity. The different scholars write chapters that showcase their disciplinary strengths, but they also act as equal opportunity employers, using data and insights from other disciplines when they help enhance discovery or make their observations more rigorous. The type of synergy they achieve comes from literacy and knowledge of each other's fields, and from having collaborated in seminars and conferences examining the topic of ethnicity, underscoring the importance of education in bringing interdisciplinary work to fruition.

But works that integrate knowledge as thoroughly as *Ethnic Identity in Nahua Mesoamerica* are exceptional, highlighting how difficult it is to integrate history and archaeology. When integrating information from different sources, scholars must resist the tendency to accept the findings from either history or archaeology uncritically, which can be challenging at times, depending on the training and inclinations of the scholar. Archaeologists have been critiqued in the past for what was perceived as an overwhelming trust of historical sources and skepticism of archaeological data. For example, Feinman (1997) writes that “archaeologists, regardless of paradigmatic affiliation, tend to overvalue documents at the expense of archaeological data,” a charge levied by others as well (e.g., Champion 1990; Moreland 2001a; Thurston 1997). Scholars must also resist the temptation to choose bits of data from history or archaeology that support their conclusions without taking into account contradictory information (e.g., Brumfiel 2011; Feinman 1997; Kepecs 1997a; Postgate 1994:176). This practice can take the form of relying too much on historical documents to provide explanations for archaeological data, rather than formulating explanations with archaeological data that are independent of historical documents (Brumfiel 2011:53; Kepecs 1997a).

Times are changing, and many archaeologists are working to overcome this reliance on documents and provide new visions of the past with the use of archaeological data (Morehart 2012a; Palka 2009; Van Buren 2010). A main goal of this book is to build on the efforts of archaeologists to enhance discovery of the past by combining archaeological and historical evidence to discover more about the past.

The productivity of recent scholarship that draws inference from historical and archaeological sources must be commended, especially because of the widely documented tendency to give epistemological priority to written documents as sources of information. As early as the seventeenth century, Danish antiquarian Ole Worm (1588–1654) gave texts greater emphasis in reconstructing the past in comparison to

material evidence, which he considered useful only if there were no texts to supply information (Moreland 2001a:111; Randsborg 2000:216). In 1898, Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos made explicit a distinction between texts and things in their *Introduction to the Study of History*, their seminal work on historical methods. After Langlois and Seignobos developed a distinction between “material traces (i.e., artifact or monument) and psychological traces (i.e., oral or written testimony)” (Lucas 2012:25), they focused solely on psychological traces and their use in historical methodology. Several archaeologists whose work is considered foundational in the discipline, including Gordon Childe and Leroi-Gourhan, also gave secondary status to material remains vis-à-vis historical sources (Lucas 2012:25–26).

Still, the separation between archaeology and history, and the primacy given to documents, has never been absolute in some academic traditions. In some regions, historians rarely take advantage of insights derived from archaeology (e.g., Stahl 2001:15), whereas in other regions, historians are likely to use archaeological evidence, but archaeologists may be more reluctant to use historical sources (e.g., Lucas 2012:21; Trautman and Sinopoli 2002). Thus, the greater importance to historical documents is neither “natural” to history nor required for a sound methodology in any discipline. It is merely a matter of tradition and practice.

In cases in which documents are given primacy over material evidence, the hierarchy of lines of evidence may require explanation. Some have argued that texts are given more importance simply because history is older than archaeology as an academic discipline, and therefore better established (Moreland 2001a). Others have argued that we live in a logocentric world, where words are seen to have authority and specificity and material culture is seen to require interpretations that are less specific (Moreland 2001a:11–12). Perhaps it is simply that texts can sometimes contain information that already looks like the story we are trying to reconstruct, in the case of narrative texts. They are more compatible with what we consider history (Hendon 2004:308). Or perhaps in our educational system we grow accustomed to knowledge formation from historical documents, but we are not used to engaging with archaeological data (Galloway 1991:455). The various scholars who have attempted to explain why historical texts are often afforded greater importance in reconstructing the past may disagree on their explanations, and the reasons for this trend are complex and historically situated. One of the goals of this volume is to stimulate further discussion about how to enhance discovery by combining lines of evidence.

Metaphor and Common Ground

I argue that to achieve a greater collaboration between the disciplines, we must draw attention away from evidence in and of itself and focus on the strategies that we use to create models or narratives out of evidence. Clearly we must not entirely lose sight of the evidence, because different interpretive strategies imply different ways of relating to evidence. This variation can enhance discovery and enrich our knowledge of the historical past, but my interest is in finding out commonalities. Despite their variation, interpretive processes often have two factors in common: they often produce narratives about the past or ways of representing the past, and they do so through metaphorical strategies.

The first observation, that models of the past are often narrative forms, is important, even though it is not the main subject of analysis in this book. Of course, this claim needs to be qualified carefully: not all products of historiography, and certainly not all products of archaeological work are in narrative form. Different genres of scholarly writing may purposefully avoid narrative form, including some ethnographic writing and some archaeological reports and scientific texts produced by archaeologists. The avoidance of narrative in favor of the ethnographic present or other nonnarrative forms of writing has sometimes been favored as a way of giving scientific rigor to scholarly texts in part through the form of the text and perceived lack of subjective and affective bias in scientific writing (Vansina 1987:435). Photographs, drawings of artifacts, maps, tables, and exhibits come to mind as products that are nonnarrative and that often accompany narratives provided by the author or elicit stories and narratives from viewers. Furthermore, it is difficult to sustain the idea that audiences are passive recipients of scholarly narratives. The diverse publics who read the products of historiography also may complete the narrative on their own, filling gaps in the narrative provided by scholars, or even making their own narratives and ideas out of the material provided.

Still, the narrative form predominates in the presentation of history for different reasons. Elizabeth Boone (2000:13) draws attention to the need to structure the past to arrive at what we consider history when she writes that “the past becomes history when it is organized ... We organize and structure event to create threads of comprehension.” Rather than just providing facts, the narrative itself provides meaning and the context in which to interpret that meaning (Tonkin 1992:6; White 1987:20). Hayden White (1973, 1987), Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), and others