

# From painters to scribes: *tlacuilos* in the 16th century

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In 1582 the noble lady (*cihuapilli*) María de Guzmán, a native of the Ollac neighborhood (*tlaxilacalli*) in Xochimilco, was gravely ill

For space reasons the editors have eliminated some of the footnotes from the original text.

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and asked city officials to send her a scribe so she could make her will. Sixty years after the Spanish Conquest this legal act had become part of everyday life, based on a fascinating cultural transformation.

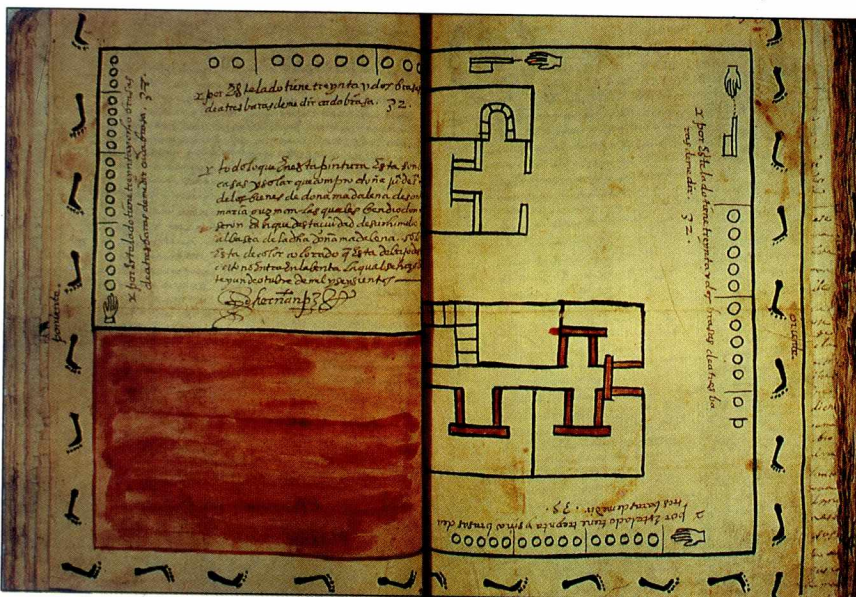
Indian scribes, like their Spanish counterparts, acquired prime importance during the Colonial era. The adoption of Spain's legal procedures meant that Indians now needed to leave a written record of all the legal affairs in which they were

involved. Thus an age-old tradition had to adjust to the new conditions imposed by the Conquest.

At least some cultures of late pre-Columbian Mesoamerica included a personage known by the Náhuatl language groups as the *tlacuilo* (from the Náhuatl verb *tlacuiloa*: to paint or write). The *tlacuilo* was part official, associated with the ruling class, and part artisan, since in order to record events he had to apply his experience and expertise so as to reproduce the models established in semantic codices hallowed by tradition. Of high aesthetic quality, his designs systematically and precisely combined figures, phonemes and colors to represent oral language.

The knowledge and practice of writing were imparted in the *calmecac*, schools for nobles which specialized in training future priests, political leaders (*tlatoani*) or teachers at the *calmecac* itself. Future *tlacuilos* always came from the nobility, since being the son of lords or priests was a prerequisite for attending the *calmecac*. This type of specialized education was apparently not provided to the lower classes. While martial arts were taught to lower-class boys in schools called *telpochcalli* (from *telpuchtli*: young boy), it is unknown whether they were also instructed in reading and writing.

In the *calmecac*, the *tlamatimine* (wise teachers) taught the correct use of language, how to decipher texts conserved by tradition,<sup>1</sup> as well as their own method for using painting to write such texts. These teachers were responsible for the study and conservation of history, theory and science, since it was they who possessed the "red and black ink" contained in books and were in charge of transmitting this wisdom. Sahagún writes of these texts:



Plan of house in Xochimilco, 1613.

<sup>1</sup> Key among them those called *tonalpothuali*, *tonalamatl*, *xihuahmatl* and *temicamatl*.



...they were called divine songs, the verses of which were written in their books in characters: and they also taught Indian astrology, and the interpretation of dreams and how to count the years.<sup>2</sup>

The young nobles educated in the *calmecac* specialized in different religious, governmental or social functions. Those who showed an aptitude for painting were more intensively trained in writing, since they could use the skills learned at these schools in order to write about history, religion, mythology, etc.

Some *tlacuilos* may have specialized in writing about issues related to particular requirements of the complex Aztec civilization. Motolinía reported that there were five key books of ancient knowledge:

*The first speaks of time and the years. The second, of the days and the feasts held throughout the year. The third, of dreams and the tricks, vanities and omens in which they believed. The fourth is of baptism and the names they gave to children. The fifth speaks of the rites and ceremonies and auguries they used in matrimony.*<sup>3</sup>

There were probably *tlacuilos* with special knowledge on the correct way to handle each of these books.

Due to lack of information, we cannot say whether the state also used *tlacuilos* to officialize communication of minor juridical affairs to the population in general, or what kind of specialization was required if this was indeed the case. What is clear is that the *tlacuilo*'s role as scribe took precedence over his role as painter, since to become a scribe one had to go

through a number of stages of cultural and intellectual training, whereas skilled painting was more a question of manual and aesthetic practice that required lesser studies.

The details of the pre-Hispanic *tlacuilo* profession remain an enigma, and what we do know about this personage is the result of inference. In his 1959 study of Mexican manuscript painting, Donald Robertson posed a number of questions regarding these scribes: whether they worked at home, in government buildings or in the temples; whether they necessarily belonged to the priesthood or included laymen working for particular governmental offices; how they learned their trade, and what methods they used to join it.<sup>4</sup>

Another scholar, Pedro Carrasco, stressed the difficulty of determining whether, in Aztec society, a given specialized activity occupied all of an artisan's (in this case the *tlacuilo*'s) time, or if this activity was combined with farming for the artisan's own consumption.

We can nevertheless assume that—thanks to their specialized functions and membership in the social elite—*tlacuilos* were not obliged to earn their keep by farming the land, producing handicrafts or going to war, as were society's other members. It has been definitely established that they were exempt from paying tribute, as were the *calpuleque* (residents of specific neighborhoods), singers, warriors who distinguished themselves in battle, and young people.

The scribe's trade was passed on from father to son. It is useful to recall what one *tlacuilo* said when Emperor Moctezuma ordered him to paint the newly arrived Spaniards:

*Powerful lord, I should not tell you something which is untrue, nor deceive you, since you are*



Coat of arms conferred on the lord of Santiago Tlatelolco by Spanish King Carlos V, 1550.

*the semblance of the gods. You should know that my forefathers and I never possessed any science other than our trade of painting and drawing these characters, and their place was to be painters of past kings, and they painted what they were ordered to depict. And thus, I do not know anything about what you are asking me to do, and if I said yes I would be lying.*

That there were *tlacuilos* of both sexes is attested to by the *Telleriano Remensis* codex, which shows a woman *tlacuila*. While no information is available on how women learned the trade, the likelihood is that they practiced it from childhood as members of painter-scribe families. It is also possible that codex painting was taught in the schools for women, called *ichpochcalli* (from *ichpochpiltontli*, maiden or girl).

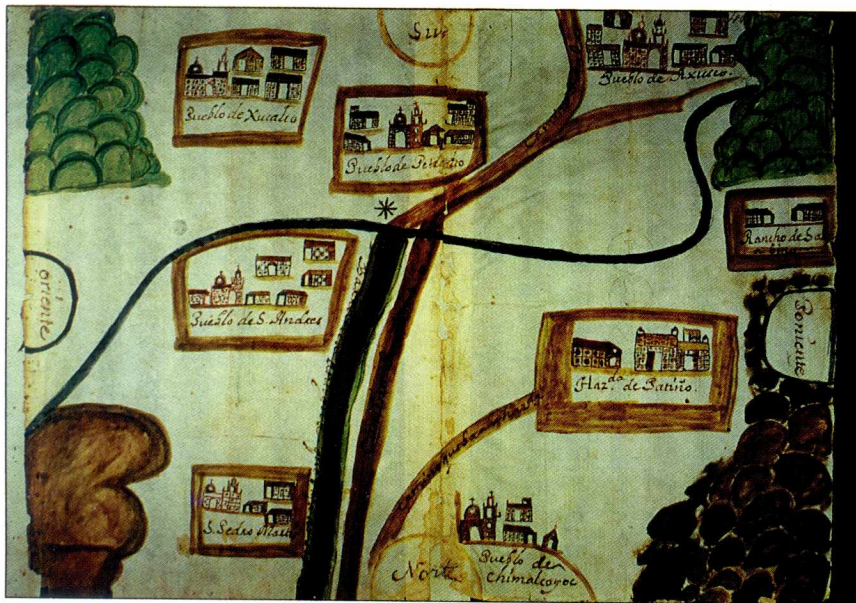
It has so far been impossible to identify *tlacuilos* with specific individuals' names. Their work was anonymous; no matter how important or complex a codex or mural, the author's name was never referred to. This is particularly strange from a Western point of view, given that considerable creativity was involved.

<sup>2</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* (General History of the Things of New Spain), Mexico City, Porrúa, 1979, p. 329.

<sup>3</sup> Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España* (History of the Indians of New Spain), Mexico City, Salvador Chávez Hayhde, 1941, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1959, p. 25.





Map of the Batiño Hacienda (Coyoacán), 1722.

Just as there were good *tlacuilos* who had the gift of combining aesthetic harmony with economy of expression, there were also mediocre ones. In Book X of his classic work, Sahagún noted:

*The painter knows his trade, knows how to use colors, to draw and sketch images with charcoal and make a good mixture of colors; he knows how to mix them very well. The good painter has a good hand and grace in painting, carefully considers what he has to paint, shades the paintings well and knows how to make shadows, distance and foliage.*

*The bad painter is of bad and foolish temperament and thus is difficult and easily angered; he does not fulfill expectations for the work at hand, does not give luster to what he paints, shades poorly, and does not bring measure and proportion to what he paints, since he paints it rapidly.<sup>5</sup>*

### The Spanish tradition: scribes and notaries

The Spanish trade of scribe, the great tradition which combined with that of

the *tlacuilo* in 16th-century New Spain (as Mexico was known in Colonial times), had a very different history.

The original Middle Ages scribe was a weak figure with very little social prestige, at the service and under the protection of feudal lords or municipal councils. His trade has been the subject of scarce historical attention, although various laws and civil ordinances—some as early as the 4th and 5th centuries A.D.—laid out the rules to be observed by would-be scribes.

The profession was defined by the following events: In the year 317 Constantine established the validity of documents written by scribes, as well as the possibility of contesting their authenticity; in 378 Valente Graciano y Valentino reiterated such documents' validity. In 472 Emperor León I, known as "the Great," issued decrees regarding the evidential value of documents made by scribes. In medieval Constantinople, Justinian's legislative work *Novellae*, *Corpus Iuris Civilis* provided systematic norms for scribes' activity, and in the year 528 he issued what came to be known as the "Justinian Regulation of Scriveners' Documents." Notarial

assent was established in 537, and in 538 the testimonial admissibility of documents was defined. On the basis of the Justinian decrees, the scribe played a significant role in the evolution of legal systems, as his work was delineated through custom and the adaptation of relevant law to different locations, social changes and the needs of the moment.<sup>6</sup>

The scribe's profession was transmitted to the Americas, as an indispensable element in any legal activity. Thus scribes played a basic role from the first expeditions through the various stages of the Conquest and the Colonial era. Among the first documents signed by a scribe in New Spain were the "Military and Civil Ordinances of Tlaxcala" (1520).

During the Colonial period viceroys, governors and town councils provisionally appointed scribes, subject to approval by the Spanish Crown. While Iberian-born Spaniards occupied these posts in the early Colonial period, over time they were replaced by *criollos* ("Spaniards" born in the Americas).

There were different classes of scribes, exercising the profession in accordance with their given legal title. The most important of these were Royal Scribe, Public Scribe, Public Scribe of the Number, notary of belongings of persons deceased, mining scribes—and there were many more, in line with the intricacies of governmental and institutional policy in the colony. Indeed, each Colonial institution included a specialized person for each particular kind of clerking.

Those who wrote the many varieties of documents produced in the "king's house" were considered royal

<sup>6</sup> The different Latin names given to scribes can be found in several of these laws: *tabellio, tabularis, scriba, cursor, logographus, amanuensis, grafarius, librarius, scribanus, cognitor, actuarius, exeptor, libetenses, refrendarius, consellarius* and *notarius*.

<sup>5</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general...*, p. 554.



scribes, and as such could exercise their profession in any part of the king's territories, except where public scribes of the number had been appointed to function in towns and cities with a shortage of royal scribes. Public scribes of the number, or of towns and cities, were allowed to exercise their functions within a specific territory only. Scribes of the number obtained their appointment as a royal concession and were designated by a lay lord or an institution to which the king had granted that privilege. The warrant to exercise this profession could be purchased or inherited.

#### **Scribes and writing in New Spanish and Indian societies: continuity or the beginning of a tradition?**

The first years of New Spain's existence brought radical changes in Indian life. Spanish institutions were rapidly established in order to reproduce, on the colony's soil, social, political and religious structures from the Iberian peninsula.

During the early Colonial period the conquistadors tried to do away with everything related to pre-Hispanic customs: rites and ceremonies, ways of governing and virtually any activity that would recall the previous way of life. Through religion and coercion, the Spaniards' lifestyle was to be imposed.

As a result of these changes the indigenous elites —priests, chroniclers, *tlacuilos*, artisans and merchants— disappeared; they were replaced by Spanish specialists or forced to change their functions.

Those few artisans or tradesmen who managed to continue working in their field faced the challenge of adapting to the ideas, techniques and tools of the conquerors so as to be allowed to engage in types of work hitherto unknown to them —in addition to Spanish demands for rapid and optimal results.

The Spaniards nevertheless organized a teaching system in order

to get as much as they could out of the Indians. Able artisans and officials found it easy to learn new trades from Spanish teachers and to adapt old ones to new techniques.

*Tlacuilos* are a good illustration of this transition. The Spaniards took advantage of their ancestral knowledge and skills in order to teach them how to write in Latin characters and see that they continued to work as artisan painters, albeit with new methods. Thus, while *tlacuilos* who became Indian scribes learned Latin writing, the tradition of pictographic manuscripts continued, perhaps so as to gradually accustom the indigenous population to the change. Indigenous scribes took on the difficulties of the new writing, seeking to overcome them by taking advantage of the symbolic and phonetic nature of traditional writing, representing some expressions symbolically and others phonetically.

They were obliged to adapt their language to foreign terms, as well as to create new expressions in order to communicate more clearly and deal with topics related to religion, Catholic as well as heraldic iconography, and civil documentation.

The Colonial era saw the production of abundant genealogical documents which were crucial for requesting privileges; cartographic papers for the legalization of landed property; official complaints denouncing abuses or soliciting justice; wills, and other documents. Despite the damage wrought by time or intentional acts of destruction, samples of codices and documents from early Colonial times survive and give us an idea of the large number of *tlacuilos* or Indian scribes practicing their trade during that period.

Where did they learn how to speak and write the Spanish language? Again, the documentary evidence is scarce; but the probability is that they learned in religious schools with the assistance of village priests, or through contact with

Spanish scribes who employed them as assistants.

The Indians continued to make paintings and manuscripts, since such documents were useful to the civil and religious authorities. Codices were accepted as legal documents, and their production was encouraged during the 16th century. This cultural integration also meant changes in spoken and written language. At the same time that indigenous languages assimilated Spanish words, new expressions and words arose out of the fusion of the two cultures, as an adaptation to the institutional changes occurring in the Indian society of New Spain.

#### **Teaching Indians to write**

With the restoration of calm after the Conquest and the construction of basic Colonial institutions, the process of catechizing the Indian population began. Scholarly friars and other missionaries applied their knowledge in the recently conquered lands. Under the auspices of the Spanish Crown, they planned and experimented with new educational systems. They took advantage of the relatively free and improvisational atmosphere of the early Colonial period to apply the norms they upheld and transmit humanistic thinking, together with the mystique of their evangelizing mission.

Franciscan friars began the task by learning the languages of the colonized territories, none of which had any connection with European tongues. It was easier for them to learn Náhuatl or other indigenous languages than to attempt to teach Spanish to all of the conquered population. At the same time they considered the Latin used in prayers, sacraments and rote recitations of catechism to be essential for acculturation.

The religious orders working in New Spain were the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and, somewhat later, the Society of Jesus. The first three Franciscan evangelizers arrived from Spain in



1523, settling in Texcoco; two of them —Juan de Tecto and Juan de Aora— were priests, and the third was the lay brother Pedro de Gante. Twelve more arrived the following year, devoting themselves largely to education and establishing new norms for Indian youth with the objective of gaining converts to the Catholic religion.

The first schools in New Spain were founded by Franciscan friars. Fray Pedro de Gante founded a school for Indians in Texcoco, and in 1529 set up another —called San José de los Naturales (St. Joseph of the Natives)— as an annex to the convent of San Francisco in Mexico City. The Augustinians' foundation of a college in 1537 was followed three years later by Bishop Vasco de Quiroga's

creation of the San Nicolás Obispo college in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, where teaching was carried out in the Purépecha language.

In 1536, under Franciscan direction, the Imperial College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco was inaugurated, with 60 Indian students who received a humanistic education including elements of European culture. "Enlightened" Indians also gave classes in this college, the objective being an interchange of knowledge between the Náhuatl and Spanish cultures.

The Imperial College was founded for the purpose of creating an indigenous clergy, but in 1555 the Ecclesiastic Council forbade the ordination of Indian priests. Faced with this loss of one of the main reasons for

Letrán college, which was founded in the mid-16th century. Thus the Spanish Crown's commitment to educating Indians declined after the relatively energetic efforts of early Colonial years.

### The social utility of Indian scribes

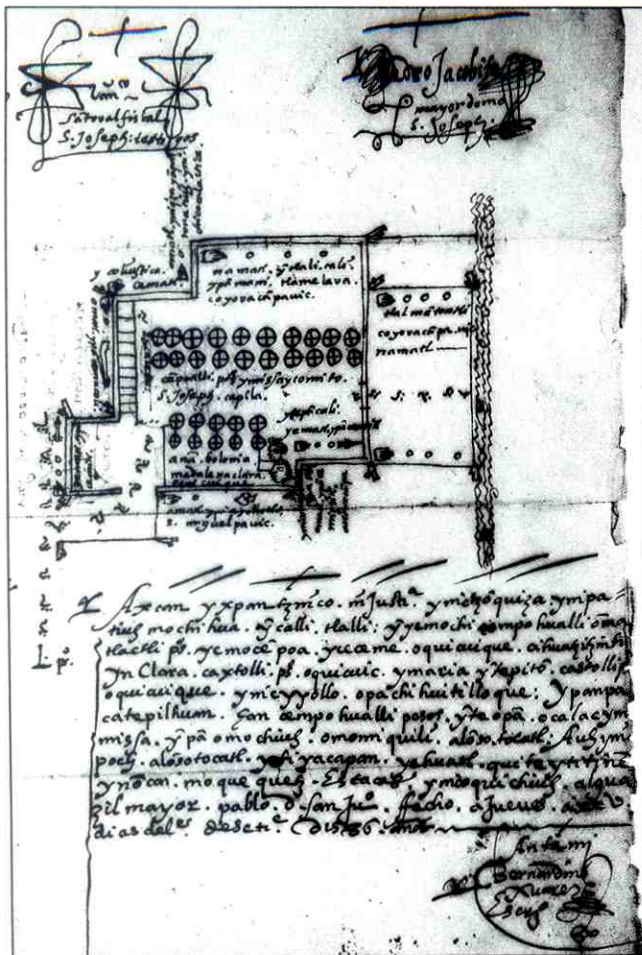
The young Indians educated in the clergy's schools and colleges became culturally differentiated from the rest of the community. They were therefore able to hold some public posts, whether helping the friars teach other young people or assisting in making or transcribing translations of books from Latin or Spanish into Náhuatl.

From very early on,<sup>7</sup> in line with growing needs, young people who had learned to read and write were used to carry out tasks in churches, courts and town councils. Their work consisted of copying documents for local archives, taking town council minutes and, in some cases, writing wills.

The first Indian scribes —who arose from the mixture between the *tlacuilo* and the European scribe or notary— took on the challenge of the new form of written expression. They produced documents with unique characteristics resulting from the synthesis of two cultures, as can be seen in the examples illustrating this article, among them the testament which the *chihuapilli* Maria de Guzmán, feeling herself close to death, dictated to an indigenous scribe 413 years ago. Documents such as these, in addition to exemplifying "cultural syncretism," are valuable tools for learning about daily life during the birth of *mestizo*<sup>8</sup> Mexico. M

the institution's existence, the Franciscans were able to obtain a royal grant of 500 pesos and a thousand *fanegas* (equivalent to about 2,500 bushels) of corn a year for feeding 150 to 200 children at the Santa Cruz boarding school. The corn came out of the tribute paid by villages close to Mexico City.

Until 1570, the Crown provided the San José de los Naturales college with an annual subsidy of 330 ducats. After that, efforts at Indian education were limited to the San Juan de



Codex-blueprint. Owners, house, lands, canals and measurements, 1586.

<sup>7</sup> That is, beginning almost immediately after the incorporation of Indian communities into important towns or district capitals, where native administrative authorities were set up in accordance with economic and demographic criteria.

<sup>8</sup> *Mestizo* denotes the mixture of races and cultures produced after the Spanish Conquest. (Editor's note.)