

The Last Acolhua: Alva Ixtlilxochitl and Elite Native Historiography in Early New Spain

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Abstract:

The present article offers a thematic analysis of the lords' discourse as a means of contextualizing and historicizing the works of don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl.⁴ Students of the famous chronicler of Tetzaco will recognize the parallels between his historical vision and how the natural lords of an earlier era explained and represented themselves to Spanish authorities. Like don Hernando Pimentel and his peers, Alva Ixtlilxochitl portrayed his mother's ancestors—descendants of the original Acolhua-Chichimeca settlers and rulers of Tetzaco and its provinces—as aristocrats of illustrious pedigree who became indispensable Christian vassals of the Spanish king. In his telling, among the Acolhuaque the Spaniards encountered natural allies, as the heirs to a prestigious native tradition embraced and aided them in their subjugation of Mexico, their partnership consummated in a triumphant *dénouement* of baptismal water.

Keywords: Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl | Acolhua | Mexico | Spanish Conquest

Article:

In 1554 the *tlatoani* (native ruler) of Tetzaco, don Hernando Pimentel Nezahualcoyotl (r. 1545–1564), requested a personal audience with King Carlos I of Castile. In rhetoric typical of both era and genre, don Hernando blended boasting with strategic supplication. ‘Although my ancestors, who ruled the house of Tezcuco for nine hundred years [...] advantaged me with many pueblos and subject provinces,’ he began, his own descendants would have the even ‘greater’ honor of Christian baptism and service to Spain (Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 189). While early modern Hispanic¹ administrative rituals required such language, savvy subjects often smuggled in any number of substantial and controversial assertions. Don Hernando was indeed a titled nobleman, but he was also the heir to an indigenous dynasty that long predated Spanish rule. Despite his air of humble submission, don Hernando communicated three politically consequential facts about

himself: he was a useful ally of the Spanish king, he was a lord of ancient pedigree, and he was a sincere Christian.

Together, these assertions amounted to a calculated defense of the privileges and authority he considered his birthrights in Tetzaco. He penned his letter at a time when the traditional modes of local authority enjoyed by the native nobility, whom the Spaniards called *caciques*, were eroding beneath the myriad social-economic transformations and demographic disasters precipitated by the recent Spanish invasion of central Mexico (Gibson 1960; Carrasco 1961; Haskett 1991; Lockhart 1992, 94–140). Challenged everywhere by opportunistic Spaniards and rebellious native commoners alike, don Hernando and others like him sought the Crown's protection. To substantiate their claims to privileges, in their frequent interactions with the colonial regime they turned to history, the locus of their greatest glory. Thus did local native leaders develop a peculiar discursive genre, a series of recurring tropes and rhetorical formulae intricately attuned to the Crown's priorities of monarchical loyalty, noble pedigree, and Catholic orthodoxy.² By the 1550s, such stories had become an iconic mode of self-representation among the so-called 'natural lords' (*señores naturales*) of New Spain, the discourse of a displaced aristocracy struggling to remain relevant. It was also an underlying message of don Hernando's otherwise boilerplate flattery: after receiving baptism and submitting to the Spanish crown, he was neither socially, politically, nor religiously inferior; indeed, he was the heir to an ancient and prestigious legacy that the king was obliged to respect according to law, custom, and decency.³

The present article offers a thematic analysis of the lords' discourse as a means of contextualizing and historicizing the works of don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl.⁴ Students of the famous chronicler of Tetzaco will recognize the parallels between his historical vision and how the natural lords of an earlier era explained and represented themselves to Spanish authorities. Like don Hernando Pimentel and his peers, Alva Ixtlilxochitl portrayed his mother's ancestors—descendants of the original Acolhua-Chichimeca settlers and rulers of Tetzaco and its provinces—as aristocrats of illustrious pedigree who became indispensable Christian vassals of the Spanish king. In his telling, among the Acolhuaque the Spaniards encountered natural allies, as the heirs to a prestigious native tradition embraced and aided them in their subjugation of Mexico, their partnership consummated in a triumphant *dénouement* of baptismal water.

This link, however, has been somewhat obscured, for due to the intriguing and controversial complexities of Alva Ixtlilxochitl's work there has been little consensus regarding his place within the 'history of the histories' of Mexico (Florescano 2002). Some characterize his blend of pro-conquest and pro-native sensibilities as indicative of a colonized perspective (Florescano 1985, 15–16, 98; Mignolo 1995, 323–29), while others suggest that his overt acceptance of evangelization and Spanish rule in the abstract afforded him some freedom to protest specific abuses (Calvi 1992; Kauffmann 2010). Another interpretation considers his histories as propaganda, a sort of extended *probanza de méritos* (statement of merits) designed to elicit viceregal favors (O'Gorman 1975, 211; Velazco 2003, 114). Many (such as Aguilar Moreno 2002 and Velazco 2003) have recently emphasized his bilingual and bicultural

background; they contemplate a figure straddling, or seeking to reconcile or transcend, incommensurate cultural and religious traditions. In this sense, the chronicler is iconic of Spanish America's legacy of transculturalism; as Rolena Adorno has argued most prominently, Alva Ixtlilxochitl and other mestizo historians were 'ethnographers of their own cultural hybridization' who navigated the fluid, unstable, and often artificial subjectivities of colonialism (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1972, 13; Adorno 1994, 401).

Yet these interpretations, by themselves, abstract the chronicler somewhat from his intellectual milieu and social cohort. In this paper, I shift from issues of ethnic and cultural identity to the cruder realm of political and legal negotiation and representation. Recognizing Adorno's observation that 'colonial writing [was] a social practice rather than merely a reflection of it' (2007, 4), I approach Alva Ixtlilxochitl as a man of his time and place, following Amber Brian's call to consider his works as 'texts constructed in dialogue with his historical moment' (2011, 139). Specifically, I locate him within an already mature colonial discourse, and argue that his intricate reconciliation of Acolhua history to Novohispanic ideals was neither peculiar nor new. Rather, he inherited and elaborated upon an older historical vision with roots in the sixteenth-century negotiations between central Mexico's indigenous rulers and the incipient colonial regime. Circumstances conspired to align Alva Ixtlilxochitl politically and socially with postconquest native leaders such as don Hernando Pimentel—a cohort that, not coincidentally, both produced and supplied most of his sources. His texts reflect that alignment by reproducing the caciques' preferred vision of history within the narrative mode of a European chronicle.

Given this historiographical debt, it is insufficient to label Alva Ixtlilxochitl a 'mestizo historian.' The hereditary lords of early New Spain were not mestizos, and their inclination to reconcile their own past to Hispano-Catholic ideologies and imperatives had political rather than ethnic motives. Furthermore, unlike his contemporaries Diego Muñoz Camargo and Garcilaso de la Vega, Alva Ixtlilxochitl did not openly consider or represent himself as mestizo (Velazco 2003, 127–95; Vega 2006, xxi). Nor should we be content with purely psychological interpretations; Alva Ixtlilxochitl's perspective was indeed 'colonized,' but he was also a colonial intellectual in a colonial milieu utilizing colonial-era sources to communicate with a colonial audience. Finally, holistically speaking it is insufficient to consider his work mere self-advocacy, as this ignores his *magnum opus*, the grand history of central Mexico titled *Historia de la nación chichimeca*. Unfinished and unread at his death in 1650, its scope and depth clearly evince a sincere devotion to Acolhua history.

Thus, to properly situate Alva Ixtlilxochitl within Novohispanic intellectual history, it is useful to consider him the final Acolhua chronicler, the last notable historian to address the full scope of the Acolhua-Chichimeca experience ostensibly from an insider's perspective. He belonged to an Acolhua noble tradition and compiled sixteenth-century Acolhua memories and sources. While later chroniclers of Mesoamerica—mostly Novohispanic creoles (American-born Spaniards)—tended to speak of 'Indian' or 'Mexican' history, Alva Ixtlilxochitl remained firmly ensconced in the ethnic tradition of his great-grandmother's cousin don Hernando Pimentel. In utilizing the

knowledge and materials of the postconquest Acolhua elite, he reproduced and elaborated upon their historical vision.

Voices of Acolhuacan: Representation in Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Histories

Alva Ixtlilxochitl echoed previous generations of Acolhua nobles for at least two reasons: they supplied his historical information, and he shared their agenda. To begin, the legal and political activities of earlier leaders such as don Hernando Pimentel had resulted in a broad paper trail rich with genealogical and historical information, and their children were among Alva Ixtlilxochitl's primary informants and collaborators (Carrasco 1974; O'Gorman 1975, 23, 47–85, 285–87). Meanwhile, the chronicler's pictorial sources—which he erroneously believed to be pre-Hispanic—were also artifacts of postconquest efforts to defend cacique patrimonies and tribute rights (Carrera Stampa 1971, 223–33; Romero Galván 2003a; García 2006, 59–61). Alva Ixtlilxochitl's source materials thus reflected not only a primordial Acolhua knowledge, but also the postconquest maneuverings of noble families seeking to contest and reframe ancestral claims in terms admissible to colonial authorities (Douglas 2010, 200–1n17).

Overall, Alva Ixtlilxochitl inherited (or was privy to) at least two discrete ‘archives’ of elite Acolhua historiography, self-representation, and memory. The first came from Tetzco, where the children and grandchildren of the tlatoani Nezahualpilli (r. 1473–1515) helped pioneer the postconquest discourse of cacique rights, arguing that both natural and positive law obliged Spanish power to respect the suzerainty of native ruling lineages. The heirs of Nezahualpilli were well-placed to usher Mesoamerican history into postconquest institutions. Tetzco, famously, was the locus of an unusually elaborate historiographical tradition long before the colonial era, as its rulers maintained an extensive archive of painted histories. Although the archive was destroyed in the Spanish conquest, the Tetzco historiographical tradition resurfaced in subsequent generations in a number of alphabetic and pictorial texts from the region (Diel 2008; Douglas 2010). Elite Acolhua memory revolved heavily around the legacy of Nezahualpilli's father, the revered Nezahualcoyotl (r. 1431–1472), whose long and triumphant reign they remembered as the definitive era of foundations in Acolhuacan (Horcasitas 1978). Local leaders continued to invoke Nezahualcoyotl to elicit colonial privileges through the sixteenth century and beyond (in Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2:292–93). As one heir declared in 1593, ‘those who are not descended from Nezahualpilli are excluded [from positions of authority ...] by rights both divine and human’ (AGN-T 1740, Exp 1, f. 141v).⁵

THE ACOLHUA HISTORIANS AND THE LORDS OF TEOTIHUACAN,
FOURTEENTH THROUGH SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

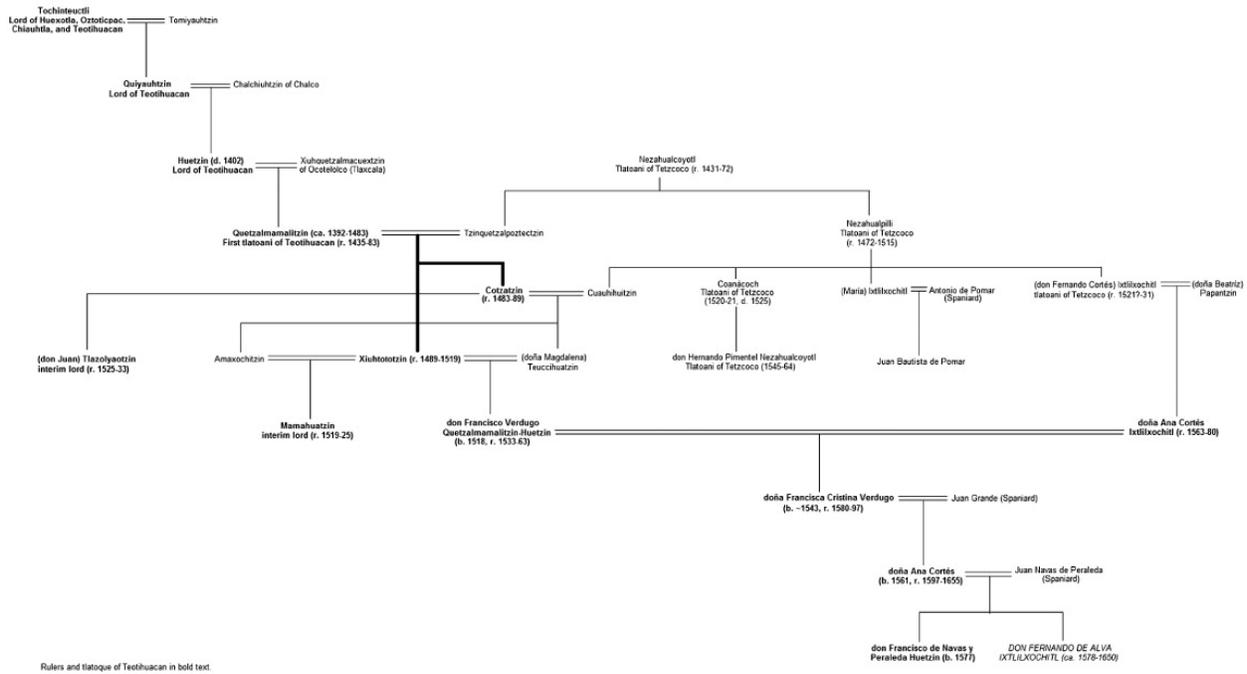


Figure 1. The lordly succession of Teotihuacan according to the 1621 document, ‘Yhtlatolo yn Teotihuacan tlatocaiotl yn iuh ypan ca tlatocahuehueamatl’ (‘Account of the Kingdom of Teotihuacan According to Old Royal Documents’). (Based on Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 379–96.)

Alva Ixtlilxochitl's other primary sources of information came from Teotihuacan, an Acolhua province previously subject to Tetzcoco, where his mother retained the local *cacicazgo* (cacique's entailed estate) (Munch Galindo 1976). The major figure in this tradition was the chronicler's great-grandfather, don Francisco Verdugo Quetzalmamalitzin-Huetzin (1518–1563). As a native lord under early Spanish rule, don Francisco's agenda resembled that of don Hernando Pimentel inasmuch as he sought to leverage his patrimony to derive favors from the colonial regime. Alva Ixtlilxochitl absorbed the noble legacy of Teotihuacan orally, from his mother and grandmother, as well as via heirlooms such as don Francisco's personal papers.

Another reason Alva Ixtlilxochitl reproduced the historical perspective of the postconquest Acolhua nobility was practical: he shared their essential agenda. By a trick of history, the so-called *castizo* (with three Spanish grandparents) from Mexico City born Fernando de Peraleda Ixtlilxochitl found himself politically aligned with the dwindling segment of Novohispanic society that continued to assert pre-Hispanic seigniorial rights. Beginning in 1563, the *cacicazgo* of Teotihuacan had passed three times to female heirs, the final two of whom married Spanish men from Mexico City. The Alvas were therefore ethnically and culturally Hispanized, yet they also inherited an economic and social agenda mirroring that of the traditional native nobility—

the preservation of historic prerogatives amidst colonial processes favoring private property, labor mobility, and Spanish ascendancy (Munch Galindo 1976, 14–21). Thus, as his own and his family's advocate, Alva Ixtlilxochitl faced the same rhetorical and legal challenges as had don Hernando Pimentel and his peers. Like them, he cited preconquest history to assert the antiquity, legitimacy, and inalienability of his mother's patrimony.

This is not to say that Alva Ixtlilxochitl's mixed heritage did not inflect his legal and political agenda. Ironically, however, it did so in a way that intensified his need to self-identify as an Acolhua nobleman. Mestizos were forbidden from inheriting cacicazgos after 1576, and rivals occasionally challenged the Alvas' rights by citing their Spanish ancestry (*Recopilación*, VI-7.6; Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2: 354–69). Meanwhile, the chronicler's own ambitions within Indian government in Tetzaco—where he served as *juez-gobernador* (judge-governor) in 1613—met with resistance, as locals rejected his tenuous rights (Benton 2012, 171–72). In both his own and his mother's defense, Alva Ixtlilxochitl was thus compelled to represent his family as full heirs to the lords of Teotihuacan and Tetzaco. In early adulthood, he discarded his Spanish father's name, replaced it with his Tetzaco great-grandmother's, and adopted the honorific salutation *don* to identify as an indigenous nobleman rather than a mestizo or creole gentleman (O'Gorman 1975, 17, 21; Munch Galindo 1976, 45–50; Adorno 2007, 336n3; Benton 2012, 168–69).⁶ Thus, the chronicler's intensely patriotic attachment to the Acolhua realm was, if not contrived, at least intellectual and retrospective rather than innate and inevitable, a pragmatic necessity as much as an inborn reflex. After all, for every Alva Ixtlilxochitl—a castizo outsider performing as a cacique insider—there were numerous examples of the converse: indigenous elites whose economic and political interests led them to live among, intermarry with, and adopt the culture of their invaders (Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 14–29). Indeed, we may legitimately wonder whether Alva Ixtlilxochitl's corpus would have been as extensive, focused, and persistent had his genealogical and ethnic ties to the preconquest order been more direct, unimpeachable, and obvious to his peers and rivals. In this sense, his perspective perhaps recalls the common saying regarding the late-medieval descendants of the Anglo-Norman colonizers of Ireland, who over the centuries had married into local lineages and become fiercely proud and patriotic: he was 'more Acolhua than the Acolhua themselves.'

Regardless, in pragmatically adopting the identity of a cacique, Alva Ixtlilxochitl joined a discrete social realm with a unique vision of history. His project, while creative and innovative, also involved compilation and synthesis: his authority was not his own, it came from those who preceded him and supplied his sources. Indeed, this was one of his primary historiographical achievements: he captured and reconstructed, in an accessible narrative format, the semi-mythic and complex, yet internally coherent discourse of historical legitimation pioneered by don Hernando Pimentel and the other native lords of early New Spain. Their vision consisted of three central historical claims: they represented themselves as vassals of steadfast fealty, lords of immemorial pedigree, and Christians of impeccable orthodoxy.

The Ideal of Vassalage: Rewards for the King's American Allies

Alva Ixtlilxochitl's primary account of the Spanish conquest of central Mexico, the 'XIII Relación' (Thirteenth Relation) of the *Compendio histórico del reino de Texcoco* (~1608), centers on the actions of Ixtlilxochitl (1500–1531), his great-great-grandfather and a son of Nezahualpilli. Upon the latter's death in 1515, Ixtlilxochitl challenged his half-brother for control of Tetzco, leading to a civil war among the Acolhua leadership. The conflict acquired a broader political significance when the Spaniards arrived. Ixtlilxochitl leveraged the newcomers to his advantage by joining their anti-Tenochca coalition. With Spanish aid, he secured his ambition, eventually becoming tlatoani (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 1:462–76).⁷ As portrayed in the 'XIII Relación,' Ixtlilxochitl becomes a top adviser to Cortés. He provides an indispensable voice of reason and restraint to the bewildered Spaniards, who are often led astray by their ignorance of the land and their thirst for loot. Indeed, thanks to the heroic services of his namesake, Alva Ixtlilxochitl argued, 'the evangelical law was established and the city of Mexico was won [...] with less labor and loss than it would have otherwise cost' (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 1:450).

Stories of 'Indian conquistadors' were not uncommon in colonial Mexico. Seeking local allies, the newcomers actively courted Mesoamerican lords with promises of privileges and autonomy. Out of weakness or opportunism or both, leaders in Tetzco and elsewhere supported the alliance against Tenochtitlan with warriors, guides, cooks, porters, and concubines (Matthew and Oudijk 2007). Many leaders thus expected reciprocity and favors from the new regime, and frequently reminded authorities of their services. Emphasizing the Spaniards' vulnerability in a densely populated, mountainous, and alien land, they told dramatic tales in which they courageously rescued the foreigners from certain death. The daring and bloody escape from Tenochtitlan in June of 1520, for example, provided the perfect opportunity to showcase such services. In 1536 don Juan de Guzmán Itztlolinqui, a tlatoani of Coyoacan married to a Tetzco noblewoman, remembered that his father had sacrificed his own life to allow the Spaniards to reach the mainland (Horn 1997, 46–49; Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 103). Xochimilco's leaders told a similar story in 1563, listing how they provisioned the Spaniards and declaring 'the true help, after God's, was what Xochimilco gave' (Restall et al. 2005, 66–67). In 1553, don Juan de Mendoza Tuzancuxtli, the aging cacique-governor of Tecamachalco (Puebla), insisted that his active decision not to intervene in the conflict was crucial. 'Any resistance by don Juan, however small,' read his statement, would have severed the Spaniards' lifeline to the coast; 'don Juan's service was thus very great indeed' (AGI-J 1013, N. 1, n. p.). In 1552 the tlatoani of Tlacopan, don Antonio Cortés Totoquihuaztli, noted that his father had peacefully received the fleeing Spaniards, who were 'wounded and demoralized.' 'If we had made war upon them,' he concluded ominously, 'none among them would have remained' (Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 161).

Acolhua elites participated in this early discourse, and frequently cited conquest-era services to elicit viceregal favors. As the tlatoani don Pedro Tetlahuehuetzquititzin (r. 1534–1539) argued during a 1537 dispute, '[The sons of Nezahualpilli put ourselves] beneath the protection and

jurisdiction of Your Majesty,' he declared, 'and [served] in the war against Mexico with [our] persons and our vassals (*macehuales*)' (AGI-J 128, N.1, f. 42r). In 1551 don Hernando Pimentel Nezahualcoyotl received a privilege of arms in recognition of the thirteen brigantines Tetzcoco had contributed to the Spaniards' lake-based siege of Tenochtitlan (Villar Villamil 1933, no. 128). Although too young to participate in the original conquest, don Francisco Verdugo brought Teotihuacan into the viceroy's frontier wars in the early 1540s; he later received 'remuneration' in the form of noble heraldry (Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 201–10). In listing the pro-Spanish services of his ancestors, Alva Ixtlilxochitl thus elaborated upon an already mature discourse of ideal vassalage.

Pedigree and Immemoriality in Hispanic Mexico

In both his histories and his legal representation, Alva Ixtlilxochitl detailed the origins of the Teotihuacan cacicazgo (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2:296–97; Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 387). When he regained his realm after 1428, Nezahualcoyotl partitioned the Acolhua region among his allies (*ibid.*, 2:89–91).⁸ Quetzalmamalitzin was the son of the previous lord of Teotihuacan; in the year 8-Reed (1435), Nezahualcoyotl rewarded him by elevating Teotihuacan to one of the fourteen 'provinces' of his realm, confirming him as its *tlatoani*, and giving him control over the tribunal responsible for the Acolhua nobility (*gente ilustre*) (*ibid.*, 2:89; Carrasco 1999, 138–39). The relationship was sealed four years later when Quetzalmamalitzin married Nezahualcoyotl's daughter, Tzinquetzalpoztectzin (Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 383).

The chronicler's emphasis on the antiquity of his mother's dynastic claims should not surprise us. A key concept underlying hereditary rights in the Spanish legal tradition was immemoriality—or, as expressed by a group of Tetzcoco nobles in 1537 (repeating a common legal phrase), 'a time so ancient that the memories of men cannot contradict it' (AGI-Justicia, 128, N.1, ff. 6v–7r).⁹ Immemoriality was a noteworthy source of rhetorical power for Mexican lords: 'pre-Hispanic memory,' notes Frank Salomón, 'was presumed to include a crucial point of knowledge no Spaniard could supply, namely, knowledge of "immemorial" social facts that colonial law was charged to respect yet could not itself define' (1998, 273). Appealing to antiquity was one of the few ways native subjects could assert authority and standing in an otherwise-hostile colonial forum.

Invoking immemorial historical facts was critical to the caciques in particular, as they had the most to lose from the disruption of traditional political and social arrangements. As early as 1531, caciques appeared frequently before colonial authorities bearing maps, histories, and family trees alleging immemorial rights to lands and tributes—textual, graphic, and hybrid—and demanded confirmation, sanction, and even restoration from the crown (Prem 1992; Boone 2000; Endfield 2001; Ruiz-Medrano 2010). Understanding their plight, with the aid of Spanish legal advocates the caciques attuned their arguments to Spanish jurisprudence: to deprive a peaceful lord, Christian or not, of his or her patrimony violated the *ius gentium* (law of nations), and was thus tyranny by definition (Pagden 1990, 13–24; Muldoon 1994).

In 1532 the high nobility of Tenochtitlan commissioned a prototype of the discourse of aristocracy wronged, and demanded that Spanish power underwrite their patrimonies. In a petition to the king, they lamented that the rise of Spanish Mexico City had rendered them penniless and powerless. Ironically, the justice they sought from the Spanish king was autonomy from Spaniards:

Holy, Catholic, Caesarean Majesty [...] we inform you of the penury, necessity, and opprobrium which we suffer [...] because [although] being the sons of whom we are, our fathers and grandfathers having been those lords that reigned over and governed this land, we are now its poorest, having no bread of our own to eat. We beg Your Grace that [...] you will pity us our misery, look to your royal conscience, and grant us favors like those of your Spanish vassals in these lands—favors without subjection to any Spaniard beside Your Grace. (Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 99)

Despite these efforts, Mexico City's special status as the nucleus of colonial government quickly marginalized the Tenochca nobility (Gibson 1964, 368–95). The project of ushering native dynasties into the new colonial regime, then, fell to others, especially the Acolhuaque. As early as the 1540s the children of Nezahualpilli were commissioning new historical-cartographical records that unambiguously linked their rights to lands and resources to ancestors who had first settled the region. Importantly, where such texts derived from pre-Hispanic originals, the lords restructured them according to Spanish prejudices—for example, by omitting religious references and reframing ancestral legacies as property rights (Douglas 2003).

As we have seen, the Acolhua elite considered the fifteenth-century reign of Nezahualcoyotl a time of foundations in which lineages were confirmed, laws established, and tribute allocations fixed (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2:89–91). In the 1550s don Hernando Pimentel penned a political history (*memorial*) of Acolhuacan to inform the king of its previous grandeur and request its partial restoration (Carrasco 1999, 58–60). He reported that Nezahualcoyotl's historic domains included no fewer than 123 separate dependencies in central Mexico and beyond, and reasoned that such rents, if restored, would amount to 340,000 pesos annually, ‘poco más o menos.’ Later, after a series of regulations restricted the caciques’ ability to extract resources and services from commoners, don Hernando petitioned for the tributes from several *pobleçuelos* (little towns) that he claimed had once enriched his venerable forebear (see Reyes García 2001, 29–40). Such benefices, he argued, were his ancestral rights, despite being ‘not even a thirtieth of what has been taken away’ (Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 257).

The centrality of Nezahualcoyotl within the Acolhua historiographical tradition is clear in the most important alphabetic account to appear before Alva Ixtlilxochitl's own, the 1582 *relación geográfica* (geographical relation) of Tetzaco—the town's response to King Felipe II's famous inquiry into the geographical and human histories of his domains (Cline 1964). Penned by Juan Bautista de Pomar—a mestizo grandson of Nezahualpilli and a close ally of the Pimentels—the report iterates the preferred historical narrative of the descendants of Nezahualcoyotl. His

account portrayed preconquest Tetzaco as an exemplar of law, order, and virtue. Although Nezahualcoyotl and Nezahualpilli were absolute despots, they ‘always comported themselves with rectitude and justice.’ The people ‘never stopped speaking well of [father and son], especially since they were free of afflictions and labor.’ Loved in peacetime and feared in war, both tlatoque promoted virtue and rectitude, and harshly punished vice and laziness, ‘even if it were their own children.’ These truths, Pomar lamented, had been forgotten ‘due to a lack of letters,’ yet ‘the things that are told, especially about Nezahualcoyotzin, do not deserve to remain buried’ (Pomar 1986, 52). Other relaciones geográficas from the region—written by Spaniards yet with the explicit input of local caciques—so closely echo Pomar's eulogy of Nezahualcoyotl that it is clear his vision was widely shared, including among Alva Ixtlilxochitl's elderly informants (Acuña 1981–1988, 7:211–51).

Interestingly, Teotihuacan's 1580 relación geográfica, authored by a Spaniard, reflects ongoing disputes over history, as local informants, mostly minor cabildo officers, remembered Nezahualcoyotl as a ‘tyrant’ who acquired power through terror and violence (Acuña 1981–1988, 7:232–35).¹⁰ Yet the heirs of don Francisco Verdugo—who lived in Mexico City by 1580—remained proud of their links to the venerable tlatoani, and continued to root their legitimacy in his legacy. In 1558 don Francisco invoked this pedigree in his statement of merits and services, later compiled by his great-grandson:

Don Francisco Verdugo [declares] that from time immemorial [...] he and his fathers and grandfathers have descended from the lord and lords that are and were of the city of Tezcuco, the leading city (*cabeza*) of the great land of New Spain; the ruler and lord of which was named Nezahualcoyoci [...] who presided over these lands before the [...] ascension of Motençuma. (Pérez-Rocha and Tena 2000, 201)

Don Francisco received a coat of arms, the most prominent feature of which was a black eagle symbolizing Nezahualcoyotl. A border of swords and disembodied legs, meanwhile, represented his many victories (Villar Villamil, no. 145).

The Acolhua Old Testament: Prophecy and Providence in Tetzaco

In the ‘XIII Relación,’ Alva Ixtlilxochitl tells that, on 13 June 1524 (7-Flint), tlatoani Ixtlilxochitl received baptism alongside his wife and the other sons of Nezahualpilli in a ceremony presided over by the revered Franciscan friars Pedro de Gante and Martín de Valencia. Inflamed with a convert's zeal, Ixtlilxochitl became a powerful advocate for the gospel. According to his great-great-grandson, he enticed his compatriots into the Church ‘with words so decent and saintly [...] that he seemed an Apostle.’ But Ixtlilxochitl's zealotry also drove him beyond gentle persuasion, and he threatened to execute his own mother when she expressed skepticism (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 1:491–93). In this way, the chronicler depicted his namesake as a primary agent of Tetzaco's evangelization.

In this, Alva Ixtlilxochitl once again echoed several generations of central Mexican elites (Haskett 2008, 2011). In early modern Spanish America, native peoples were, like the Jewish converts and their descendants in Iberia, forever suspected of religious backsliding or (worse) insincerity. High-profile cases of religious resistance in the 1530s and 40s only exacerbated the issue (Gruzinski 1988; García Galagarza 2010; Lopes Don 2010). Thus, native leaders who sought rapprochement with colonial institutions were compelled to emphasize not only the authenticity of their own Christian convictions, but also the swiftness and enthusiasm of their ancestors' conversions. Such stories held power because they invoked the archetypal epiphany of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Recasting themselves as eager believers rather than reluctant or hostile infidels, native lords reminded Spaniards of their own universalist religious principles, and challenged the neo-Crusader moral justification for colonial violence and domination.

However, while Alva Ixtlilxochitl was not the first to portray his ancestors as zealous Christians, he went further than most by embedding the story of Mexico's evangelization into a long vision of its pre-Columbian development. As Salvador Velazco has shown, he achieved this with a teleological narrative in which the preconquest leaders of Tetzaco helped pave the way, albeit unwittingly, for the eventual arrival of the institutional Church (Velazco 2003, 53–54). In this, Alva Ixtlilxochitl echoed the Franciscan missionaries, whose eschatology and evangelical project likewise ascribed Christian portents to the epic of Mesoamerican history (Brading 1991, 109; Baudot 1995b). Inspired by St. Augustine—who interpreted pagan Rome as a mechanism by which God provided for the later proliferation of the gospel—the friars scoured local history for evidence of divine providence, and eventually honed in on Nezahualcoyotl as their pre-Hispanic hero, reinterpreting him as the bearer of a moral and political wisdom that prefigured Christian doctrine (Lee 2008, 193–228). The parallels between Alva Ixtlilxochitl and the Franciscans in this regard are unsurprising, as the chronicler befriended and collaborated with them in the interpretation of indigenous pictorials (O'Gorman 1975, 204; Brading 1991, 278). Yet the chronicler also had personal reasons for adapting the Franciscan interpretation of Acolhua history, as the proto-Christian makeover of Nezahualcoyotl valorized his indigenous ancestors in colonial discourses by giving them roles in a heavenly plan eons in the making.

Providentialism is most evident in the *Historia de la nación chichimeca*, Alva Ixtlilxochitl's 'Old Testament' of central Mexico, which begins with a destructive flood (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2:7). Like its Hebrew counterpart, the *Historia* is driven by moments of reasoned monotheism and (as read by Christians) prophetic allusions to the eventual arrival of the gospel. For example, Alva Ixtlilxochitl offered a version of the not-uncommon contemporary belief that the Apostle St. Thomas had preached in the Americas. Shortly after the death of Jesus in the year Ce-Acatl (1-Reed), he wrote, a bearded white sage with a saintly aura named Quetzalcoatl appeared in central Mexico, bearing a cross he named the 'Tree of Health and Life' and preaching honesty, temperance, and order. Finding little success, however, he departed into the east, promising that his followers would eventually return (in another Ce-Acatl) to conquer the land and fully implement his message (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2:8–9).

Nezahualcoyotl, however, is the true ‘providential prince’ of the *Historia*, the key agent of God's plan in central Mexico (Baudot1995a; Lesbre 2001; García 2006, 101n54). Most significantly, Alva Ixtlilxochitl depicted the famous tlatoani as a monotheist whose theology closely paralleled that of the Christians whom he had never met. As portrayed in the *Historia*, Nezahualcoyotl contemplates and dedicates himself to a mysterious, unknowable God: a supreme, unitary ‘creator of all things’ whom he called ‘*In tloque yn nahuaque*’ (Owner of the Near and the Close). He knew that after death ‘the souls of all the virtuous went to be’ with the creator God, while ‘those of the evil went to another place.’ He declared local deities the ‘enemy demons’ of the human race, and wearily regarded their public veneration an empty but necessary bit of political theater. Most importantly, he despised human sacrifice and worked to rid Tetzcoaco of its worst excesses (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2:132–33, 36–37).

Continuing the Old Testament analogy, Alva Ixtlilxochitl also portrayed Nezahualcoyotl as a prophet. In 1467 (Ce-Acatl), exactly one ‘bundle’ of fifty-two years (in the central Mexican cycle) prior to the 1519 arrival of Cortés (also Ce-Acatl), the tlatoani envisions the catastrophic collapse and moral rebirth of central Mexican civilization. Upon the inauguration of a temple in Tetzcoaco dedicated to the Mexica god Huitzilopochtli, he remarks:

In another year like this one [Ce-Acatl], the temple that is now being revealed will be destroyed. Who will be there, I wonder? Will it be my son or my grandson? In that moment the land will begin to fail and its lords will perish. The small and unseasoned maguey is weak and ragged. Immature trees bear unripe fruit, and defective land will always diminish. During that time malice, vice, and sensuality will ripen, ensnaring men and women from a tender age, and the people will rob each other's homes. Prodigious things will occur: the birds will speak, and in this time the tree of light, health, and sustenance will arrive. To free your children from these vices and calamities, ensure that from a young age they commit themselves to virtue and good works.

‘All these changes, and the rise in immorality,’ interjects Alva Ixtlilxochitl, ‘have come perfectly true’ (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2:132–33).¹¹

Nezahualcoyotl's Jeremiad allows for multiple understandings. The most piously orthodox interpretation holds that the plagues would result from the evil of native idolatry, with deliverance possible only through the ‘tree of light, health, and sustenance’—a clear allusion to the aforementioned cross of Quetzalcoatl-St. Thomas. Yet this seems to contradict Alva Ixtlilxochitl's contention that Tetzcoaco was a place of order and virtue. Another interpretation holds that Nezahualcoyotl foresaw that the temple's destruction would sow discord by cutting the people adrift from a firm moral anchor. Yet at that precise moment the Church would appear to offer another path—different, but also better. The old gods were not purely evil—after all, they did promote peace and prosperity—yet they were ultimately false and their time was past. Their weak and ‘unripe’ moral fruit would pale in comparison to the robust bounty of the Christian ‘tree of health.’ This interpretation aligns more with Alva Ixtlilxochitl's overall portrayal of central Mexican civilization because he never faults preconquest religion for its non-Christianity

even as he openly embraces the Church. In his view, while the Tetzcocha were not heaven-bound Christians, they nonetheless understood the difference between good and evil, virtue and vice (Brading 1991, 259; Adorno 1994, 389–90). This nuanced sentiment was typical of the postconquest native nobility, whose status (as we have seen) relied heavily on their ability to reconcile their preconquest pedigrees to postconquest ideals of orthodoxy and loyalty.

While few of Alva Ixtlilxochitl's forebears went as far in retroactively Christianizing their distant ancestors, many did seek to neutralize or temper the fiery moral opprobrium that characterized Spanish discourses regarding such practices as human sacrifice. The best example is the geographical relation of Juan de Pomar, which likewise depicts Nezahualcoyotl as a monotheistic devotee of *in tloque in nahuaque*, the 'true God and Creator of all things' who both designed and sustained the universe. Pomar portrayed the 'idols' and 'devils' of Tetzcocha as foreign impositions of Tenochtitlan. And while these 'superstitions' ensnared credulous commoners, the Acolhua nobility was above such 'delusions.' Guided by the wisdom of Nezahualcoyotl, the Tetzcocha leadership reasoned its way to a partial understanding of the Christian God, 'the immortality of the soul,' and the Last Judgement (Pomar 1986, 54–70). Other geographical relations from Acolhuacan, meanwhile, similarly remember Nezahualcoyotl's monotheism (Acuña 1981–1988, 7:211–51).

Thus, Alva Ixtlilxochitl was not the first to portray the Acolhuaque as historically destined for conversion. The notion, however, arose within a particular legal and religious context, as the sixteenth-century friars honed their evangelical tactics and caciques struggled to preserve their social positions. Once again, Alva Ixtlilxochitl inherited and elaborated upon ideas that had circulated among the Acolhua elite for generations.

Conclusion

Despite remaining unpublished for centuries, don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's influence on Mexican historiography was profound, as Novohispanic creoles embraced his vision as their own and Anglophone scholars accepted his claim to be the bearer of an unfiltered indigenous historical knowledge (Cañizares-Esguerra 2001, 221–25; Brian 2011; García 2006). Today, his presence haunts popular accounts and memories placing Tetzcocha and Nezahualcoyotl at the heart of pre-Hispanic culture and learning (Lee 2008, 1–14). A leading history textbook in the USA, for example, echoes the old description of Tetzcocha as 'the Athens of Anáhuac,' while a recent *New York Times* bestseller describes Nezahualcoyotl as a philosophical peer of Hobbes, Locke, and Voltaire (Meyer et al. 2011, 48; Mann 2006, 133–36).

However, for modern historians the works of Alva Ixtlilxochitl are important not only as sources of information about pre-Hispanic history, but also as windows into the complex dynamics of race and ethnicity in colonial Latin America. His vision exemplifies how, in the development of Spanish-American identities, social, economic, and political factors often trumped official efforts to reify and codify castes (Fisher and O'Hara 2009b). The subjectivity and fluidity of colonial

identity is one key to understanding Alva Ixtlilxochitl's self-alignment with the Acolhua elite—which was neither inevitable nor insincere.

In this light, we can remember Alva Ixtlilxochitl as the final Acolhua voice in Mexican historiography—the last to speak about Nezahualcoyotl while identifying as one of his heirs. Facing a similar set of challenges and incentives, he absorbed the long perspective on local history characteristic of don Hernando Pimentel and the other leaders of postconquest Tetzaco and its environs: their pride and nostalgia, their frustrations and resentments, and their pious reinterpretation of Acolhua culture. He was one of them; his views were theirs. As the members of the municipal council of San Salvador Cuautlancingo (near Teotihuacan) reported in 1608 upon reading the *Compendio histórico del reino de Texcoco*,

This history is very correct and true as we know from the memories we inherited from our parents and grandparents, [and] as painted and written in the little that survives of our ancient histories and chronicles; and we recommend highly that this history be shown to the king, so that he may learn of everything and that the memory of the greatness and the deeds of our ancestors, the ancient kings and lords and other natives (*naturales*) of New Spain, will not be lost [...]. We give this approbation so that the King will know that [it] is correct and true in both its account of history as well as in its account of the difficulties and calamities that are now consuming us [...] of the landowners and ranchers who are destroying our fields with their livestock and robbing our children and daughters and women, and who are taking away from our lands, and stealing people off of them; to say nothing of a thousand other injuries they inflict upon us, all specifically detailed in the aforementioned history (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 1:518–20).

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Notes

¹ In this article, I use ‘Hispanic’ as a linguistic and cultural (rather than ethnic) label, to refer to practices and institutions derived from Spanish rather than Mesoamerican traditions.

² The discourse I examine was designed to influence colonial officials, yet historians demonstrate that indigenous accounts were generally very different when not intended for a Spanish audience, offering more unflattering views of the colonizer (Kartunnen 1998, 428–35; Wood 2003; Schroeder 2011).

³ Spanish law viewed native peoples as ‘free vassals’ in full possession of the same rights and protections enjoyed by Spaniards, but only after voluntarily and peacefully acceding to Spanish rule (Gibson 1978).

⁴ José Rubén Romero Galván similarly situates the *Crónica mexicana* of Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc (Romero Galván 2003b).

⁵ This was the mestizo Juan de Pomar, discussed below, a local merchant and ally to the Acolhua elite.

⁶ Modern ethnohistory reveals the functional subjectivity of ethnicity in colonial Mexico, and is sensitive to the many social, religious, and political components that resist fixed and deterministic notions of biological race in Spanish America (Cope 1994; Martínez 2008; Fisher and O'Hara 2009a; Katzew and Deans-Smith 2009; Schwaller 2010).

⁷ The sources differ regarding the precise dates of Ixtlilxochitl's reign. After Cacamatzin's death in 1520 Cortés seized his younger brother, Coanácoch, and installed a series of puppet rulers in Tetzoco, yet locals did not regard them as legitimate successors. Non-Spanish sources also differ regarding whether Ixtlilxochitl's reign began with the fall of Tenochtitlan, when he and Coanácoch divided Acolhuacan between themselves, or after the latter's death in 1525. The Nahuatl chronicler Chimalpahin gives the date as 1526, after the death of both Coanácoch and don Hernando Tecocoltzin, another son of Nezahualpilli (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975, 1:484; Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin 1997, 2:39; Benton 2012, 69).

⁸ In the so-called Tepanec War of 1427–1428, Tenochtitlan, Tetzoco, and Tlacopan defeated the hegemonic Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco. The tripartite hegemony that resulted was called the Triple Alliance, a military partnership characterized by the regular partition of the tributes and spoils of subject communities (Carrasco 1999, 29–34).

⁹ In Spanish: *de tanto tiempo que memoria de hombres no es en contrario*. The concept of immemoriality has long been fundamental to indigenous struggles to maintain lands and resources within the modern nation-state and its colonial precursors (Perry 1996, 8–17; Ruiz-Medrano 2010).

¹⁰ The informants in San Juan Teotihuacan were *alcaldes* don Cristóbal Pimentel and Luis de San Miguel, *regidores* Antonio de San Francisco, Mateo Juárez, and Antonio de Los Ángeles, and the *principales* Andrés d'Alpes, and don Lorenzo and don Francisco Quacnochtli.

¹¹ In the *Historia de la nación chichimeca*, Nezahualpilli follows in his father's prophetic footsteps. Just before his death in 1515, he warns Moctezuma of the impending doom of his reign, and calls on his vassals to end their warfare and prepare for great changes (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977, 2:181–82).

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