

Changing Tides: Cartographic Depictions of Water as Reflections of Cultural Change in Ancient Mexico

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Depictions of water are common in the imagery of ancient Mexico before and after the Spanish invasion. These representations encoded physiographic information about the landscapes inhabited by people and cosmological knowledge of the realms of the cosmos populated by supernatural beings and forces; they thus constitute a kind of regionally-distinctive cartographic production. Changes in the ways that water is represented under Spanish Colonial rule reflect shifting understandings of the universe, but aspects of an indigenous Mesoamerican worldview are still apparent despite the successes of conversion.

As is to be expected, imagery in precolumbian documents emphasized symbolic and cosmological meanings of water, whereas post-invasion documents produced by indigenous artists increasingly featured European cartographic interests in bodies of water. Differences in the subject matter of surviving documents complicate the comparison, but it is clear that cartographic representations of water do have precolumbian antecedents and that Colonial period water imagery continued to reflect Mesoamerican cosmological understandings.

This paper considers common precolumbian symbolic uses of water imagery to identify historical and mythic places as well as to characterize supernatural beings and locations and situate them within the physical and supernatural realms. It identifies distinctive Mesoamerican cosmological references in the water imagery of Colonial period maps, notably the continued use of common stylistic conventions for representing water and the celestial realm. These continuities in symbolic representation can be understood as a dimension of the hybrid belief systems that emerged in Colonial period Mexico and as reflective of the ongoing importance of water as a component in indigenous conceptualizations of place.

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