Tlacaelel Remembered: Mastermind of the Aztec Empire by Susan Schroeder, and: *Annals of Native America: How the Nahuas of Colonial Mexico Kept Their History Alive* by Camilla Townsend (review)

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Tlacaelel Remembered: Mastermind of the Aztec Empire. By SUSAN SCHROEDER. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. xiii + 218 pp. $35.00 (hardcover).

Annals of Native America: How the Nahuas of Colonial Mexico Kept Their History Alive. By CAMILLA TOWNSEND. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 344 pp. $35.00 (hardcover).

The books under review represent the dominant contemporary approach to ethnohistorical studies of the Basin of Mexico region of Mesoamerica and its largest indigenous population, "Nahuas." Many readers will know that conglomeration of linguistically and culturally related peoples as "Aztecs." After briefly discussing nomenclature, I describe and evaluate both books in light of that approach, the New Philology, and ask what readers interested in indigenous studies, conquest, and colonialism in other parts of the world might take away from these books.

The term "Aztecs" has been used since the nineteenth century to describe related ethnicities in central Mexico in the two centuries before Europeans arrived who spoke the Nahuatl language; the conquest-based empire created by three predominant ethnicities (Mexica of Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoca of Tetzcoco, and Tepaneca of Tlacopan); or the Mexica of Tenochtitlan and its sister-island city of Tlatelolco. Many ethnohistorians, especially those whose research covers the colonial period, prefer the term "Nahua," popularized by James Lockhart,[1] referring to Nahuatl-speaking peoples of the basin region and beyond. Here I use the term "Nahua" in that broad sense and particular ethnonyms for specific ethnicities, which were often coterminous with kingdoms (or city-states) with urban centers and dispersed surrounding populations. Such units were called *altepetl*, headed by a supreme ruler or *tlatoani* and constituted key political centers in late preconquest central Mexico.

Hernan Cortés and his followers conquered the largest such altepetl, Tenochtitlan, the *huey* or "great" altepetl in 1519, bigger and more powerful than any other. Susan Schroeder describes how Tenochtitlan came to have great political power by narrating the history of its ruling dynasty through the story of a key political figure

[1] James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

related to it, Tlacaelel. This man advised three generations of tlatoani, five in total, but never himself ruled. Half-brother of the first ruler named Moteuczoma, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, Schroeder argues that it was Tlacaelel more than any of the five rulers he advised—as *cihuacoatl* ("female serpent," second-in-command and leading advisor to the ruler)—drove the Mexica to dominate basin politics. She asserts he reshaped Mexica religious practices to place a greater emphasis on mass human sacrifice as both ideological underpinning to and product of warfare, conquest, and empire building. Schroeder develops this argument across an introduction and four chapters. But in describing sources, Schroeder points to, but does not completely resolve, a puzzle raised by the range of texts that deal with Mexica political history.

In her focus on texts written or heavily influenced by indigenous authors, Schroeder exemplifies New Philology scholarship highlighting indigenous-language sources, their historical linguistic study, and indigenous roles in contact and conquest.[2] What are the texts on which Schroeder relies? In the first chapter she explains her heavy reliance on the writings of three men; one was Diego Durán, a Dominican friar, whose *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la Tierra Firme* (written around 1581), provides the clearest Spanish-language narrative of Tlacaelel, his life, and governing activities. Other chronicles discuss Tlacaelel, one of which is closely related to Durán's *Historia*. Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, a grandson of the second Moteuczoma—ruler when Cortés arrived—spoke Nahuatl fluently, but his most voluminous work, the *Crónica mexicana*, completed around 1598, was written in Spanish though with elements of Nahuatl syntax, rendering the text challenging to decipher. It has long been thought that both authors, Durán and Alvarado Tezozomoc, derived their chronicles from an earlier Nahuatl-language text, the so-called "Crónica X." This idea explains similarities in chronology, organization, and content of the two texts, even though the writing styles differ as do specific points of information.[3]

A third writer, don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Quauhtlehuanitzin (whose writings date to about 1610 to 1620, about whom Schroeder is the world's leading expert), prolific and widely steeped in an array of Nahuatl- and Spanish-language writings, created many texts

[2] Matthew Restall, "A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History," *Latin American Research Review* 38, no. 1 (2003): 113–134.

[3] See Robert H. Barlow, "La Crónica X: versiones coloniales de la historia de los Mexica tenochca," *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Antropológicos* 7 (1945): 65–87. For further scholarship, see Susan Schroeder, *Tlacaelel Remembered: Mastermind of the Aztec Empire* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 44–47.

in which both the Mexica and Tlacaelel were portrayed. Most texts produced by Chimalpahin were in Nahuatl and took the form of annals. Annals consist of year counts in which scribes of the prehispanic era recorded events important to the individual altepetl with a pictographic writing system. The practice lasted into the colonial era, at first using the Nahua calendar system, later applying European year labels. As time wore on, scribes wrote with colonial alphabetic Nahuatl. Chimalpahin produced annals of his altepetl of birth, Chalco, and other kingdoms, especially Mexico Tenochtitlan. His writings contain much detail about Tlacaelel, affirming and supplementing Durán's and Alvarado Tezozomoc's histories. Because of the range of sources Chimalpahin used and his desire to "furnish a true history of all that had transpired so that future generations of Nahuas would know of their illustrious past,"[4] Schroeder considers his annals to be historically accurate.

But she points to an enduring puzzle about Tlacaelel. Other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources, many by Spaniards, some heavily influenced by indigenous informants or texts, others either by *mestizo* writers of mixed indigenous-Spanish heritage or by indigenous writers, hardly or do not mention him. Some colonial writers and modern scholars question therefore whether Tlacaelel existed or whether his life and actions were glorified by descendants seeking privileges and status, competed for non-stop by colonial indigenous nobles.

The book covers Tlacaelel's political and religious impact in the second and third chapters. The second chapter discusses Tlacaelel's birth and dynastic heritage as grandson of the first tlatoani Acamapichtli, son of another, Huitzilihuitl, and brother to two more, Chimalpopoca and Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina. The chapter details Tlacaelel's role in the Mexica war with the leading basin power, the Tepaneca, early in the fifteenth century, during which he served as military advisor and cihuacoatl to his uncle Itzcoatl who became ruler upon Chimalpopoca's death. When Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina succeeded Itzcoatl in 1440, he and Tlacaelel set about to structure and enlarge what has become known as the "Aztec empire" or "Triple Alliance," the subject of Chapter Three, covering the years 1440 to 1487 when Tlacaelel died.

During this time, Tetzcoco became part of the Triple Alliance, according to Schroeder's sources subdued by and junior partner to the

[4] Schroeder, *Tlacaelel Remembered*, 27.

Mexica; other sources emphasize Tetzcoca power, seeing it as nearly equivalent to Tenochtitlan as a center of imperial power. Her chapter concentrates, however, on the prolonged twenty-year Mexica war with Chalco, in which eventually it was subordinated, and the Mexica seized land and other kinds of property. Schroeder emphasizes how conquest in this period resulted in the transfer of wealth to the Mexica, especially to the tlatoani and Tlacaelel who, as he aged, amassed a fortune. As the highest rulers garnered ever greater affluence, they became more concerned with enforcing social class differences through stratified access to justice, religious privileges, and displays of rank. The Mexica built new temples and large sculptures commemorating major deities and the tlatoani of this period. The practice of human sacrifice also intensified, with Tlacaelel promoting wars in which large numbers of captives would be taken to feed Mexica deities, especially their patron god Huitzilopochtli, to whom they offered blood, hearts, and human flesh. Dying at the age of ninety, having constructed a large, powerful imperial state, Schroeder asks "Could one man have been responsible for so much?"[5]

The argument that Tlacaelel never existed fails to account for the array of evidence pointing to the reality of his being, especially that which Schroder draws upon in Chimalpahin's voluminous writings. She uses that evidence masterfully to develop the biography presented. Yet the sources do differ in that one group—those Schroeder emphasizes—provide much detail about him; others, less Tenochca Mexica centered, either mention him briefly or not at all. The author places great weight on Chimalpahin's abilities and willingness to weigh and judge the veracity of his sources, many no longer extant. Despite drawing on a broad indigenous- and Spanish-language source base, Chimalpahin nevertheless had a point of view that promoted the significance of the Tenochca Mexica and Tlacaelel and his descendants, perhaps because he resided in the neighborhood of Mexico City, Xoloco, the same place where Tlacaelel's colonial descendants lived (and Tlacaelel himself had a marital tie to Chalco, the place—other than Tenochtitlan—in which Chimalpahin had the deepest historical interest).

Less self-promoting than other colonial indigenous and mestizo writers, Chimalpahin nevertheless highlighted the importance of places to which he had kin or residential ties. He shared in the pronounced tendency of colonial writers to promote the interests and

[5] Schroeder, *Tlacaelel Remembered*, 121.

colonial legacies of particular kingdoms and rulerships. That means the question Schroeder raises, but never really answers, "Could one man have been responsible for so much," calls for an answer, because prehispanic Nahua political culture seems to have been characterized in so many instances—war, law, and the keeping of social order more broadly—on collective decision-making. Less criticism and more comment on the difficulty of writing a biography of an individual whom we can only know from a source base that is at odds even over Tlacaelel's being, Schroeder highlights sources for which we know who the authors are and can assess their points of view. Camilla Townsend's book, about the colonial annals of Basin of Mexico communities, examines related questions about authorship, purpose, and audience, exploring these in the context of Nahua ways of keeping and writing history.

Beginning with a discussion of prehispanic Nahua practices, she shows they existed in two predominant forms, one set painted and written documentation of yearly events (*xiuhpohualli*), the other oral performances of history, often "a political act, intended to reify certain alliances."[6] Together, these developed into colonial painted calendars (often with explanatory alphabetic text added) and annals, written in Nahuatl with the Roman alphabet as explained above. Painted calendars have been the subject of much historical and art historical scholarship, the annals less so, though Schroeder and Rafael Tena, a Mexican historian, have done much to bring Spanish and English translations of Chimalpahin's annals to light.[7]

But Nahuas produced many other annals. Some historians argue that the influence of European historical traditions and self-dealing of writers who promoted themselves, their families, and/or communities, undermine the cultural legitimacy of the annals, rendering them inauthentic sources for the study of indigenous culture, especially for the period before Europeans arrived. But Townsend shows that prehispanic history keeping always reflected the interests of ruling groups and altepetl, and scholars can interpret these texts—repetitive and confusing as they can be—by examining how they reflect Nahua

[6] Camilla Townsend, *Annals of Native America: How the Nahuas of Colonial Mexico Kept Their History Alive* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[7] Domingo Francisco de San Antón Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Codex Chimalpahin: Society and Politics in Mexico Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Texcoco, Culhuacan, and Other Nahua Altepetl in Central Mexico*, ed. and trans., Arthur J. O. Anderson and Susan Schroeder, 2 vols. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); *Las ocho relaciones y el memorial de Colhuacan*, ed. and trans., Rafael Tena (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1998).

ideas about history, politics, religion, and kinship and also how they portray colonial events, people, and power relations. Townsend does a masterful job of both. She removes the anonymity of authors, only a few of whom claimed authorship (including Chimalpahin), and explores the contexts of writers and their texts.

Townsend covers annals from a range of places across central Mexico and over a lengthy period, 1540s to the 1690s. Readers will gain a sense of the annals style because each chapter opens with a lengthy excerpt translated into English; Nahuatl transcriptions appear in an appendix. Each chapter then discusses the author or authors and his/their social environment. Townsend shows the impact of religious education, including writing with a phonetic alphabet, provided by Franciscans and friars of other orders. That education formed the base upon which native intellectuals documented altepetl histories. She demonstrates how colonial writers used and transformed Nahua historiography, capturing the varied perspectives key to representing the migratory histories and multiple communities subsumed within each altepetl as well as the cooperation and conflict among altepetl as alliances shifted and changed before Europeans arrived. This form also allowed the writers to detail events and impacts of conquest and colonial rule.

An annal that captures well the variety of themes this genre encompasses is the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, about the history of Cuauhtinchan, an altepetl near Cholula. The compilers began the text in the 1540s, and its production was heavily influenced by don Alonso de Castañeda. As a ruler of a component altepetl of Cuauhtinchan and deeply knowledgeable about the history of migration and alliance formation in the twelfth or thirteenth century underlying its formation, don Alonso recited a history that younger family members transcribed. The text provides a narrative of those early years of migration and settlement up through the 1550s when Cuauhtinchan found itself involved in land litigation that don Alonso attempted to mediate. Early though this text is, its hybrid nature reveals the multivocality of Nahua historical and political practices, including the intermarriages that shaped dynastic relations within and beyond Cuauhtinchan, illustrating Townsend's expertise about Nahua gender relations, yet is shaped also by colonial knowledge about writing and Spanish law and governance.

Like Schroeder, Townsend is an elegant writer, her book a pleasure to read. It covers much ground geographically and chronologically. The analysis of authorship and patterns of expression within this genre alone makes the book worthwhile for Mesoamerican specialists. For readers not steeped in the intricacies of Nahua culture

and linguistic patterns, the book presents a challenge. How do these two books illustrate trends in Mesoamerican studies? Here, Townsend's theme of seeing both continuity and change in the annals genre is consequential.

The political power and claims of legitimacy by dynastic lines that used to be declared and fought over through diplomacy or war, became asserted through court cases between communities and their ruling families in the colonial era. These struggles, internal to and between colonial altepetl, shaped not just law but textual production and intellectual development across the Basin of Mexico and in many parts of central and southern Mesoamerica where the new technology of alphabetic writing had significant impact politically, legally, and culturally. The New Philology has expanded its reach geographically, chronologically, and thematically; the books reviewed here stay with the central area of Mesoamerica where such studies began, but they illustrate the turn to lesser known texts and the role of individual writer/intellectuals within a broader group of elite political actors.

This, however, is linguistically specialized scholarship because of the skills required to analyze dense and complex indigenous-language texts and raises three questions. Because so many of these texts were produced by elite indigenous or those close to them, how much do they speak for a wider indigenous non-elite populace? Has this highly specialized scholarship decentered Spanish-conquistador and chronicler accounts that so influence both scholarly and popular understandings of the period of contact, war, and transition to colonial rule? And finally, what can a world history audience learn from reading about particularities of the Spanish invasion of Mesoamerica and the waves of cultural change that provoked? I can but provide brief thoughts here.

First, some texts illustrate schisms internal to kingdoms. Some of Chimalpahin's annals as well as Zapata y Mendoza's *Historia cronológica de la Noble Ciudad de Tlaxcala*, the latter discussed in detail by Townsend, point to indigenous conflicts around class as well as land access and ownership that involve the non-noble populace, but in general, these texts were written from an elite colonial indigenous perspective. Given who the authors were and the perspectives to which they gave voice, many issues, perspectives, and concerns were elided.

Second, while New Philology writings date back to the 1970s, it is doubtful they have decentered conqueror-derived narratives. The model of conquest and cultural destruction remains powerful because its pervasiveness reinforces it and is not totally wrong—violence, exploitation, and cultural loss all occurred. The linguistic turn of New Philology that emphasizes continuity *and* change has had an influence

on Mesoamericanists in art history, religion, philosophy, even economy. North Americanists and Andeanists have embraced New Philology approaches for places where colonial indigenous-language documentation is scarce. However, stories about how communities and peoples maintained political structures, ruling families, and forms of historical memory are complicated, not easily rendered by world historians in the terms of victors and vanquished through which this place and period of history is still so often told.

Yet it is that complex story that should most interest those seeking to compare patterns of contact, conquest, and cultural and identity transformation globally. How local indigenous communities remembered, told, and wrote their histories helped shape how those peoples and histories participated in the creation of nation states and national histories, with their particular renderings of indigenous presence, absence, agency, or subordination. This is not just the case for Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, the most indigenous parts of Latin America, but also pertains to indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. What Mesoamericanists, and New Philologists in particular, offer historians of conquest and colonialism operating on a more global scale is a linguistically and textually rich historiography that cautions against overemphasizing acculturation, modernization, and integration without acknowledging how local communities questioned, used, resisted, and reshaped what appear to be hegemonic forces of change.

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The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism. By ANTOINETTE BURTON. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 336 pp. $29.95 (hardcover).

How Empire Shaped Us. Edited by ANTOINETTE BURTON and DANE KENNEDY. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 216 pp. $114.00 (hardcover); $29.95 (paper).

British Imperial: What the Empire Wasn't. By BERNARD PORTER. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016. 216 pp. $29.00 (hardcover).

More than a few observers have discerned echoes of Britain's imperial past in the June 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union. The sense that British greatness lay beyond constraining