



Codex Mendoza, c. 1540-1542, ink and color on paper

1) Aguilar-Moreno, Manuel. *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. pp. 270-1

The *Codex Mendoza* is believed to have been commissioned by the Viceroy Mendoza for presentation to Charles V and is said to have been seized by French pirates. It can possibly be attributed to the tlacuilo Francisco Gualpuyogualal and was translated by the canónigo (honorary ecclesiastical title) Juan Gonzalez, a nahuatlato (translator) from the Cathedral of Mexico.

2) Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 5th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2014. p. 839

An Aztec scribe drew an idealized representation of the city of Tenochtitlan and its sacred ceremonial precinct for the Spanish viceroy in 1545. It forms the first page of the *Codex Mendoza*. An eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus growing out of a stone- the symbol of the city- fills the center of the page. Waterways divide the city into four quarters, and indicate the lake surrounding the city. Early leaders of Tenochtitlan are shown sitting in the four quadrants. The victorious warriors at the bottom of the page represent Aztec conquests, and a count of years surrounds the entire scene. This image combines

historical narration with idealized cartography, showing the city in the middle of the lake at the moment of its founding.

3) Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 5th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2014. p. 839

The Mexica people who lived in the remarkable city that Cortes found were then rulers of much of the land that later took their name, Mexico.

Their rise to power had been recent and swift. Only 400 years earlier, according to their own legends, they had been a nomadic people living far north of the Valley of Mexico in a distant place called Aztlan.

The term Aztec derives from the word Aztlan, and refers to all those living in Central Mexico who came from this mythical homeland, not just to the Mexica of Tenochtitlan.

4) Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 5th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2014. pp. 838-9

The Mexica arrived in the Valley of Mexico in the thirteenth century. They eventually settled on an island in Lake Texcoco where they had seen an eagle perching on a prickly pear cactus (nochtli) growing out of a stone (tetl), a sign that their god Huitzilopochtli told them would mark the end of their wandering.

They called the place Tenochtitlán. The city on the island was gradually expanded by reclaiming land from the lake, and serviced by a grid of artificial canals. In the fifteenth century, the Mexica- joined by allies in a triple alliance- began an aggressive campaign of expansion.

The tribute they exacted from all over Mexico transformed Tenochtitlan into a glittering capital.

5) O'Riley, Michael Kampen. *Art Beyond the West: The Arts of Africa, India and Southeast Asia, China, Japan and Korea, the Pacific, and the Americas*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001. pp. 276-277

The frontispiece of the Codex Mendoza (1541-1542), painted by an Aztec artist after the Spanish conquest, portrays the vision in a hybrid Aztec-Spanish style. An inscription below the shield and spears and the hieroglyphic sign at the base of the cactus indicate that this is Tenochtitlán, the capital of Mexico and the symbolic center of the Aztec cosmos. The hub of the city is surrounded by four canals and men seated on mats with hieroglyphic signs that may represent municipalities or regions subject to the Aztecs.

The warriors below, with shields and clubs, as well as the platformed temples in the background with tilting roofs spouting smoke and flames represent Aztec conquests. No authenticated pre-conquest Aztec manuscripts inspired by the Mixteca-Puebla style of painting survive; under the rules of the Spanish church, natives found in possession of such "heathen" materials could be executed. However, such post-conquest paintings as the Codex Mendoza perpetuate elements of the native Aztec style.



6) Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Frontispiece of the Codex Mendoza," in Smarthistory, August 9, 2015, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/frontispiece-of-the-codex-mendoza/>

The cactus upon which the eagle rests also symbolizes the place name of Tenochtitlan. The cactus is a nopal, or prickly pear cactus, which in Nahuatl is *nochtli*. The cactus grows from a stone, or *tetl*. When paired together, they form *tenoch* to connote the place of the prickly pear cactus, or Tenochtitlan.

Today's Mexican flag similarly displays the eagle on a nopal cactus growing from a stone in the middle of a lake, relating to the mythic origins of the Mexican capital.

7) Berdan, Frances F. and Patricia Rieff Anawalt. *The Essential Codex Mendoza*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Source: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1359>

The original purpose of the *Codex Mendoza* seems to have been to provide royal policymakers with reliable information about the functioning of the former Aztec empire now controlled by the Spaniards. Beyond its practical value to the Spanish, the antiquarian value of the codex to modern scholars is immense, since two-thirds of the document may have been copied directly from pre-Hispanic pictorial sources. If so, then this is a truly amazing survival since such pre-Hispanic codices were all but completely destroyed during the extirpation campaigns waged by the first bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumarraga.

8) Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Frontispiece of the Codex Mendoza," in Smarthistory, August 9, 2015, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/frontispiece-of-the-codex-mendoza/>

Besides the eagle on the cactus, other figures and symbols on the frontispiece aid us in understanding the city's foundation and early history. For instance, below the cactus and stone in the middle of the drawing is a war shield, indicating the Mexica did not settle peacefully in the Valley of Mexico.

The simple structure above the eagle likely symbolizes a temple, possibly an early phase of the Templo Mayor, or the Aztec's main temple that was located at the heart of the city in the sacred precinct. To the right of the eagle is a simplified skull rack (*tzompantli*), another structure found near the Templo Mayor.

Different types of plants, including maize, or corn, dot the city's four quadrants, no doubt alluding to the agricultural fertility associated with the city.

9) Stokstad, Marilyn and Michael W. Cothren. *Art History*, 5th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2014. p. 839

According to Aztec belief, the gods had created the current era, or sun, at the ancient city of Teotihuacán in the Valley of Mexico. The continued existence of the world depended on human actions, including

rituals of blood-letting and human sacrifice. Many Mesoamerican peoples believed that the world had been created multiple times before the present era. But while most Mesoamericans believed that they were living in the fourth era, or sun, the Mexica asserted that they lived in the fifth sun, a new era that coincided with the Aztec Empire.

The Calendar Stone boldly makes this claim using the dates of the destructions of the four previous eras to form the glyph that names the fifth sun, 4 Motion. The end of each period of 52 years in the Mesoamerican calendar was a particularly dangerous time that required a special fire-lighting ritual.

10) Carrasco, David. "City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza," from the *History of World Religions*, Vol. 20, no. 3, Feb. 1982, pp. 199-223, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 203

Tradition tells us that the beautifully painted books were gathered into a small heap in the marketplace of Tezcoco and that, in a Christian ceremony marked by religious fervor aimed at wiping out the devil's magic and idolatrous images, the brilliant intellectual and artistic treasures of ancient Mexico were committed to the flames and became ashes.

Though this particular story may be apocryphal, it is a fact, bitter to the mind of scholars, that of the thousands of pictorial manuscripts extant in Mexico in 1519, showing the histories, cosmologies, and cartographies of the ancient culture, only sixteen remain today.

11) Carrasco, David. "City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza," from the *History of World Religions*, Vol. 20, no. 3, Feb. 1982, pp. 199-223, Chicago: University of Chicago Press p. 210

Within this temporal frame, the city appears as a large rectangle with stylized blue borders representing the waters of Lake Tezcoco. Two blue intersecting lines, apparently representing canals, divide the city into four quarters. Within these four parts, we see various forms of vegetation, a skull rack, the image of the town house or place of speaking, and ten men seated on mats, who represent the ten leaders chosen at the beginning of the city's existence.

12) Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Frontispiece of the Codex Mendoza," in Smarthistory, August 9, 2015, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/frontispiece-of-the-codex-mendoza/>

Ten men are also depicted in the four quadrants, wearing white garments and displaying top knots in their hair. These figures are the men who led the Aztecs to this island location. Their name glyphs are attached to them in a manner typical of pre-Conquest manuscripts; a thin black line connects to a symbol that denotes their name.

13) Carrasco, David. "City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza," from the *History of World Religions*, Vol. 20, no. 3, Feb. 1982, pp. 199-223, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 210-211

The figure to the left of the large cactus in the center is the most prominent leader. He is distinguished by a blue speech glyph in front of his mouth signifying that he is the chief speaker of the new settlement. The mat on which he sits is finely woven, while the other figures sit on bundles of green reeds. This signifies that he is "lord of the mat" and occupies the place of authority.

His elevation above the others is further marked by the elaborate arrangement of his hair, set in the style of a high priest. This status is likewise marked by the red design around his left ear, denoting bloodletting.

His name is expressed by the thin line attached to the sign above him and behind him, which is a blooming cactus growing from a stylized rock. This translates as ‘Tenoch,’” written “tenuch” on the front of his white garment.

14) Carrasco, David. “City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza,” from the *History of World Religions*, Vol. 20, no. 3 , Feb. 1982, pp. 199-223, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 210-211

In contrast, the man above and behind him, more simply groomed and smaller in size, has the name sign of a blue reed emerging from the head of a rabbit, translating as “Acacitl,” or “hare of the grass reed.””

All these signs surround the central image, which shows a huge blooming cactus growing from a stylized rock. This is the place sign for the city, Tenochtitlan. On it an eagle has landed, signifying the arrival of the Aztecs in the form of the hummingbird god of war and the foundation of the city.

Below this sign of the city’s origin, almost supporting the rock, is a large Aztec war shield with seven eagle-down feathers and seven spears attached. This is the sign for authority and government.



15) Carrasco, David. “City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza,” from the *History of World Religions*, Vol. 20, no. 3 , Feb. 1982, pp. 199-223, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 214

The centering and cardinal orientation, these attempts to coordinate supernatural forces and social forces, are also elaborated plastically, that is, when a city or its ceremonial center not only “marks the spot” and

controls the lines of force, but actually represents and signifies in its design and structure a cosmic struggle, a myth or divine drama.

The city was eulogized as a proud, invincible place, the center which linked the world of men with the Giver of Life- “the foundation of heaven.” This line becomes more significant when we realize that the Aztecs conceived of their cosmos as containing three superimposed sections: the heavens, the surface of the earth, and the underworld.

The city, as the foundation of this vertical cosmos, was appreciated as the axis mundi of the universe, the place through which the Giver of Life sent his commands for courage and conquest, as well as the point of communication to the underworld.

16) Carrasco, David. “City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza,” from the *History of World Religions*, Vol. 20, no. 3 , Feb. 1982, pp. 199-223, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 217-8

It is clear from archaeological evidence and other relevant maps that the city was divided by four major highways which crossed at the foot of the Templo Mayor and which drove straight and hard out of the heart of the city, passing through the coatepantli, or serpent wall.

In Aztec cosmology, the earth was imagined as a great cross, or a flower with four petals with a green stone bead at the center.

A marketplace and administrative center were part of each quarter’s central precinct. Thus, each quarter had its own sacred pivot, reproducing the image of the center which dominated the city as a whole. This pattern of centering was further duplicated in the many barrios of each quarter, each of which had a local ceremonial precinct consisting of a temple, a small marker, and a school.

17) Carrasco, David. “City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza,” from the *History of World Religions*, Vol. 20, no. 3 , Feb. 1982, pp. 199-223, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 218

Johanna Broda utilizes the abundant evidence concerning tribute patterns of warriors’ uniforms sent to Tenochtitlan (found in part 2 of the Codex Mendoza) to demonstrate that the Mexica organized their tribute system into five great regions corresponding to the five major directions (north, west, south, east, and the center) in order to conform to their view of cosmic order.

She speculates that the influence of cosmo-magical thought extended into the palatial structure of Moctezuma which, the Mendoza reveals, was divided into five principal rooms. The Mendoza also shows that the apex of Aztec government consisted of Montezuma at the center of power with four counselors assisting his royal judgments.

18) Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Frontispiece of the Codex Mendoza," in Smarthistory, August 9, 2015, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/frontispiece-of-the-codex-mendoza/>

Surrounding the entire page are year glyphs, beginning on the upper left with the date 2-House (1325 C.E.) and finishing (counter clock-wise) with the date 13-Reed. There are a total of fifty-one year glyphs. One year is marked—the year 2-Reed, which occurred twenty-six years after Tenochtitlan’s establishment; the reed has a cord wound around it and a fire drill appears above it.

These symbols note that the year 2-Reed was the first year of a new 52-year cycle, the time during which new fire was drilled to begin the new cycle and signal the completion of the previous 52-year cycle. For the Aztecs, the New Fire ceremony occurred every 52 years—a complete cycle of the solar calendar—and it assured that the sun would rise again. Just prior to the beginning of a new cycle, new fire was drilled in the body of a sacrificial victim. After this point, the fire was distributed among people to light their homes.

19) Carrasco, David. “City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: The Clues from the Codex Mendoza,” from the *History of World Religions*, Vol. 20, no. 3, Feb. 1982, pp. 199-223, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 208, 210

Let me orient our investigation by noting the elevated sign, near the bottom right-hand corner, which is added by a slender dark thread to the year sign “2 reed.”

This year sign, third from bottom right, is bound by a white knot. The elevated sign is a fire-drilling glyph signifying that this year marked the end of a fifty two-year cycle, a period similar to our notion of a “century.”

It was at the end of this year that the extremely important “New Fire Ceremony” was held to initiate a new and secure time period for the civilization. The central ceremonial act was the drawing of a new fire on the chest of a captured warrior, who was then sacrificed through heart extraction. The fire born on the sacrificial victim was then carried to all parts of the city and surrounding towns.

20) Berdan, Frances F. and Patricia Rieff Anawalt. *The Essential Codex Mendoza*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Source: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1359>

The codex itself was divided into three distinct sections. Part One, “the conquest section,” is a history of the Mexica kings from the founding of Tenochtitlan to the arrival of the Spanish. For each king’s reign, a standard “annals” format was employed by native artists: Native-style year glyphs run along the margins of an initial page (corresponding to his years of rule), followed by a series of place-glyphs pierced by flaming-spears (representing the towns and regions captured during his military campaigns).

Part Two, “the tribute section,” is an account of the provinces which owed tribute to the Mexica kings. Again a standardized format is employed by the native artists with each page corresponding to a distinct tribute-paying region: Place-glyphs of the towns within each tribute province are drawn along the left and lower margins of the page, while the type and quantity of tribute paid during the year are represented by images of tribute goods with Spanish glosses. Like its sister-document the *Matricula de Tributos*, Part Two of the *Codex Mendoza* provided the Spanish with practical information about Aztec tribute patterns and levels that served as a guide and yardstick for their own tribute-collection activities.

The third part of the *Codex Mendoza*, “the daily-life section,” contains ethnographic data pertaining to the life cycle of individuals from birth to marriage (fs. 57r-61r), as well as about the various occupations of priests, warriors and other professions. While Parts One and Two seem to have been copied from extant native pictorial manuscripts, the third section was added specifically for the codex.
