In Search of Aztlan:

An Investigation of the Origins of the Nahua Migrations

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Abstract

The Aztec migration histories do not clearly differentiate between myth and history, for there was no such distinction in the Mesoamerican worldview. This raises a number of questions as to the historicity of various aspects of the codices, most notably, the identity of Aztlan, the ancient Aztec homeland. Based on the nature and content of these ethnohistorical documents, as well as linguistic analyses and glottochronological estimates, there is compelling evidence that the Nahua migrations did in fact take place. As any migration must start somewhere, it stands to reason that Aztlan and its associated places, Teoculhuacan and Chicomozoc, were inspired by a real location, most likely in the Bajío region, which saw significant emigration in the Epiclassic period. It is my intention to use the grant in conducting a non-intrusive archaeological survey in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, the theorized origin point of the migrations. By investigating and analyzing Cerro Culiacán and the greatly under-studied archaeological sites of Guanajuato, I hope to shed new light on the Aztec migration histories by establishing a link between the architectural designs of the Bajío and the Valley of Mexico, tangible evidence for the origin of the Nahua migrations.
Biographical Sketch

For as long as I can remember, I have had a deep fascination with the past. As a young boy, my favorite place to visit was the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. In the gallery of Pre-Columbian artifacts, I would marvel at the treasures and tools of bygone cultures, physical testaments to a history we are still writing and rewriting to this day. My boyhood dreams of adventure, of forgotten cities and ruined temples, have since been refocused through an academic lens, but the thrill of discovery remains as captivating as ever. Today, I am pursuing a major in history and minors in archaeology, anthropology, and Latin American studies. I am also a member of the Cornell Anthropology Exchange, and enjoy going on historical and archaeological outings with the club. My studies thus far have mostly concerned the Americas, with a focus on Mesoamerica. In my time at Cornell, I have taken every class offered on Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and South America, as well as several on the colonial period. Studying under Professor Henderson and planning this project with him has been a particular highlight of my career, as he is equally interested in these subjects but far more knowledgeable. I have great expectations for this proposed project, and hope that the research paper I intend on writing will be the first of many.
Statement of Purpose

Although the Aztecs had established themselves as the dominant political power in central Mexico at the time of European contact, the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of the Triple Alliance were not natives of the Valley of Mexico. In both oral and written histories the Nahua trace their origin to a mythic homeland somewhere to the north-west known as Aztlan. In fact, the term "Aztec" is derived from the Nahuatl aztecah, meaning "people from Aztlan." Though Aztlan is typically treated as a purely mythological place of origin, ethnohistorical and linguistic evidence indicate that a southeastern migration of Nahua peoples into central Mexico from the Bajio most likely occurred, and it stands to reason that Aztlan is more than mere myth, but the memory of an actual point of origin for the historic migrations.

Migration stories are featured in seven different Aztec histories: the Codices Aubin, Azcatitlan, Boturini, Mexicanus, Telleriano-Remensis, and Ríos, and the Sigüenza Map.¹ Though each differs in some regard from the others, the histories all begin at Aztlan, with the exception of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis and Codex Ríos. Aztlan is always depicted as an island in the center of a lake with a variable number buildings, one of which is larger and likely representative of a temple (Fig. 1).² On the shore next to the lake is Culhuacan, literally "place of those with ancestors." This Culhuacan is distinct from the altepetl of the same name in the Valley of Mexico, and prose sources refer to it as Teoculhuacan, the prefix teo- signifying "wonderful" or "divine." Teoculhuacan is depicted as a hill with a curling top, though whether the curved hill of Teoculhuacan represents an altepetl or a literal hill is uncertain. The Codex Boturini and Codex Azcatitlan depict Huitzilopochtli inside a cave within Teoculhuacan,

¹ Navarrete, 31-32
² Boone, 214
suggesting the latter. Teoculhuacan is frequently linked to Aztlan in prose sources, and the two are said to be alternate names for the same place in Durán's *History of the Indies of New Spain*.\(^3\) Chicomoztoc, the next major destination of the Colhua Mexica's exodus, was also conflated with Teoculhuacan and Aztlan. Chicomoztoc translates to "seven caves" and is generally depicted as a seven-chambered cave with one main opening. The seven caves have been associated with the multiple tribes who accompanied the Mexica on their migration, as well as the seven openings of the human body.\(^4\) Chicomoztoc is also present in the mythologies of other Mesoamerican groups as a mythic place of origin, and is depicted in documents such as the Cuauhtinchan Map 2, Lienzo of Tlapiltepec, Selden Roll, Codex Vienna, and Codex Zouche-Nuttall.

The next stops on the Mexica migration, Tamoanchan, Cuexectcatlichocayan, Coaticamac, and Coatepetl, have not been identified with actual locations. However, Tula, the real-world Toltec site, also referred to as Tollan, figures prominently in all sources as a destination during the migration. It is here the Mexica, formerly characterized as Chichimec hunter-gatherers, learned the ways of civilization from the Toltecs. From Tula, the Mexica continued their journey and reached the Valley of Mexico, and from here the migration accounts are firmly grounded in known real-world locations (Fig. 2). The *altepetls* visited by the Mexica within central Mexico are all relatively close to one another, and thus it would be a logical assumption that the locations visited prior to Tula were not vastly distant. It is important to note that although the codices show the migration as a set of clear and concise movements, a real migration would not have been such a directed process, but a more gradual population dispersal.

\(^3\) Boone, 166

\(^4\) Brady and Prufer
Linguistic analysis indicates that Nahuatl speakers did indeed migrate to the valley of Mexico, supporting the historicity of the Aztec codices. Nahuatl belongs to the Uto-Aztecan family of languages, which have their origin in the USA-Mexico border region, and a historic range spreading from the western United States through lower Central America. Glottochronological calculations indicate that Nahuatl arrived in Central Mexico sometime in the sixth century CE.\(^5\) The departure date of the Colhua Mexica from Aztlán is 1 Flint, which corresponds to 1168, 1116, or 1064 CE, depending on which 52 year cycle one chooses to place it in.\(^6\) The glottochronological estimates support the historical sources which indicate Nahuatl was spoken in Tula and well established in central Mexico by the time the Mexica, the last of the migratory groups, arrived in approximately 1250 CE.\(^7\) Based on archaeological evidence, Beekman believes the Nahua migrants to have come from the Bajío region of Guanajuato, which experienced "a period of intensified sociopolitical change" beginning in the sixth century CE, the same time that Nahuatl is thought to have spread to the Basin of Mexico.\(^8\) The Bajío population peaked during the Epiclassic before experiencing a rapid decline into the Early Postclassic, after which the region was largely abandoned. Beekman considers "the Bajío to be the likely source of the Epiclassic migrations into Jalisco and central Mexico... and some population influx into Zacatecas and Michoacan is possible as well" (Fig. 3).\(^9\)

There have been attempts to find Aztlán since the reign of tlatoani Montezuma I (1440–1469 CE) who sent his finest sixty sorcerers in search of the city. Scholars who have attempted

\(^5\) Beekman, 117

\(^6\) Joyce, 12

\(^7\) Van Tuerenhout, 37

\(^8\) Beekman, 136

\(^9\) Beekman, 137
to place Aztlan, Chicomoztoc, or Teoculhuacan in real world locations have typically done so in the states north and west of the Federal District. Sahagún identified Chicomoztoc with Cerro Colihuquitépetl on the historic Aztec–Tarascan border, Torquemada and Clavijero believed it to be at the site of La Quemada in Zacatecas, Jiménez Moreno placed it in the Tula-Xilotepec region of Hidalgo, Chávez thought it was in the vicinity of the city of Culiacán in Sinaloa, and Kirchhoff located it at Cerro Culiacán in Guanajuato.\textsuperscript{10} Eduardo Matos Moctezuma theorized Aztlan to be somewhere in the states of Guanajuato, Jalisco, or Michoacán. Of the locations proposed, Kirchhoff's choice of Cerro Culiacán is the most likely, and it falls within Matos Moctezuma's theorized range of Aztlan's possible locations. Located approximately 100 miles from Tula, in the Bajío region, local beliefs associate this hill with Chicomoztoc, and it may very well be the legendary Teoculhuacan (Fig. 4). Cerro Culiacán and its nearby lakes, especially Lake Yuriria, match the vague descriptions of the Aztec homeland presented in the Codices Aubin, Azcatitlán, Boturini, and Mexicanus, as well as the Sigüenza Map, although there is no nearby island to link with Aztlan (Fig. 5). Guanajuato has some 1,500 bodies of water in total, and it's possible that Aztlan and Teoculhuacan were not situated quite as close together as the codices depict, but further apart within the Bajío.\textsuperscript{11}

Without material evidence, the true nature of the Mexica migrations remains a mystery, and only through physical investigation can we go about distinguishing reality from myth. I intend to conduct a series of non-intrusive archaeological surveys on Cerro Culiacán, where I will be primarily looking for caves and any evidence of ritual activity therein, as well as a number of Guanajuato's sites, where my focus will be on building layout and form. Individual

\textsuperscript{10} Brady and Pruefer

\textsuperscript{11} "Guanajuato." Wikipedia.
Bajío sites are not very large, and six primary centers have been identified so far. Of the region’s 1,400 identified archaeological sites, only four have received proper study. One of these four, the site of Peralta, features a double-pyramid structure which, though not identical to the Aztec style double-temple, seems indicative of an early influence. If the migration histories are based on true events, one should be able to observe evidence in the form of other similarities in the architecture styles of the older Bajío sites and the later developments in the Valley of Mexico. Caves held much significance in Mesoamerican mythology and functioned both as places of emergence in myth as well as destinations for ritual pilgrimages, sacrifices, and burials.\textsuperscript{12} The discovery of one or more caves on Cerro Culiacán, and any evidence of ritual activity inside, would support its identification with Teoculhuacan and Chicomoztoc, which in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, is located in inside of Teoculhuacan. I plan to spend a month in Guanajuato studying Cerro Culiacán and the region’s relatively undocumented archaeological sites, taking the month before the trip to review my Spanish and prioritize which particular sites to visit. When my research in Mexico is complete, I will analyze my findings and formally present them in the form of a research paper. It is my belief that the Aztec codices depict events inspired by an actual movement of people from the Guanajuato area to the Valley of Mexico, a position supported by linguistic evidence, and this summer I hope to obtain archaeological evidence for this claim and shed light on a centuries-old mystery.

\textsuperscript{12} Heyden, 135
Fig. 1. Aztlan and Teoculhuacan from the Codex Boturini

Fig. 5. Modern map of Cerro Culiacán, Lake Yuriria, and the surrounding area
Fig. 2. Map of the Valley of Mexico showing the route from Tollan to Xochimilco depicted in the Codex Boturini (MacGregor and Sánchez, 45)
Fig. 3. Proposed source of the Epiclassic migrations (Beekman, 115)

Fig. 4. Simplified route of the theorized Mexica migration from Cerro Culiacán to Tenochtitlan
References


