HISTORY OUT OF TIME, if not place, decades of events collapsed into a single transforming moment, cultural heroes who never existed, Spaniards portrayed as welcome arrivals rather than invaders, miracles, apparitions, and mind-numbingly complex land boundary descriptions: all of these perplexing features can be found in the later-colonial indigenous-language records which have been dubbed títulos primordiales (primordial titles). Many who encountered them, from Spanish magistrates to twentieth-century scholars, dismissed the genre as little more than a tissue of clumsy fraud created by people desperate to protect their threatened corporate autonomy. Others accepted primordial titles as factual records of the past. So it was that, until not too long ago, our understanding of these challenging texts remained confused and confounded by controversy.

I didn’t pay too much attention to primordial titles myself until I was beguiled by a brittle and yellowed little book entitled Códice Municipal de Cuernavaca. Anónimo del siglo XVI which I came across as I built a source base for my dissertation. The Códice contained a historical narrative presented by an indigenous noble named don Toribio Sandoval de San Martín Cortés who claimed to have witnessed the arrival of the conqueror Hernando Cortés, the transformation of the Tlalhuica altepetl of Quauhnahuac (“near the forest”) into Cuernavaca (“cow horn,” a Spanish corruption), the building of the first churches and the Christianization of the people, the miraculous appearance of a cross. Here was just the kind of thing I was looking for as I sought to understand the origins of Cuernavaca’s colonial indigenous ruling elite and the foundations of their municipal government in the dawn of the postconquest era. Indeed, I found that scholars of Cuernavaca’s past such as G. Micheal Riley and Valentín López González had mined the document themselves. Disillusionment set in, however, as I became familiar with the seminal work of James Lockhart and Stephanie Wood about primordial titles and their complexities. I soon realized that the Códice—filled with detailed boundary descriptions as well as historical material—was a Spanish translation of just that kind of document, not really the product of the early conquest era at all. Further research told me that in all probability don Toribio had not yet been born when Hernando Cortés rode into town, and that the Códice had been written in its surviving form sometime in the very late seventeenth century. Still, I was intrigued. Though I left the document aside for a time, in the end I could not resist trying to make sense of the Códice as a historical record.

What, exactly, is a “primordial title?” It is possible to find collections of eighteenth-century Spanish-language legal instruments related to municipal land claims referred to as “primordial titles.” This kind of document is not what is
meant by “primordial title” here. The legitimacy of land claims is certainly asserted by the genre, but to my way of thinking primordial titles are much more than this. They are alphabetic texts written by one or more indigenous authors (usually elite or near elite, male, and anonymous), most often in their own language and driven by their own perspectives. Aside from a focus on land tenure, primordial titles distill fundamental information about an ethnic group’s or community’s origins, belief systems, and sociopolitical organization (not all titles will include every one of these elements, or give equal weight to all of them). Most primordial titles have to do with a particular polity, such as the Nahua altepetl or one of its divisions, expressing above all legitimacy, autonomy, and identity. They were crafted as instruments to be shared by the entire society of the featured locality, so that expressions of legitimacy connected with cultural heroes and community leaders stand for and assert the legitimacy of the whole.

The label “primordial titles” seems to have become attached to this kind of text in the nineteenth century, linked to its use as a register of properties claimed by the community and its leading indigenous citizens.\(^5\) It was once thought that primordial titles were limited to the Nahuas, but we now know that many other Mexican peoples—highland and lowland Mayas, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Purépechas—wrote them as well; the precise format varies accordingly.\(^6\) In common is a presentation that makes the bulk of the texts seem to date from the sixteenth century. As in the Códice Municipal de Cuernavaca, the first-person narratives appear to be eyewitness accounts of the arrival of the Spaniards—Cortés, early viceroy, friars—and of sacred and secular events associated with the refounding of indigenous communities in what we would call a postconquest form. Some primordial titles include precontact founding events, too, though this is not particularly true of the Cuernavacan examples known to date. The texts are a challenge for scholars because their orthography and syntax can only be described as unconventional, confusing, and unexpected. Most of them have some scattered illustrations, but they do not exhibit the beauty, skill, and ubiquity of those found in indigenous-style pictorial codices or even in the Techialoyan manuscripts.\(^7\)

The primordial titles do not lack in emotion, but considering the source their typical tone is as unexpected as their orthography. In the central Mexican examples there is satisfaction, pride, triumph, and even joy in the texts rather than the suffering and anguish of a conquered people that one might expect. There are few if any allusions to military conflicts with the Spaniards, no despairing laments about the scourge of epidemic disease, no melancholy connected with the defeat of the old deities and their replacement by God, Christ, Mary, and the Holy Trinity.\(^8\) There is really no “conquest” at all. Instead, Cortés and other Spaniards

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8There is at least one central Mexican exception, a primordial title-like document from Ajusco, a town in the mountains above Mexico City; see Wood 1997, pp. 333–48.
arrive, are made welcome, and accepted. The local people and their leaders actively help establish churches and Iberian-style town councils. They voluntarily embrace the obligation to pay tribute to their new and distant king without a whimper. Indeed, taking a warning tone, most primordial titles claim that these powerful Spanish patrons will help protect the people from other, less upstanding outsiders who might be scheming to usurp land or to otherwise undermine the autonomy of the community. The community is reinvigorated, its legitimacy and stature recognized and confirmed by the newly arriving Spaniards. The indigenous nobles who act as the narrators in the titles, or, if you will, are cast as cultural heroes there, take the leading roles in the unfolding drama. They, not the Spaniards, are the movers and shakers in a brilliant moment of creation and renewal. Instead of historical progression, the titles offer a seminal turning point frozen in time and space.

This timeless has betrayed the titles, as has the fact that European-style dates found in them are usually haphazard and sometimes wildly out of kilter (a colonial event in a Cuernavacan title dated in the year 358, for instance). Under careful examination, the cultural heroes who narrate the titles turn out at worst to be creatures of fiction, at best to be placed out of their own true times, the fate of don Toribio Sandoval de San Martín Cortés, the hero of the Códice Municipal de Cuernavaca. The documents have been controversial since the turn of the eighteenth century, when many of them were opportunely “discovered” and put into evidence by indigenous litigants embroiled in property disputes. Magistrates confronted by what they might see as opportunistic contrivances were as likely to dismiss them as frauds as to accept hastily produced Spanish translations of the documents as valid evidence of immemorial land tenure; historical matter in the titles was usually ignored. After their heyday in court, most of these titles languished among the piles of litigation records molding in archives. Others never made it out of their municipalities or the jealously guarded records of prominent local families, rarely if ever meeting the gaze of outsiders. When someone did happen across a primordial title, it was usually the Spanish translation rather than the indigenous language text that was studied. Hardly anyone understood what they were really seeing.

It was only in the last decades of the twentieth century that sustained analytical attention began to be given to the primordial titles, and older controversies were renewed. What to make of them? Were they really “frauds” because of their historiographical oddities, their seemingly disingenuous claims of antiquity, and their often convenient “discovery” just when they were needed in court? The fact that Nahuatl examples from the Valley of Toluca, elsewhere in the modern state of Mexico, and Morelos had such similar formats and some shared information tended to count against the genre, too, since these attributes were seen by some as

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9Primordial titles from the Valley of Toluca warn their readers to hide the records from the prying eyes of Spaniards, who might use the information in the histories against the community; see Wood, 1998b, 220.

strong evidence for contrivance. There were others who steadfastly maintained that the titles were “true,” and warned that those who belittled them were endangering present-day village land tenure (the assumption is that, left to themselves, Mexican authorities will regard the primordial titles as authentic land records). Members of this school of thought have questioned the right and ability of people who are neither Mexican nor indigenous to explain what the authors of the titles thought about themselves, their communities, and their histories. There will always be some kind of gulf separating us from societies and histories that are not our own, so that we do indeed need to tread very carefully as we study, describe, and analyze these documents. But I believe that we can achieve certain kinds of empathy with the thoughts and experiences of other human beings as they echo across time, place, and culture. We can and should employ our informed imaginations as we try to recover the textures of life in the past; otherwise history would be an impossible study.¹¹

In my own case, the lands and landmarks described so lovingly in the Cuernavacan titles are now mostly buried under urban sprawl, deluxe condo complexes, and luxury hotels in this tourist paradise of “eternal spring.” Whatever land claims are asserted or proven in the Códice Municipal and other, similar titles are now beside the point, impossible to confirm or disprove. On this level, the fact or fiction of the titles means nothing. But because the Spanish text of the Códice has been used as a fundamental source for the recovery of early colonial Cuernavacan history, the indigenous heroes of the primordial titles have become legitimized as the true heroes of the conquest era. This situation has given the Códice a lot more historiographical punch than most primordial titles. Any suggestion on my part that the Códice and other similar documents are “frauds” would undercut the arguments of my Mexican colleagues.

Fortunately the situation is not quite as bleak as it might seem. I have no doubt that some of the characteristics of the primordial titles, including those from Cuernavaca, do raise legitimate concerns. Yet I think there is plenty of evidence in the primordial titles to suggest that they rested on firm local historiographical foundations. It could be argued, for instance, that the boundary narratives seem to be a “European” element. Spaniards are much better known than precontact indigenous peoples for an obsession with establishing ownership rights to land. Spanish-language records of land tenure are full of detailed boundary descriptions that read something like those of the primordial titles. But the Tetzcocan historian Ixtlilxochitl wrote of precontact cartographic documents that were “the paintings of the boundaries, limits, and landmarks of the cities . . . and of the types and distribution of lands, whose they were and to whom they belonged.”¹² In early postconquest Cuernavaca itself, Tlalhuica painters—men who had probably plied their trade before Cortés’s invasion—created detailed, precontact-style land maps showing individual, named properties.¹³ Jim Lockhart has suggested that the primordial titles were based on "parallel record[s]" created by such indigenous

¹¹For a discussion of many of these issues see Wood 1998a, pp. 167–221.
¹³Códices indígenas de algunos pueblos del Marquesado del Valle.
scribes who witnessed early land surveys conducted by colonial authorities to establish the boundaries of newly subdued altepetl. The primordial titles also seem to include information that could have come from local records of congregación surveys done in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as well as other later-colonial land investigations.¹⁴

All of this suggests to me that, despite their ahistorical quirks and their apparently mythic quality, the primordial titles are actually a kind of true history, not so much of facts as of consciousness, of a coming to terms with the disturbing new world of Spanish Mexico, of the renegotiation of the altepetl’s and its indigenous rulers’ place in New Spain. Nahuas, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and others valued their titles as receptacles of true information about real past events that provided the backbone for their survival as independent, self-governing communities. Those who instigated the titles were usually self-conscious members of a privileged sector of indigenous society, but their vision was likely shared by the broader populace. Theirs was a way of thinking that Stephanie Wood aptly calls “transcending conquest.”¹⁵

These thoughts come from the later stages of my scholarly journey into the world of the titles, not its beginning. Back then I simply wondered if there might be a Nahuatl original of the Códice Municipal in existence, and turned to the Handbook of Middle American Indians for help. There I discovered that the Códice Municipal (and several other indigenous texts from Cuernavaca) was to be found in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris (BNP).¹⁶ Elated, I quickly requested copies, but was frustrated when all of the texts turned out to be longhand transcriptions made in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. There was some consolation in that a previously unpublished Nahuatl version of the Códice was included in the mix, but it was only a fragment of what had clearly been a much longer text. The copies were clear and certainly usable, but I was suspicious about the accuracy of the transcriptions. Meanwhile, while carrying out research during 1981–82 in Mexico’s Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) I had uncovered several other Nahuatl titles from Cuernavaca’s sujetos (subject communities), and I also became acquainted with something Robert Barlow published in Tlalocan entitled “Unos títulos de Cuernavaca.”¹⁷ This obviously incomplete document bore a relationship to the Códice, sharing some blocks of text and featuring don Toribio Sandoval de San Martín Cortés as one of its culture heroes. Barlow thought “Unos títulos” had been written in 1552, a date appearing in the text, but once one knew the secret of the primordial titles it became obvious that the

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¹⁴Lockhart 1991, pp. 43–44.
¹⁵Wood 2003.
¹⁶Gibson and Glass 1975, pp. 322–400; BNP, MM 291 (partial Nahuatl transcription) and 292 (full Spanish translation).
¹⁷Barlow 1952, pp. 213–22. Primordial titles found in Mexico are: AGN Hospital de Jesús (HJ) vol. 48, segunda parte, exp. 9, cuaderno 3 (primordial titles of the sujeto of San Pablo); AGN HJ vol. 79, exp. 4, fols. 121r-124v (primordial titles of the sujeto of Chiamilpa); AGN HJ legajo 447, exp. 7 (titles of Cuernavaca); AGN HJ legajo 447, exp. 81, fols. 6v-8v (primordial titles of the sujeto of Ocotepec); AGN Tierras vol. 2762, exp. 3 (primordial titles of the sujeto of Tlatenango, available in Spanish translation only).
manuscript was later than that.

Then I had exciting news from Fritz Schwaller, who told me that he had come across some Nahuatl documents from Cuernavaca in the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan. Fritz kindly mailed me xeroxes of several representative pages, including some with illustrations. They turned out to be bits and pieces of what seemed to be primordial titles. I ordered microfilm of the entire body of “Cuernavaca Papers” from the Clements right away. Imagine my delight when they proved to contain at least eleven primordial titles, including two versions of the Códice Municipal—one of them probably written in the second half of the seventeenth century, the other a copy made around the beginning of the eighteenth century—and the originals of other BNP transcriptions. In 1995 I was able to work out translations of most of the titles thanks to a fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., which in turn fueled the creation of book-length study of the Cuernavacan titles.

As the manuscript progressed, I became more and more interested in the variety of ways people had defined Cuernavaca and its history. What I found was not a homogenous memory of the past, but multiple and often contradictory ones. The book ended up being constructed like a series of nesting boxes: the orthodox history of Cuernavaca based mainly on Spanish records and points of view; the Cuernavaca as paradise on earth—in one case likened to a goddess emerging from a hot bath—that flowed from the minds of travel writers, nineteenth-century railroad and tourism boosters, poets, and artists; and the heart of the work, the Cuernavaca found in the pages of its indigenous-authored primordial titles. Since these titles are representative of the genre as a whole, it can be enlightening to conduct here brief sample analyses of two key elements: the significance of the springs mentioned in boundary narratives and the story of a cross apparition from the Códice Municipal de Cuernavaca.

Boundary descriptions are the most obvious and often the most extensive element in Cuernavaca’s primordial titles; some of the Clements Library texts are actually little more than this, with a limited amount of more general community information and historical matter scattered haphazardly throughout. The markers in the land used to establish boundaries of community and noble properties are typical, though obviously linked to local geographical realities. Natural features include rocks, usually those with a distinctive or unusual shape, outcroppings, hills, ridges, ravines, caves, particular trees, rivers, streams, and fords. Artificial structures are common, including crosses, stone walls, gateways, chapels,

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19William L. Clements Library, Cuernavaca Papers (CLCP) fols. 121r–131r (Nahuatl copy of the Códice Municipal de Cuernavaca); CLCP 132r–141r (Nahuatl original of the Códice Municipal de Cuernavaca); CLCP fols. 142r–151v (colonial-era Spanish translation of the Códice); CLCP 160r–163v (incomplete Spanish-language version of a lost Nahuatl original; a transcription is known as the Réédification de la Ville de Cuernavaca in the BNP). The BNP titles and some of those found in the AGN have been published, but not analyzed, in Dubernard Chaveau, Códices de Cuernavaca y unos títulos de sus pueblos; Dubernard did not have access to the Clements documents.
churches, and various kinds of secular structures. References to mounds of stones, usually signaled by the generic Nahuatl term for boundary marker, *quaxochtli*, are ubiquitous. Boundaries are also anchored by named places, but whether they are house lots, plots of agricultural land, or the sites of small settlements is often difficult to guess.

Translating boundary narratives can be tedious. In mind-numbing repetition a boundary goes up to a tree, then down to a ravine, then runs on to abut with a wall, then onward to negotiate a ford to meet the corner of a house, then goes down to where there is a cross, and on and on and on. It is all too easy to overlook these sections of titles and concentrate on the meatier-seeming historical and sacred narratives embedded in them. But as I resisted the temptation to skip over these sections of text, it dawned on me that there might be more than meets the eye going on in them. I began to pay more attention to the specific kinds of boundary markers being used, and started to look up descriptions of trees and plants in Sahagún, Hernández, and other pertinent sources.\(^\text{21}\) Time after time, I found that trees such as the native cypress, the *ahuehuetl*, and the *pochotl*, or silk cotton tree, had some kind of symbolic significance, or played an important role in traditional indigenous medicine and ritual.\(^\text{22}\)

It seemed, then, that at least some of the many landmarks selected to describe the boundaries of Cuernavaca’s properties were freighted with other kinds of meanings and significance, some of them echoing precontact ideas about the intersections of the physical and sacred worlds. A good example of this is offered by the many springs (*ameyalli*) invoked as boundary markers in the titles, springs like the one at Cuernavaca’s own Chapultepec (still a celebrated site). Many different peoples have found springs to be attractive and even sacred. For millennia the imaginations of Europeans have been beguiled by the spectacle of life-giving water bubbling to the surface in unexpected places. Sacred springs abound. I have visited one in Ireland that originated just above a small, clear pool of water, a place where the Catholic faithful came to pray, to leave offerings, and to light candles to the Virgin Mary. I have spent a short time contemplating the head of a spring in the foothills of Spain’s Pyrenees which had been channeled through a brass spigot surrounded by a stone slab engraved with a dedicatory slogan. I might as well have been traveling in the sixteenth century. Back then local Iberian shrines were apt to be located near holy springs, which along with caves were considered to be "connections to the underworld."\(^\text{23}\) Only a thin veneer of Christianity covered older pagan beliefs, since from time immemorial rural Spaniards “locate[d] sacred images in places of universal significance for agricultural and herding communities” near water.\(^\text{24}\)

The Nahuas were no different. Fray Diego Durán argued that “after fire there


\(^\text{22}\) In Cuernavaca’s colonial Nahuatl election records the cypress and the silk cotton tree—in *pochotl in ahuehuetl*—were often paired in a political metaphor standing for the ruling legitimacy and power of the *tlatoani*, his authority shading his community protectively like these large trees; see Haskett 1991, p. 100.


\(^\text{24}\) Christian 1981b, p. 91.

\(^\text{25}\) Durán 1971, pp. 261, 263. See also Heyden 1989, p. 64.
was no element of the four [elements] so hallowed by the Mexica people as water.” Much to the disgust of the seventeenth-century idolatry extirpator Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, the Nahuas of what is now Morelos persisted in their “blasphemous” beliefs that the gods “live in all parts of the land. . . . they believe the same thing of the rivers, lakes, and springs, since to everything mentioned they offer candles and incense. . . . with the faith and belief that from those waters, fountains, or hills their good happenings and their health have their origin.”

Even in the late twentieth century rural Nahuas saw water as the "blood" of the earth running through the soil of its living body.

One of the springs featured in Cuernavaca’s primordial titles was found at a site known as Tepexic, which was moreover located near some caverns; for the Tlalhuica of Cuernavaca and many, many others, caves were openings into the underworld full of cosmic portent and meaning, womb-like places where both deities and humans had been created and emerged. Tepexic itself means at the abyss, tepexitl, described by Sahagún’s informants as “a dangerous place, a deathly place.” Near a cave and a “dangerous” abyss, this spring issued from the underworld, possessing a potent sacred force. Some sort of prehispanic ritual may have been recalled by a statement in the Códice Municipal that nobles “cut reeds” near another spring at Santa María Ahuehuetitlan (“near the cypress tree”), since nobles were not usually associated with this kind of manual labor.

According to fray Diego Durán, springs associated with cypress trees were considered to be “most hallowed.” Even the name of the tree, ahuehuetl, includes the element atl, or water, emphasizing this sacred pairing which Durán was told originated from the idea that “the water passes through its roots.” Today pilgrims sojourning at the cave-shrine of Our Lord of Chalma “still collect spring water from the roots of a great ahuehuetl tree on the outskirts” of the town.

The sacred quality of the landscape is echoed in quite a number of references to Christian symbols, beliefs, and ceremonies, particularly in the Códice Municipal de Cuernavaca. Not only are the foundations of churches and the celebration of first masses highlighted, but the text includes sections that read something like fragments of catechism lessons reminiscent of the native-language doctrinas cristianas which were written for or by the Franciscans and Dominicans. But the single most important sacred text in the Códice is the cross apparition story. In it, an indigenous noblewoman named doña María Salomé beheld a miraculous apparition of a cross springing tangibly from the living core of a newly axed black zapote tree. The news spread quickly after doña María had notified the local indigenous fiscal (the main indigenous assistant to a Spanish priest), and soon the local population marveled at the cross. “For this reason they gave it to the church. . . . A mass of the Holy Cross was celebrated there. The nobles gave an offering which was delivered to the church.”

26Ruiz de Alarcón 1984, pp. 43, 48.
27Chicomoztoc, the famous cavern from which the Nahuas emerged, is an obvious example. See Boone 2000, p. 153. See also Heyden 1989, p. 63, and Ingham 1986, p. 185.
28Sahagún 1963, p. 263.
29CLCP, fol. 122r.
30Durán 1971, 267–68.
31Miller and Taube 1993, p. 156.
32CLCP, f. 125r.
This is not the only reference to the story of the miraculous cross. Fray Agustín de Vetancurt, the Franciscan chronicler of the late seventeenth century, told of a Capilla de la Santa Cruz in Cuernavaca’s monastery church which contained four “very well formed” wooden crosses reputed to have been discovered by an indigenous man when he cut down a white zapote tree, crosses treated reverently and carried in procession during the yearly festival of the Holy Cross. Then in a 1743 relación geográfica, a Spanish alcalde mayor named Lorenzo Antonio Correa y Troncoso wrote about this same apparition, dating it to Sunday, July 25, 1621. Correa y Troncoso mentioned a humble woman named Angelina in connection with the apparition, but it is her forty-year-old grandson Juan who is the main character in the drama, cutting down the miraculous tree to provide his aged grandmother with firewood. As Juan began to split the trunk, he discovered a perfectly formed black cross embedded in the white wood of each half.

The alcalde mayor’s tale of the cross apparition fits neatly into Spanish traditions which almost always cast humble rural men or children, rather than women who were thought to be “impure,” as those most likely to behold apparitions. Angelina is upstaged by the woodcutter Juan—whose ethnicity is not mentioned—the expected sort of dweller in the wild world. In contrast, the Nahuatl text of the Códice Municipal does not even name the person who cut down the black zapote after being ordered to do so by the noble doña María Salomé. Doña María is not just any noblewoman, but rather the wife of don Toribio Sandoval de San Martín Cortés, the culture hero and narrator of the Códice. Primary agency is given to a woman by people whose cultural roots lay in a sacred system that, unlike the Catholic Christian one, did have space for women as priests and guardians of temples. The cross itself emerges from a native tree with light wood, the zapote which bore fruit with black flesh, probably the totolcuitlatzapotl described in Book 11 of the Florentine Codex. The apparition takes place not on a specific date in the early seventeenth century, but rather at the beginning of Cuernavaca’s journey into the colonial era, in the primordial time of foundation presided over by don Toribio and other lords. Indigenous people, not Spaniards, are the actors. Doña María alerts the male indigenous fiscal, who sees the cross for himself and then notifies unnamed friars and generic Spaniards about the event. These people may take the cross into the church, and presumably preside over the resulting mass, but it is Cuernavaca’s Tlalhuica pipiltin who establish what must have been a yearly endowment to celebrate the apparition of the Holy Cross.

It is likely that the indigenous people of Cuernavaca would have seen the apparition of the cross as proof of God’s special favor for the Tlalhuica, confirm-

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33Vetancurt 1971, p. 59.
34AGI Indiferente General, leg. 107, fols. 296r–297v. The alcalde mayor told of several other similar appearances of crosses in the early eighteenth century, remarking that there had been so many of them that Cuernavaca had earned the nickname “villa of the crosses” (ff. 297v–299r).
37Sahagún 1963, pp. 116–118.
ing them as worthy and devout Christians.\textsuperscript{38} The cross, moreover, had appeared in a very ancient place that was reborn and refigured with the coming of Cortés and thus the apparition became one of the watershed events of this transformation. It was a “foundation miracle” in the same way that the apparition of the eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus marked the beginning of Mexica Tenochtitlan.\textsuperscript{39} The cross, like Tenochtitlan’s eagle and cactus motif, signaled God’s sponsorship for Cuernavaca’s sociopolitical legitimacy as an altepetl in colonial terms and sanctified its retention of a land base. Mesoamerican traditions were transformed, but not replaced, in the cross apparition story. Politically speaking, the indigenous notables are participating in a divine certification of their own and their community’s worth. Culturally speaking, this is their cross, their church, their faith, not something imposed, something which sprang from their native place and natural world. Retold over and over again across the years, the cross apparition experienced by doña María Salomé became a shared “social vision” in Cuernavaca, whose indigenous population could see in it an image of themselves as a “chosen people.”\textsuperscript{40}

In our collective memories, epic times, eras of seemingly profound and rapid change, war, tyranny, and the like, seem always more vivid and significant than the mundane details of slowly evolving human life. Sagas are replete with heroes going on quests, achieving great things against daunting, even terrible odds: Beowulf, Alexander, Cesar, Joan of Arc (even Frodo Baggins and Harry Potter), Quetzalcoatl, the ball-playing twins of the Popol Vuh, the Maya kings whose exploits are carved into battered stelae or painted on ruined walls, and undoubtedly other forgotten heroes of lost Cuauhnahuauc, Monte Albán, Cacaxtla, and Teotihuacan. The primordial titles are not obviously sagas, but the heroes in them do achieve great things in their own ways and in the eyes of whoever wrote these texts. Doña María Salomé and don Toribio are the founding couple, the same kind of autochthonous pair seen by Jim Lockhart in other titles from other places. Together they preside over and actively realize the saga of Quauhnahuauc’s emergence as Cuernavaca. They are Cuernavaca’s Adam and Eve, its Oxomoco and Cipactonal, the founding human pair of the Nahua people of the fifth sun.\textsuperscript{41}

The primordial titles’ general lack of attention to the upheavals of the Spaniards’ military invasion and the catastrophe of the epidemic-induced demographic disaster seem at first to rob them of the stature of records of epic times, of being full and accurate chronicles of the past. Most professional scholars have by now embraced the idea that “history” is a far more complex intellectual phenomenon than some kind of assemblage of “facts” which are “true” (though I suspect that the vast majority of people, including large numbers of neophyte history majors, still equate “history” with “fact” and “truth”). We are learning to accept other visions of the past which do not adhere to our time-honored conventions, to view them as valuable tools for understanding different times, places, cultures, and world views. Still, the perplexing timelessness of so many primordial titles, which

\textsuperscript{39}López Austín 1990, pp. 314–16.
\textsuperscript{40}Christian 1981b, pp. 78, 125, 178.
\textsuperscript{41}Lockhart 1991, pp. 46–49; López Austin 1996, 100–07.
PRIMORDIAL TITLES

moreover are obviously later colonial records despite the supposedly conquest-era eyewitness testimony offered in them, continues to discourage their widespread scholarly acceptance.

As a way out of this situation, I think that we should consider the possibility that the inaccurate and distorted-seeming narrative presented in the titles is actually what might be called “elders’ wisdom” that had been passed down over the generations in various forms, both oral and written, pictorial and alphabetic, until someone distilled it into the written documents which have survived. As immemorial wisdom, the information was by definition true even though worldly-wise later colonial indigenous citizens of Cuernavaca and elsewhere might have found some of it to be out of step with their current realities. It had happened a long time ago, far beyond the limits of living memory, so that the fragmented recollection of the past surviving within the indigenous community was by default the only authentic history left. Few entities had produced a historian at the level of Chimalpahin or Zapata y Mendoza to put things “right.”

Nonetheless, the depiction of Cuernavaca’s conquest-era leaders as instant and enthusiastic allies of Cortés is not completely inaccurate. The “instant,” welcoming part is certainly off the mark. The Spaniards had to subdue Quauhnahuaç by force of arms, though the battle took less than a day. Soon after the dust had settled, noble representatives of the altepetl came before Cortés and offered to become his allies, saying with possible justice that the Mexica garrison had forced them to fight, an explanation the invader chose to accept, an offer he could not refuse. Warriors from Quauhnahuaç participated in the final siege of Tenochtitlan and were active in other battles waged against Mexica allies.42 Later, the leaders and people of the emerging villa of Cuernavaca did help build the first churches, did participate in the initiation of tribute payment to Cortés and to the crown, or in other words carried out the acts described in the primordial titles. As far as the claims of Christian zealotry are concerned, Cuernavaca actually did gain a reputation among friar-chroniclers as a place that had been more receptive than many to the coming of the new faith.43

The one-day assault on Quauhnahuaç by the Spaniards began a process lasting decades during which elements of what some still often call the “colonial system,” including the Catholic church, were fastened on Cuernavaca. It was this process, not the violence of battle, which seems to have stuck in the consciousness of local keepers of historical memory precisely because the changes wrought during this era of dislocation, reconstruction, and rebirth had a profound and lasting impact on the lives of Tlalhuica Cuernavacans. In other words, though Spaniards may have seen the glorious history of their successful military defeat of the Mesoamericans as the watershed of New Spain’s history, the indigenous Cuernavacans and others like them did not. In the primordial titles they crafted their own seminal point of emergence, their own epic times, by celebrating events that were in their view far more important, the stages in the creation of their

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postcontact altepetl. The primordial titles are an authentic depiction of this historical divide.

In the same way, the apparent contrivance suggested by the formulaic similarities of titles written all over New Spain is, I believe, more apparent than real. It is the result of a compilation of information drawn from a number of different precontact “community charter” kinds of recordkeeping traditions given a thin and imperfect overlay of European-style conventions.\(^{44}\) Annals are one of these surviving traditions. In common with other primordial titles, several of the Cuernavacan examples have snippets of what seem to be annals entries, year-by-year listings of important human and cosmic events in the life of the community. Even though the cross apparition narrative of the Códice seems to conform more or less to Catholic-style miracle stories, on another level it is the same kind of “stellar event” (in both cosmic and mundane senses) that would have been featured in precontact annals.\(^{45}\) Yet the fragments of annals-like content are not arranged in the standard, linear march of the years so characteristic of that genre. Instead, the stories of the arrival of Cortés, the heroes’ efforts to build churches, and even the cross apparition story are scattered throughout the text in discrete sections of their own.

Another precontact model for this kind of presentation can be found, however, in the event-oriented histories, such as Mixtec genealogical-historical codices, called res gestae by Elizabeth Hill Boone. “Event and participant”—what happened to whom—are the most important elements here. Chronology is much less important than the events which drive the narrative.\(^{46}\) In the primordial titles of Cuernavaca the arrival of Cortés, the construction of the first churches, and the apparition of the cross are all events associated with the agency of participants, Cuernavacan lords and heroes such as don Toribio Sandoval de San Martín Cortés and doña María Salomé. Chronology is “immaterial” in that long stretches of “real time” are collapsed into a brief moment of creative force in a kind of primordial “first time.”\(^{47}\) Typical of the res gestae-style event-oriented histories, the heroes’ actions are really ritual acts reaffirming the preexisting stature of the polity, at the same time establishing the legitimacy of the altepetl and those who rule it in keeping with the new “colonial” situation.

In this “first time” the legitimacy of land tenure is asserted in the ubiquitous boundary descriptions. Just as these detailed surveys are not simply utilitarian prose maps of property markers and limits, they also spring from the very core of the primordial titles’ organizational logic. This logic is provided by a precontact pictorial form known today as cartographic histories. In the cartographic histories, territories are delimited by a series of descriptive and place glyphs arranged around a featured altepetl center. Once again, time is not particularly important, with the narrative being determined by geographic space. According to Elizabeth Hill Boone, glyphs painted on the cartographic texts provide “mnemonic cues to

\(^{44}\) See Boone 1998, pp. 30–31, speaking about what she calls “city charters” created by Nahuas and others in the precontact era.


\(^{46}\) Boone 2000, pp. 71, 75.

\(^{47}\) Furst 1990, pp. 123, 128.
the events that occurred there.”\textsuperscript{48} The glyphs in pictorial cartographic histories could be read in various orders from a variety of starting points, meaning that the thread of the historical narrative running through them was not fixed. These characteristics can help explain how and why the historical narrative of the primordial titles seems “confused” to many of us now.\textsuperscript{49} Though some cartographic pictorials emphasize the movement of people across a landscape, culminating in a new foundation, others, such as some codices from the Tetzcoco area, stress foundation itself as the historical catalyst.\textsuperscript{50} This is exactly what is going on in Cuernavaca’s primordial titles. Now instead of boundary narratives with historical references scattered haphazardly throughout, we have a prose rendition of a cartographic history text in which \textit{res gestae}-type events are recalled in association with specific “mnemonic cues” in the landscape. Within its own indigenous context, this is a thoroughly logical and effective way of organizing information.

What about the charge that the primordial titles represent a narrow, elite vision rather than a more general “indigenous” one? It is indeed likely that the authors, or at least the instigators, of titles such as the Códice Municipal de Cuernavaca were in some sense members of the villa’s male indigenous ruling elite. In general, however, as I will proceed to discuss just below, the writing in títulos, across the whole genre in various localities, varies distinctly from the more polished and lucid vocabulary and syntax seen in annals and notarial documents; it has precisely a popular flavor. And the declamatory language of the documents, the constant reminders that the audience should listen carefully and remember what they are hearing, suggest that the titles were regularly read publicly. They may even have been performed. It is easy to imagine a group of town officers and more humble Tlalhuica citizens of Cuernavaca marching across the landscape, the leader reading the boundary narrative aloud as they went. Though it would be impossible to trace the borders of Cuernavaca today, there were undoubtedly those who could do it in the colonial era, who knew which tree, which rock, which stopping point on the edge of a ravine was indicated by the text. From time to time the action would halt, and a particular historical incident or memory brought to mind by particular places would be intoned. In this way, what had started perhaps as an elite indigenous vision of Cuernavaca and its past could have become the collective memory of the greater community.

The authorship of primordial titles remains a thorny issue. The many quirks and orthographic anomalies found in many of the central Mexican examples, their lack of mastery of notarial vocabulary and conventions, their common lack of precision when it comes to the identities and titles of Spanish officials such as viceroys and even kings, among other things, have led Jim Lockhart to postulate that the authors were likely literate but “non-professional.”\textsuperscript{51} Finding the same kind of stylistic and orthographic situation—as well as the presence of identical blocks of text—in titles from communities geographically remote from one another in the Valley of Toluca and the Chalco area, Stephanie Wood concurs,

\textsuperscript{48}Boone 2000, pp. 77–81, 164.  \textsuperscript{49}Boone 2000, p. 61.  \textsuperscript{50}Boone 2000, p. 194.  \textsuperscript{51}Lockhart 1991, p. 41.
suggesting that titles authors were probably “poorly educated, socially precarious” members of resident indigenous political factions who lacked meaningful political power. These authors were “recording and amending local lore to suit [their] needs” on the pages of the primordial titles. Wood has speculated that there even might have been some kind of primordial title “workshop” or at least a lively exchange of information, ideas, and orthographic styles in central Mexico; this is a possible explanation for those shared blocks of text, for instance.\textsuperscript{52}

Another layer of complexity and doubt is added by the many Cuernavacan titles, which are less unorthodox orthographically even if they share other characteristics of the titles studied by Lockhart and by Wood. While this does not necessarily mean that professional notaries had a hand in writing Cuernavaca’s documents, a survey I carried out for my first book indicated that literacy in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was not widespread among the local indigenous population.\textsuperscript{53} No humble people seemed to have been able to scrawl their own names, let alone read or write in any language, and only a small minority of the male leadership—the faction-ridden group that provided town officers for the municipality—were literate. There were some literate, landowning caciques in the area, men who had entered the Spanish world economically and culturally to a great extent. However, they had generally speaking divorced themselves from the internal life (political and otherwise) of their home communities. Setting aside professional notaries, there were few people besides the most politically prominent, high-level men who could have written the Nahuatl primordial titles in Cuernavaca.

The many positive statements about the crown and the church found in the titles belong to a complex going back as far as the famous Nahua tl letter (1560) sent by the leaders of Huejotzingo to the king in Spain.\textsuperscript{54} This kind of rhetorical loyalty had become a canonical element in altepetl statements, so much so that though we might be tempted to connect it with a leading group, we could just as well say that it was universal in the Nahua written literature. In the end, we need more and better comparative studies of primordial titles from many different regions, and perhaps some lucky archival discoveries, before we will be able to come to a definitive conclusion about authorship. Suffice it to say that those who wrote the titles were somewhat literate indigenous men with some connection to the local power group, even if they were not usually professional notaries or, perhaps, not always members of the most politically influential clique. Perhaps we need to make a distinction between higher-ranking initiators of the titles and lower-ranking figures who actually compiled and wrote them, making use of miscellaneous sources and popular lore.

\textsuperscript{52}Wood 1998b, pp. 211–14.
\textsuperscript{53}Haskett 1991, pp. 136–43.
\textsuperscript{54}Lockhart and Otte 1976, pp. 167–71. As in many primordial titles, the council members of Huejotzingo claimed that they had voluntarily welcomed and aided Hernando Cortés (called the Marqués, just as he was in the later Cuernavacan documents), had fed and supplied the Spaniards, had welcomed the newly arriving Franciscans (the Twelve, also invoked in the Cuernavacan examples), and had willingly paid tribute.
The primordial titles were assembled from the bits and pieces of an indigenous memory which stretched far back in time. Everything in them was bent to the cause of asserting the enduring legitimacy and autonomy of the altepetl. This may not have reflected “reality” exactly as we would have recorded it, but the primordial titles packaged the past in a way that helped the community, its leaders, and its people to maintain pride and cope with the vicissitudes of the colonial era. This is what it was essential for everyone to remember, so that Cuernavaca would endure.

Bibliography


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