Sixteenth-Century Tlaxcalan Pictorial Documents on the Conquest of Mexico

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ALTHOUGH MY training is primarily in art history, I have also long been interested in what is called “history” plain and simple and have taken courses in it; I have also devoted considerable study to the older written form of Nahuatl. I have brought all these interests to my study of the early postconquest pictorial material prepared by indigenous people and have found them all relevant to a series of Tlaxcalan productions which I look at here both in themselves, as “texts,” and in connection with the broader historical context as seen in alphabetically written sources of various kinds.

At various points in the sixteenth century, artists in the great Nahua complex altepetl of Tlaxcala painted images concerning the military alliance established between Tlaxcalan rulers and Hernando Cortés in the conquest of Mexico and surrounding regions. The pictorials on this subject known today are: (1) a manuscript fragment of four scenes on a folio of native bark paper in the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, probably the earliest of these pictorials, based on style and content (Figs. 1–2); (2) a mid-sixteenth century painting on a large cloth panel, or lienzo, commonly referred to as the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, which is now missing but can be reconstructed principally from two copies made directly from the original (Figs. 3–5); and (3) 156 ink drawings included with a manuscript, which is now at the University of Glasgow (MS Hunter 242), but compiled originally between 1580 and 1585 by the Tlaxcalan historian Diego Muñoz Camargo; this work is entitled the Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala de la Nueva España . . . (hereafter, the Descripción) (Fig. 6).

Klaus Jäcklein found the Descripción, which had previously been unknown in the field, in 1976. Muñoz Camargo’s manuscript revealed to scholars for the first time that an early version of the Tlaxcalan conquest narrative had been recorded in painting in a hall of the palace of Xicotencatl in Tizatla and that another version existed in the corridor and hall of the Casas reales, the municipal-council building. Both works, probably murals, were destroyed at some time before the present. In other words, with the finding of the Descripción, we learn that the Tlaxcalan version of conquest events was repeated pictorially at different points throughout the sixteenth century and thus that there was a larger corpus of this visual narrative than previously known. Jäcklein’s discovery, therefore, proved to be a boon to ethnohistorians and art historians alike, but particularly for me in that I was provided with a compelling

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Fig. 1 Manuscript fragment, Tlaxcalan conquest pictorial, scenes 1 and 4, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin. By permission.
dissertation topic.

I was introduced to the Tlaxcalan conquest pictorials in an art history seminar of Cecelia Klein at UCLA. In this course students were encouraged to examine critically the visual claims made in postcontact pictorials. Previous scholars have generally agreed that the Tlaxcalteca used pictorials of the conquest to claim economic and political privileges from Spanish officials by reminding them of the role that Tlaxcala had played in Spain’s victory. Until now, however, no one had studied all of the Tlaxcalan conquest images known today, comparing and contrasting them to determine why the pictorial strategies evolved across the sixteenth century. In making this analysis, I found that the known Tlaxcalan pictorial documents recorded Tlaxcala’s version of conquest events with an overall consistency of composition and content. There are some differences between them, however, in their form and particularly in additions to the imagery in the later pictorials. These changes were difficult to interpret in isolation. But when I lined the pictorials up chronologically and compared them in relation to each other and to sixteenth-century alphabetic sources in both Nahuatl and Spanish, the reasons for the differences became clear. I came to see that the pictorial strategies were in accord with those found in other kinds of sources. As a result of my study, I will make some statements on how these pictorial documents can be used in Mesoamerican ethnohistorical and philological research. The principal contributions are to the study of (1) the transition from oral to written forms of expression, and (2) the colonial altepetl: its structure, leadership, and internal and external rivalries.

**Manuscript fragment at the University of Texas, Austin**

Based on style and content, the manuscript fragment at the University of Texas, Austin, appears to be the oldest of the Tlaxcalan conquest pictorials that remain or of which we have a copy. As such, it is useful for research on the postcontact Nahua transition from oral to written expression of the past and for examining an early representation of the complex altepetl. Scenes painted in color of Tlaxcalan leaders welcoming Cortés are featured on the leaves of a single folded sheet. Its size indicates that the codex was intended to be viewed by a single person or small group. The anonymous work is without provenience but is known to have been in Tlaxcala in the nineteenth century.

The preconquest practice of using pictorials in oral recital probably continued to be employed in the initial decades following the conquest; in the 1530s the orthography of Nahuatl was still being developed, and the first indigenous writers were being trained. Even in the middle decades of the sixteenth century, when Nahuatl alphabetic writing was well established, traditional Nahua pictographic expression continued, following preconquest practices but with changes in form and subject matter. Alphabetic writing was often used to express what had been previously the oral component of a recital: an interpretation or elaboration that

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3See Lockhart 1992, p. 330. From 1519 to ca. 1540–50, records were expressed pictorially with an accompanying oral component. From ca. 1540–50 to ca. 1640–50, pictorials were still used but the oral information began to be recorded alphabetically. By 1640-50 to 1800, information was recorded primarily by alphabetic means.
Fig. 2  Manuscript fragment, Tlaxcalan conquest pictorial, scenes 2 and 3, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin. By permission.
went beyond the pictorial. Later examples of pictorial expression often leave space for alphabetic comment. The placement of the Nahuatl text in the composition of the Texas fragment suggests a date earlier than the Lienzo. Andrea Stone has observed that the glosses appear to be very early, but that no space was provided for them and they often run across the pictures (See Figs. 1 and 2).  

This arrangement reveals that, while the Texas scenes are obviously postcontact in content, the artist adhered to the earlier practice of pictorial and oral expression. Thus the alphabetic text had to be squeezed in after the painting was already made.

The postcontact subject matter of the Texas fragment is expressed using both Nahua and Spanish forms of communication, so that the pictorial provides an opportunity to identify new as well as traditional conventions in style and imagery. In scene 1 the location is given by a precontact-style toponym comprised of water falling over rocks, representing “water” (atl in Nahuatl) and “to fall,” (huetzi) to convey Atlihuetzyan, a major settlement of Tizatla, one of the four divisions of the complex altepetl Tlaxcala (Fig. 1). In the second scene Cortés is greeted by the ruler of Tizatla, Xicotencatl, who is indicated by the type of cloak he wears and by his red and white twisted headband featuring a feather ornament, a Tlaxcalan insignia of rulership rank (Fig. 2).  

Cortés and Xicotencatl meet on a path with footprints, a precontact convention to express travel, but here with hoofprints as well to signify the presence of the Spaniards. The native artist must have had some exposure to European painting, since there are clear attempts at modeling, as in the depiction of Cortés’s clothes. Yet the colors of the Texas pictorial are largely unmodulated, flat washes bordered by a frame line, as in precontact painting, suggesting an early date of composition.

In scenes 3 and 4 of the Texas fragment the figures of the rulers are identified through precontact name glyphs as well as by alphabetic glosses in Nahuatl, evidencing the transitional state of the work (Fig. 1 and 2). What is distinguished in the early Texas fragment, as first observed by Stone, is that while the rulers of the four constituent altepetl of the complex altepetl of Tlaxcala are named, only Xicotencatl wears the red and white twisted headband of rulership rank. He is also consistently shown in a privileged position in relation to the other rulers, either leading them or being seated with Cortés while the others stand. This special

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5See Nicholson 1967 for the origin and meaning of this device. Elsewhere I have suggested that since the early extant Texas scenes of the Tlaxcalan conquest narrative show only Xicotencatl wearing this insignia of lordly rank of Tlaxcalan tradition while the corresponding scenes (and many of the other drawings) in the Descripción depict nearly all the Tlaxcalteca wearing the twisted headband, it is possible that the symbol may have taken on new or additional meaning in the colonial period as observed in this chronological comparison.

6Xicotencatl is named by an indigenous glyph showing a bumblebee or xicotli. Maxixcatzin, the ruler of the Tlaxcalan region of Ocotoloco, is identified by a water glyph to hint at urination, for the verb axixa, “to urinate,” makes up the bulk of his name. Tlheuxoloteuctli’s name, Fire Turkey-Cock Lord, is composed of the words tletl, “fire,” huexolotl, “turkey cock,” and teuctli, “lord”; hence the red and black turkey-head name glyph.
Fig. 3  Lienzo de Tlaxcala, main scene, *Antigüedades mexicanas*, private collection.
recognition given to Xicotencatl may indicate a deference to this lord because the events took place in his region. Perhaps the artist was from Tizatla, and therefore favored his own ruler following typical altepetl micropatriotism. Scene 4 depicts the Tlaxcalan lords presenting gifts and women to Cortés and the other Spaniards (Fig. 1). Five daughters of Tlaxcalan lords stand facing the interpreter Marina. Two of these were daughters of Xicotencatl. Other unidentified women are also depicted. Beneath them are the luxurious gifts of gold, feather work, finely woven blankets, and precious stones.

Scene 4 is particularly significant in understanding the function of these Tlaxcalan conquest images. It documents the ceremonial contract for the formation of a military alliance between the Tlaxcalteca and the Spaniards. In Mesoamerican practice, marriage was a common means by which to establish ties between groups at all levels. Gifts were given to celebrate elite marriages. Scene 4 of the Texas manuscript fragment depicts the ritual used to establish alliances through marriage and gift-giving to express a new political relationship, but following Mesoamerican traditions as evidence of these alliances. After the conquest the Nahua continued to believe in the power of pictures as evidence. The Texas fragment, then, offers traditional visual evidence of a traditional alliance formation between an altepetl and another group. That much is clear even though the oral component has been lost and the full context is not known.

**Lienzo de Tlaxcala**

The same Tlaxcalan narrative of the conquest events shown in the Texas fragment appears in an expanded form in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala (Figs. 3–5), which was kept in the municipal council building of Tlaxcala. This anonymous work is now missing but can be reconstructed from various sources, among them an extant late copy. Our principal source of information on the commission of the now lost Lienzo de Tlaxcala is don Nicolás Faustino Mazihcatzin y Calmecahua, a municipal official in Tlaxcala who wrote a detailed description of the painting, including the glosses. By his account, Viceroy don Luis de Velasco commissioned the painting, along with two others of the same subject that are now also missing, during his administration from 1550 to 1564. The execution of the work was overseen by the Tlaxcalan municipal council or cabildo.

The Lienzo de Tlaxcala contained one large rectangular main scene at the top of the panel, and beneath this image were 87 smaller scenes in boxes arranged in sequential order along 13 rows. The images were drawn in clear, simple compositions that could be viewed by many people in a public celebration of the community’s history.

The copies show that the main scene of the Lienzo fully diagrams basic

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7 See Boone 2000, p. 73, fig. 37; Marcus 1992, p. 383, fig. 11.22; Brumfiel and Earle 1987, pp. 112–14.
9 Mazihcatzin 1927. Juan Manuel Yllañes made the oldest copy of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala in 1773, don Nicolás Faustino Mazihcatzin y Calmecahua wrote his description of the Lienzo in 1787, and, following Diódoro Serrano’s copy and tracings of the Lienzo from the nineteenth century, Genaro López made lithographs that were published by Alfredo Chavero with his commentary in *Antigüedades mexicanas* in 1892.
Fig. 4  Lienzo de Tlaxcala, scene 7, *Antigüedades mexicanas*, private collection.
elements of the complex altepetl structure (Fig. 3). Replacing the toponym of the *tlaxcalli*, or tortilla, for Tlaxcala is its colonial insignia set within a traditional Nahua hill sign to represent an altepetl. The ensemble features the coat of arms that Charles V granted in 1535 to the city and province of Tlaxcala with the title “Loyal City.” It also depicts the Virgin of the Assumption, the patroness of Tlaxcala, within an architectural façade, corresponding to the preconquest tradition of the deity and main temple to mark an altepetl. The glosses in this painting name Cortés, Spanish viceroy don Antonio de Mendoza and don Luis de Velasco, bishop don Sebastián Ramírez de Fuenleal, who served as president of the Royal Audiencia, the high court residing in Mexico City, and members of the first and second Royal Audiencia. The four constituent altepetl of the complex ethnic state are represented by the rulers (*tlatoque*) of these entities, following the Nahua traditional definition of an altepetl by a specific territory and ruler: Xicotencatl of Tizatla (upper left), Maxixcatzin of Ocotololco (upper right), Tlehuexolotzin of Tepeticpac (lower left), and Citalpopocatzin of Quiahuiztlan (lower right). Each unit contributed equally to the obligations of the altepetl in a fixed order of rotation. In the case of Tlaxcala, this order traditionally followed a historical sequence beginning with the oldest settlement: Tepeticpac followed by Ocotololco, Tizatla, and Quiahuiztlan respectively. At the time that the Lienzo de Tlaxcala was painted, Ocotololco and Tizatla were the two most powerful divisions and are each shown in the main scene with a church and a *fiscal*, an indigenous church steward, whereas the other two divisions are not (Fig. 3). Such a representation may indicate internal competition, typical of the cellular structure of these units. Tizatla is shown with the most lordly houses, or *teccalli*, perhaps, as with the Texas pictorial, favoring this constituent altepetl over the others.  

Colonial Nahua pictorials sometimes served for self-identification, to preserve memories of the past, and to secure high-status positions. The main scene of the Lienzo appears to document the rulers, other distinguished leaders, and warriors at the time of the conquest and preserve their memory. It is clear from the Tlaxcalan municipal council records, written in Nahuatl, that many of the descendants of this group long continued in high municipal office.

A distinctive element of sociopolitical organization in the eastern Nahua region was the development of the powerful *teccalli*, or lordly house. The main scene of the Lienzo provides evidence of this institution and can be used for research to identify the lords in the sixteenth century, although with caution, as the glosses come from eighteenth-century copies. In the four quadrants of the main scene, *teteuctin*, lords, heads of lordly houses, are depicted. They wear the twisted headband associated with lordly rank and are placed within a sign that represented, by convention, a house or *calli*, conveying together a *teccalli*, the

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10Yllañas glosses the House of Citalpopoca as being at the site of Tlapitzahuacan, a town in the northern part of Quiahuiztlan. As Tepeticpac proved weaker, the predominant sixteenth-century order was Ocotololco, Tizatla, Quiahuiztlan, and Tepeticpac. In other words, the order remained the same, but it started in a different place. Lockhart 1992, pp. 16–17, 33; Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson 1976, p. 6.

11See Lockhart 1992, pp. 102–09 and the literature there referred to. Some lords listed in the Padrones de Tlaxcala are also glossed in the main scene of the Lienzo. See Anguiano and Chapa 1976, p. 135. See also Reyes García 1993, pp. 208–09.
Fig. 5  Lienzo de Tlaxcala, scene 5, *Antigüedades mexicanas*, private collection.
lordly establishment with its related lands.

In the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, the Tlaxcalan warrior don Antonio Calmecahua of Ocotelolco is represented as a *teuicli* in the main scene. His name is also glossed in many of the conquest scenes of the painting according to Mazihcatzin y Calmecahua’s description and Yllañes’s copy. After the conquest, he is listed in the Actas as a member of the cabildo in the position of regidor. The Lienzo thus may have served to advertise the antecedents of lineages which were represented on the cabildo. In any case, it proves to be a useful resource for researching the ruling elites of Tlaxcala both during the conquest period and later.

Several entries in the Actas make clear the cabildo’s concern for the welfare of the lords and integrity of the lordly houses. They complain that commoners’ production of cochineal was not good for Tlaxcala, allegedly reducing the supply of foodstuffs and making them uppity toward the lords (and also implicitly competing with the nobles’ own cochineal production). Another entry records complaints that commoners were claiming noble status to avoid tribute payment. In yet another entry, the lordly houses themselves are said to be crumbling because so many noblemen were selling their lands, and fear is expressed that the commoners buying the land may succeed in becoming noblemen. Unlike the Texas fragment as we know it, and the Descripción, the main scene of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, then, may be addressing an internal point of contention in the 1550s. The pictorials in the town council buildings were most likely used in public ceremonies in which the descendants of nobles and warriors depicted in the imagery would benefit. The cabildo had a painting executed in the mid-sixteenth century that showed traditional Nahua lordly structures at a time when they may have been under challenge.

When comparing Tlaxcalan conquest images to related Spanish and Nahuatl alphabetic sources, it becomes clear how the images functioned in petitioning Spain. As a reward for military assistance in the conquest, Tlaxcala remained under the direct administration of the royal government rather than being given out to Spaniards in encomienda. Gibson suggested long ago that the Tlaxcalans kept up a constant campaign of petitions and reports to maintain and augment their privileges, and that a version of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala may have been sent with a delegation to Spain to petition the king. The Tlaxcalan cabildo minutes of June 17, 1552, indeed record the council’s plan to send a delegation to Spain to lay Tlaxcala’s troubles before the emperor. General contributions were to pay the expenses. A painting of Cortés’s arrival in Tlaxcala and the war and conquest was to be prepared for presentation to the emperor; two regidores were to oversee the project, arranging for artists’ supplies through the city majordomo and choosing the artists. At the time of the entry, it was not decided whether the painting should be on cloth (*tilmatli*) or paper (*amatl*).

This project surely sounds like the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. In any case, a pictorial was perceived to be a necessary accompaniment to an oral presentation of

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12 Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986, p. 128.
13 Ibid., pp. 48, 53, 80.
14 Ibid., p. 51.
Tlaxcalan claims, not only to prompt a narrative but also as a pictorial record to document the conquest events involving the Tlaxcalans. Indeed, the entry reads as if a pictorial to accompany the recital of merits was a standard practice. Since such a pictorial could be on either cloth or paper, the Texas fragment, which is on native paper, similarly may have been presented in such a recital. Its purpose, as always, would have been to document the alliance formed between Cortés and Tlaxcala to the Spanish officials in hopes of favorable treatment.

Further evidence of the pervasiveness of this kind of recital comes from a later cabildo minutes entry, from November 16, 1562. The cabildo had to account for a large number of official acts during the previous five-year period in the type of judicial review that the Spaniards called a residencia. But they were not satisfied with such narrow justification. They thought it necessary to tell again all of the merits of Tlaxcala from the first arrival of Cortés, writing into the minutes the essence of the whole familiar story: that their forefathers greeted the Spaniards peacefully and supplied them; that many Tlaxcalans, noblemen and commoners, lost life and property helping the Spaniards in war, in Mexico City and all over New Spain; that from that time forward they had been greatly afflicted with tribute in kind and labor duties; that they had suffered greatly in giving the Spaniards logistical support for military activity in Veracruz; and that for all their services they had been paid nothing.

Petitions for favors were to accompany the recital, such as that the tribute of commoners be raised and the city keep the excess, and summer pasturing in Tlaxcala by Spaniards be curtailed. An alcalde, a regidor, and a Spanish interpreter were to go to Mexico City to make the presentation and were expected to make use of the services of Spanish lawyers.\footnote{Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986, pp. 62–63 and 119–21.}

Based on its style and content, I place the Texas fragment at an earlier date than either of these entries from the cabildo minutes. It may have served as a pictorial document at the time of a recital of merits at an earlier presentation of requests to Spanish authority. We know, for example, that in 1535 the Tlaxcalteca had sought and received recognition for their conquest services from the royal government when the city was named “La Leal Ciudad de Tlaxcala” (the Loyal City of Tlaxcala) and granted its official coat of arms from Spain.\footnote{Gibson 1952, pp. 62–63, 229.}

Gibson found alphabetic documents of petition from Tlaxcala to the crown government; however, he did not compare them to the Tlaxcalan conquest pictorials. When I made such a comparison, I discovered that the same information presented visually in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala was essentially stated alphabetically in the written petitions for favors. A letter of petition written in Spanish and presented before the king by Tlaxcalan ambassadors, dated March 1, 1562, and a report written in Spanish, dated 1565, and signed by some conquistador witnesses, also follows the Tlaxcalan pictorial narrative of conquest events closely.\footnote{See Kranz 2001, pp. 237, for bibliography on these texts.} This report was ordered by the indigenous Tlaxcalan governor and the cabildo for presentation to Spanish officials in Mexico City and Puebla. Such documents
allowed me to conclude that the Tlaxcalan conquest narrative was most likely expressed initially in a visual form. It would have been accompanied by an oral recital of claims which later came to be placed completely in alphabetic writing in these petitions. The written documents closely followed the pictorial accounts, with added details most likely originally recited. The brief Nahuatl glosses found in the pictorials would indicate a transitional stage between the visual tradition of expression and a full alphabetic text representing the original oral component of the narrative. In other words, my examination of the Tlaxcalan conquest images in relation to petitions of the period led me to realize that the pictorials could shed light on the written documents. They indicate that the written arguments emerged from an oral form of expression and provide some of the elaboration that may have been included in the original oral component.

The letter to the king written in Spanish from the Tlaxcalan cabildo in 1562 focuses first upon the Tlaxcalan alliance with the Spaniards during the conquest. This letter served as one more reminder to the crown that the Tlaxcalteca received the Spaniards with “love and peace” and gave them many gifts of “gold, precious stones, other necessities of value, and food.” The report from 1565 also asserts that the Tlaxcalteca welcomed Cortés peacefully, “became his friends,” and provided the Spaniards with food and lodging and “all that was necessary every day that they were there.” All the Tlaxcalan conquest pictorials depict this peaceful welcoming of the Spaniards, their providing of food, and the presenting of gifts (Figs. 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6).

Items 5 through 7 of the 1565 report address the first allied military effort entered into by the Tlaxcalans and the Spaniards, which took place at Cholula. The report states that when Cortés entered Cholula, “the Tlaxcalans helped him and stayed with him,” and explains how the Tlaxcalan rulers protected Cortés by providing warriors and provisions, thereby supporting him in a decisive victory. This first battle is depicted in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala in scene 9.

Furthermore, both the written petitions and the Lienzo refer to battles to the north at Xochipilla in the hostile Chichimeca region and to the south in Guatemala. A comparison between the Lienzo and the petitions indicates the transition from oral to written expression in that the petitions include an elaboration on the difficulty and danger the Tlaxcalans encountered in these expeditions for which they had received no favors. The Lienzo de Tlaxcala, then, proves also to be useful in researching where the Tlaxcalteca claimed to have gone with the Spaniards as military allies. Muñoz Camargo’s Descripción provides even more battle sites.

The drawings in Diego Muñoz Camargo’s Descripción and the broader context

The Descripción was a relación geográfica, a geographic report, and is often referred to as the Relación geográfica de Tlaxcala. Muñoz Camargo was a mesti- zo whose writing indicates that he identified with Spaniards culturally, but whose work as a propagandist for indigenous Tlaxcala was the focus of his career.¹⁸ His

¹⁸See Gibson 1950.
Fig. 6 Diego Muñoz Camargo, Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala (MS. Hunter 242), drawing 34, by permission of the Department of Special Collections, Glasgow University Library.
prose manuscript answers a Spanish questionnaire on the basic facts of Spain’s dominions in the New World. As a more or less official Tlaxcalan historian, Muñoz Camargo included in his geographic report an expansive account of matters of concern to the altepetl: the foundation and preconquest history of Tlaxcala, the arrival of Cortés and the welcome he received by the Tlaxcalans, the Tlaxcalans’ conversion to Christianity, the aid that they gave to the Spaniards in the defeat of Tenochtitlan, and the establishment of the colonial city of Tlaxcala. The 156 anonymous ink drawings, by more than one hand, that are included with the manuscript depict Tlaxcalan rulers, the Tlaxcalans’ introduction to Christianity, diagrams of sites in Tlaxcala, portraits of explorer-conquerors and Hapsburg monarchs who ruled Spain in the sixteenth century, and scenes of the Tlaxcalans welcoming the Spaniards and aiding them in the conquest. In other words, the corpus has a generic similarity to the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, but varies from and expands upon it.

Muñoz Camargo’s manuscripts have a complex and not fully understood history, which need not detain us here. The Descripción is in the hand of a scribe; the Spanish glosses beneath the drawings are in this same hand. Tragically, the top of the pages of the Descripción containing the drawings was trimmed, so that many of the Nahuatl glosses (by a different hand) have been lost. Most of the Nahuatl glosses still legible in the drawings of the Descripción appear to correspond to Nahuatl glosses in parallel scenes in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, with some variations in orthography suggesting a common source. For example, Scene 28 of the Lienzo and the corresponding scene 56 in the Descripción, concerning Hueiotlipan, both state, “There the lords met them; they gave them everything edible.” The Descripción follows the Lienzo in the brevity of the Nahuatl gloss despite its later time of origin. What is new in the Descripción is the Spanish text beneath some of the images. It explains what is occurring in the image but elaborates with additional details or surrounding events, most likely some of the information that had been included in an earlier oral recital. It explains how Cortés rested in Hueiotlipan, but also how the enemy were forced back into their own lands by the many people Maxixcatzin sent to help at the cost of many lives. The text ends saying that Cortés gave Maxixcatzin a standard.

The alphabetic text and the drawings are on two different types of paper, suggesting that the two sections were made separately, then bound together. The Spanish writing beneath the drawings is in a standard iron gall ink, while the drawings themselves and the Nahuatl glosses are in a blacker ink that contained more carbon. Yet because the Spanish writing in the text is the same as that of the Spanish glosses under the Descripción drawings, one can deduce that the relación text and the drawings were intended to be presented together as a single unit. Andrea Martínez points to some cross-references from the images to the text. Muñoz Camargo, then, always conceived of a set of pictures to accompany his text. The Tlaxcalan conquest imagery was a well established corpus and hard to

19 Some of it can be seen in Acuña’s commentary in Muñoz Camargo 1984.
20 “Oncan quinamique in tlatoque quimacaque ixquich qualoni.”
21 Martínez Baracs 1990, pp. 152–53.
change by the date of the Descripción in the early 1580s. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the drawings with the written text indicates that the Tlaxcalans at this time still perceived the pictorials to have an “evidentiary” function.

Yet a comparison between the Tlaxcalan conquest pictorials reveals that the representation of the Tlaxcalan arguments could change over time as it was perceived to serve their interest. The details depicted of the ritual of giving of daughters and gifts to convey the formation of an alliance in scene 4 of the Texas fragment have been minimalized in scene 7 of the later Lienzo de Tlaxcala and drawing 34 of the still later Descripción (Figs. 1, 4, and 6). The Tlaxcalteca sought more effective ways to visually articulate their alliance. The early Texas scene depicts the women with clarity and with glosses explaining that daughters of nobles were given to Cortés. The gifts are clearly itemized, taking up a significant portion of the composition and in larger scale in comparison to the human figures than in the Lienzo and Descripción. The corresponding scene in the Lienzo bunches the women together without distinguishing them. The parallel scene in the Descripción reduces the women to only two, and they are presented as mere commodities among the other gifts. Indeed, the Spanish gloss beneath describes them as women and slaves without mentioning anything related to daughters of nobles. While Muñoz Camargo’s written text does mention the marriage of Xicotencatl’s daughter to Pedro de Alvarado, he too writes of women and slaves being offered to the Spaniards but rejected because they were not baptized.22 The giving of women and gifts is de-emphasized over time as the Tlaxcalteca perceived other visual arguments to be more effective in securing privileges from the Spaniards. The late Descripción places a greater emphasis on Tlaxcalan military assistance and depictions of the acceptance of Christianity than the earlier pictorials. This example reveals how much can be learned by a chronological comparison of the Tlaxcalan conquest images.

Other accounts of the conquest written by Spaniards and other Nahuas relate some of the same events addressed by the Tlaxcalans, although with some significant differences that indicate how Tlaxcalan written and pictorial claims were conceived in competition with opposing accounts. In his history of the conquest of 1552, Francisco López de Gómara, who was never in Mexico, relates an incident that occurred upon the initial entrance of the Spaniards into the Tlaxcalan region. At that time, he wrote, the Tlaxcalans wounded two Spaniards and killed two horses, and later denied the action.23 Muñoz Camargo knew of Gómara’s accounts of Cortés’s actions in Mexico, citing Gómara by name. Muñoz Camargo’s version of the conquest includes the narrative of Cortés’s entrance into the Tlaxcalan region and relates the same incident regarding the two Spaniards who were wounded and whose horses were killed. He counters the Spanish account with a competing narrative, however, in which he deflects attention away from Tlaxcalan

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22Muñoz Camargo 1984, pp. 237–38. In her study of the Texas scenes, Andrea Stone found supporting evidence in Ixtlilxóchitl for the presence of the mothers at the ceremony in which the daughters of Tlaxcalan leaders were given to the Spaniards, and Stone argued additionally that some of the women could have been the young women’s servants, citing an account by Bernal Díaz del Castillo.

23Gómara 1943, pp. 158–59
responsibility for the early hostilities by referring to the Otomi warriors in the area. The tension between the narratives is apparent.

The Tlaxcalan conquest pictorials show no battles between the Tlaxcalteca and Spaniards. It was in Tlaxcala’s interest to disassociate itself from any initial conflict with Spain, expound on its contributions, and leave those of anyone else unmentioned. In scene 30 of the Descripción, the glosses specifically identify the indigenous men presenting gifts to Cortés upon his arrival in the region of Tlaxcala as Tlaxcalans, and the artist specifies their Tlaxcalan identity with the familiar twisted headband. Throughout all of the Tlaxcalan conquest pictorials, the artists, with a typical altepetl bias, stress the status of the Tlaxcalans as allies and give no acknowledgment to any other indigenous groups. When examined against related accounts of other types, the Tlaxcalan conquest pictorials can be used in research into the points of contention that existed among indigenous people and Spaniards as they each sought rewards for their conquest services, and the context of particular assertions in the Tlaxcalan materials can be understood more clearly.

Nahuatl sources show that it was not only the Spaniards whom the Tlaxcalans had to counter in their version of the conquest narrative but also other Nahua. In my study with Jim Lockhart, I had the opportunity to review closely the Nahuatl of a letter from the municipal council of Huexotzinco that clinched my understanding of how these Tlaxcalan pictorials operated in a highly competitive environment of rival conquest accounts. In preconquest times, Tlaxcala would often ally with their neighboring altepetl Huexotzinco in battles against the Mexica, although Nahua alliances were ephemeral, existing only to serve the interest of an altepetl at a given time. Both the Tlaxcalteca and the Huexotzinca assisted the Spaniards in the conquest, but in typical altepetl rivalry, each sought privileges from the crown for their own polity alone.

The cabildo of Huexotzinco represented conquest events to the crown government in a letter dated 1560 that sought relief from tribute payments for their altepetl. A close reading of the document reveals a common pattern with that of Tlaxcalan representations, a similar conception in the arguments they made to Spain for privileges. Although both state that they had offered a friendly greeting to the Spaniards upon their arrival and had assisted them throughout the conquest, the petition from Huexotzinco specifically distinguishes the aid of their altepetl from that of Tlaxcala. The letter states, “Although the people who are called and named Tlaxcalans indeed helped, yet we strongly pressed them to give aid, and we admonished them not to make war; but although we so admonished them, they made war and fought for fifteen days,” a reference to the hostilities the Spaniards first encountered when entering Tlaxcala. This point is played down by Muñoz Camargo and completely suppressed in the Tlaxcalan conquest pict-

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25In Lockhart 1993, pp. 288–97. A document from the Archivo General de Indias shows that the indigenous cabildo of Xochimilco also wrote to the crown in 1563 about its own efforts in the conquest on behalf of Spain. The Xochimilca distinguished their contribution from the less helpful Tlaxcalteca “since they [the Tlaxcalteca] came from a distant land, fatigued and without supplies.”
torials. The Huexotzinco letter continues by criticizing the Tlaxcalteca’s skill as warriors: “But as to those Tlaxcalans, several of their nobles were hanged for making war poorly; in many places they ran away, and often they did badly in the war.”

In my research I was amused to find that Muñoz Camargo’s account of the conquest not only omits Huexotzinco as an ally of the Spaniards but instead names the rival altepetl as a conquered polity. He writes:

Having finished this talk and reasoning, Hernando Cortés affirmatively promised the Tlaxcalans that, if our lord God gave him victory, they would share in whatever he should conquer, spoils of gold as well as other riches of all the provinces and kingdoms that should be won and conquered, particularly the city of Cholula and province of Huexotzinco and of Tepeyacac.26

When in reading this Tlaxcalan claim, one could only think, “Wait until they hear about this in Huexotzinco!”

While I cannot say that the Tlaxcalans knew of the letter that the cabildo of Huexotzinco sent to the king, they clearly had learned about the petition process and participated in the tradition of altepetl rivalry. It most likely was because of such rival accounts that the Tlaxcalans added an additional 41 drawings in the Descripción, not included in the Lienzo, depicting Tlaxcalan military assistance all the way to what is today the southwestern United States. These drawings prove to be particularly useful in researching where the Tlaxcalteca claimed to have accompanied the Spaniards in their conquest expeditions. Indeed, the pictorials detail sites not named in Muñoz Camargo’s written account. These battle scenes depict Tlaxcalan military skill in assisting the Spaniards. The scenes show the Tlaxcalans dwarfing the Spaniards, to convey visually that Tlaxcalan support had been the very reason for the Spaniards’ success.

The Tlaxcalans also claimed visually in their pictorials that they had converted to Christianity soon after the first encounter with the Spaniards. As Stone pointed out, scene 5 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala depicts a Christian cross not appearing in the corresponding scene 2 of the Texas fragment (Fig. 2 and 5). I found that when I examined these images in chronological order and in comparison with alphabetic sources, I could attribute this change to the growing Tlaxcalan recognition of how important the propagation of the Christian faith was to the Spaniards. They remodeled their arguments to convey that they had accepted the new beliefs by including a Christian cross where none had been previously.

Since the Texas scenes are a fragment, it is impossible to know what other images once accompanied them. The Lienzo de Tlaxcala and the Descripción, however, clearly include a narrative that documents the Tlaxcalan conversion to Christianity. Scene 8 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala and drawing 33 of the Descripción depict the baptism of the rulers of Tlaxcala soon after the arrival of Cortés in their community. The Spanish text beneath the latter explains that the four lords “asked to be Christians.” Gibson points out that this claim of an early baptism is suspect, as no source written before mid-century mentions the event. Furthermore, there

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26Muñoz Camargo 1892, p. 236.
are contradictions in later accounts, and other corroborating evidence exists.

Tlaxcalan claims of an early conversion to Christianity were also called into question by other Nahuas. In the earlier mentioned letter from 1560 to the emperor from the cabildo of Huexotzinco, the officials directly accused the Tlaxcalteca of refusing to convert to Christianity, unlike themselves. The Huexotzinco letter emphasizes how the first twelve friars who came to give instruction in the region were warmly welcomed by their community, in contradistinction to the Tlaxcalans, who “pushed out and rejected the fathers, and would not receive the faith.” Here again, the Descripción provides evidence of altepetl rivalry in the postcontact period. It is typical that the Tlaxcalans, the most famous and best rewarded of all the altepetl, simply blanked out and ignored their rivals, whereas the others directly point a finger at the more successful Tlaxcala.

These accounts demonstrate that in addressing the acceptance of Christian instruction, the Tlaxcalans faced competing claims. Nearly all of the scenes with Christian imagery in the Lienzo have corresponding versions in the drawings of Muñoz Camargo’s Descripción. However, the later Descripción pictorial contains eleven more images on this subject, emphasizing instruction in the Christian faith and the eradication of idolatry. Only the later version, in drawing 8, recognizes the twelve early Franciscan friars whose very presence caused indigenous deities to flee. The image is most likely addressing a point of contention about the strategy of continuing to press claims to the emperor of an early Tlaxcalan conversion, exceeding other altepetl. The inclusion of these images indicates the increasing recognition of the value of claiming an early and enthusiastic Christianity in their negotiations with Spanish officials; this recognition appears in alphabetic as well as pictorial sources.

Susan Kellogg finds a similar progression in her examination of Spanish and Nahuatl documents from lawsuits involving indigenous residents of Mexico City. In her analysis of shifts in legal strategies during this period, Kellogg finds that the natives’ Christian faith was invoked “as an emblem of good character” in lawsuits beginning around the 1570s, which became increasingly pronounced after 1585, the period in which Muñoz Camargo compiled the Descripción as a relación geográfica for Philip II.27 The Descripción drawings, therefore, provide information not so much for research on the introduction and instruction on Christianity in early colonial Mexico as for research on how indigenous people at various times presented the process and why.

It was through the method of viewing the images chronologically for style and content, and then comparing them to Nahuatl and Spanish alphabetic sources from the sixteenth century, that the Tlaxcalan conquest pictorials came to life. I was able to interpret the meaning of their change over time in relation to the movement from pictorial to written forms of expression and also to put the changes in their content within the frame of competitive posturing in early colonial interaction. The practices in the pictorial corpus proved congruent with what is seen in other kinds of sources, so that each throws light on the other.

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List of Illustrations

Fig. 1 Manuscript fragment, Tlaxcalan conquest pictorial, scenes 1 and 4, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin. By permission.

Fig. 2 Manuscript fragment, Tlaxcalan conquest pictorial, scenes 2 and 3, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin. By permission.

Fig. 3 Lienzo de Tlaxcala, main scene, Antigüedades mexicanas, private collection.

Fig. 4 Lienzo de Tlaxcala, scene 7, Antigüedades mexicanas, private collection.

Fig. 5 Lienzo de Tlaxcala, scene 5, Antigüedades mexicanas, private collection.

Fig. 6 Diego Muñoz Camargo, Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala (MS. Hunter 242), drawing 34, by permission of the Department of Special Collections, Glasgow University Library.

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