

# Codiphagia in Diego Muñoz Camargo's *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala* (1584)<sup>1\*</sup>

## Códigofagia en *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala* (1584) de Diego Muñoz Camargo

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**Resumen.** El concepto de «*códigofagia*», acuñado por Bolívar Echeverría, permite ampliar una comprensión semiótico-ontológica de la cultura y propone una base conceptual útil para una reflexión crítica sobre la *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala* (1584) de Diego Muñoz Camargo.

**Palabras clave.** Códigofagia; Bolívar Echeverría; Diego Muñoz Camargo; crónica de indios.

**Abstract.** The concept of «*codiphagia*», coined by Bolívar Echeverría, allows a broadening of the semiotic-ontological understanding of culture and proposes the conceptual basis for a critical reflection on Diego Muñoz Camargo's *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala* (1584).

**Keywords.** Codiphagia; Bolívar Echeverría; Diego Muñoz Camargo; *crónica de indios*.

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Diego Muñoz Camargo's *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala* (1584) is a prime example of the relationship between Indigenous and European knowledge and imaginaries during the first stage of colonization in the part of the Americas known as New Spain. The concept of «*códigofagia*» or «*codiphagia*», coined by Bolívar Echeverría, allows a broadening of the semiotic-ontological dimension of culture. In a more general sense, Echeverría's concept lays out a communicational semiosis that maintains a conflictual relationship among cultural codes. Applied here, that would mean conducting analyses and interpretations that integrate «*codiphagia*» as part of the conceptual basis for a critical reflection on this particular work by Diego Muñoz Camargo. Accordingly, the study will approach the matter at hand in three different ways. The first delves into the *crónicas de indios* (written accounts by indigenous authors) and how the concept of «*codiphagia*» can be useful in interpreting the *Descripción*. The second puts forth a reading of the *Descripción* in order to interrogate the author's motives and modes of transfer and appropriation of cultural codes. Lastly, the third, concluding section proposes a reading of the *Descripción* that raises, from a codiphagic perspective, new questions and sheds light on what can be considered a civilizational project in the making.

#### ON *CRÓNICAS DE INDIOS* AND THE NOTION OF CODIPHAGIA

This article seeks to contribute to New World historiography as a complex field of study focusing on the colonial period in the Americas that acknowledges the heterogeneity of the «cultural text» or «*kulturelle Text*»<sup>2</sup>. It also suggests the need for comparative analyses and the establishment of complex interrelations (mainly regarding intertextuality) as a methodological axiom in the study of the incredible plethora of texts —heterogeneous in their perspectives and articulations— that allow for comparative analyses with a wide range of scopes and objectives<sup>3</sup>. The goal is to shed new light on the written material discussed in New World historiography by tending to what these texts can tell us when read and interpreted in different ways. In this sense, one should take into consideration the concept of «*crónica mestiza*» or «mestizo chronicle», particularly because it attends to the historic-literary aspects of written production carried out by indigenous writers during the colonization of the Americas. Lienhard establishes his concept:

Atribuimos el carácter "mestizo" a aquellas crónicas que, casi independientemente del origen étnico de sus autores (indígenas, mestizos, españoles), reelaboran materiales discursivos o reales de la historia americana a través de unos procedimientos narrativos (verbales y/o pictográficos) de tradición heterogénea: indígena y europea<sup>4</sup>.

With the concept of «mestizo chronicle» set as a conceptual linchpin, it then becomes possible to articulate a theoretical critique of an identity discourse *in the*

2. Bachmann-Medick, 2016.

3. Stoll, 2010, p. 1281.

4. Lienhard, 1983.

*making*, which contains historic-literary elements ripe for non-dogmatic reflection and application open to raising new questions that seek to form «las premisas de una nueva conciencia global, histórica, política y cultural»<sup>5</sup>.

Besides, one should take into account Bolívar Echeverría's work on two concepts that are—for the purpose of this study— fundamental and interrelated: «cultural *mestizaje*» and «codiphagia». In the words of Echeverría:

El mestizaje cultural ha consistido en una «códigofagia» practicada por el código cultural de los dominadores sobre los restos del código cultural de los dominados. Ha sido un proceso en que el devorador ha debido muchas veces transformarse radicalmente para absorber de manera adecuada la substancia devorada; en el que la identidad de los vencedores ha tenido que jugarse su propia existencia intentando apropiarse de la de los vencidos<sup>6</sup>.

Echeverría is referring to a process of «cultural *mestizaje*» that is tantamount to the devouring of cultural codes. And it is here where the idea of «codiphagia» gives way to a culturally tension-laden form of subjectivity— one that is liminal, in motion, and appropriates and redirects the horizons of understanding and interpretation relative to the construction of alternative, mestizo identities. That is:

Si la identidad cultural deja de ser concebida como una sustancia y es vista más bien como un «estado de código» —como una peculiar configuración transitoria de la subcodificación que vuelve usable, «hablable», dicho código—, entonces, esa «identidad» puede mostrarse también como una realidad evanescente, como una entidad histórica que, al mismo tiempo que determina los comportamientos de los sujetos que la usan o “hablan”, está siendo hecha, transformada, modificada por ellos<sup>7</sup>.

The foregoing of a substantialist perspective of cultural identity (in favour of a semiotic reading) puts Echeverría at odds with Latin American culturalist essentialism. At this level, Echeverría follows a sort of deconstructing approach, which is similar to the performance studies framework, in order to address the idea of cultural identity as a «code being staged» in New Spain<sup>8</sup>. As such, the notion of a state of a cultural code constitutes an evanescent subjectivity —the type that is of interest to this study— in which cultural identity (or code) plays out in such a way that it exposes itself to the possibility of devouring and being devoured.

Nevertheless, this evanescent reality brings about transformations in which cultural identities are constantly being re-constructed. This is why Echeverría underscores the way in which codes are constructed and amended through the regeneration of semic possibilities, while also eschewing formalisms by attributing historical experience (historicity) to cultural codes and their continuous transformations in

5. Lienhard, 1983, p. 107.

6. Echeverría, 2001, p. 63.

7. Echeverría, 2005, p. 31.

8. Cabranes-Grant, 2016; Harris, 2000; Scolieri, 2013.

meaning. However, the question remains as to how these codes are used and spoken, as well as how they are transformed and reconstructed, and by whom:

Jugando a ser europeos, no copiando las cosas o los usos europeos, sino imitando el ser europeo, simulando ser ellos mismos europeos, es decir, repitiendo o "poniendo en escena" lo europeo, los indios asimilados montaron una muy peculiar representación de lo europeo. En una representación o imitación que en un momento dado, asombrosamente, había dejado de ser tal y pasado a ser una realidad o un original: en el momento mismo en que, ya transformados, los indios se percataron de que se trataba de una representación que ellos ya no podían suspender o detener y de la que, por lo tanto, ellos mismos ya no podían salir; era una "puesta en escena absoluta", que había transformado el teatro en donde tenía lugar, permutando la realidad de la platea con la del escenario<sup>9</sup>.

The key to follow Echeverría proposals is the «staging» carried out by indigenous people, which paved the way for the survival for their culture and identity. Effectively, through these representations and imitations of an unfamiliar world, they managed to construct their own reconfigured and reinvented points of reference—necessarily altered due to the circumstances and context—by blurring the lines between the audience's reality and that of the stage.

Among those *indios* that found it necessary to participate in efforts to stage and put European cultural codes to use, the group that most stands out is that of indigenous writers, who have been categorized in different ways: as «humanists and *letrados*»<sup>10</sup>; as «Ladinos»<sup>11</sup>; as part of the «contact zone»<sup>12</sup>; as «cultural translators»<sup>13</sup>; as «*passeurs*»<sup>14</sup>; and as «indigenous intellectuals»<sup>15</sup>. This study is interested in those who learned and made use of writing, and, in so doing, managed to prolong, negotiate and redirect their historical experience by way of a European alphabetic code as their vehicle. And this was possible because theirs was a type of writing that lays bare the fact that indigenous history can also be written by the *indios* themselves.

Our proposal seeks to determine how the *indios* carry out this staging process, which amounts to a unique historic-literary production, when writing and translating. Moreover, the aim is to engage in an open dialogue with Echeverría and his ideas—especially regarding border, liminal and alternative modes to modern, Western subjectivity—in that these ideas act as catalysts or points of relay for profoundly ontological discourses and problems. The writing in questions seeks to put European modes of discursive articulation, often related to the biblical, classical and humanistic traditions, in dialogue with others sources that are mainly associated with oral traditions, non-alphabetic writing and polysensual experiences. In this sense,

9. Echeverría, 2010, p. 191.

10. León-Portilla, 1964; Garibay, 2007; Romero, 2011.

11. Adorno, 1992; Bernard, 2001; Cornejo Polar, 2011.

12. Pratt, 1991; Cortés and Zamora, 2016.

13. Navarrete, 2007; Payàs, 2011; Añón, 2012; Valdeón, 2014; Richter, 2015.

14. O'Phelan and Salazar, 2014.

15. Ramos and Yannakakis, 2014.

what is at hand is codiphagic writing as a specific manifestation of «codiphagia» which, in this case, can be found operating through —but not reduced to— writing. In effect, codiphagic writing is also an act of compiling «discursive fragments» and «fragmentary systems of dispersion»<sup>16</sup>.

This fragmentary compilation opens up space for the proclamation of alternative subjectivities by delving into the conflicts and tensions inherent in the reconstruction of identities and cultures. Therefore, the value ascribed to codiphagic writing is operational, depending on how discursive fragments are compiled in the contentious movement of the reconfiguration of codes. The objective is to apply this codiphagic approach to a particular little-known chronicle, entitled *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala* by Diego Muñoz Camargo.

#### ON DIEGO MUÑOZ CAMARGO AND THE *DESCRIPCIÓN*

Who is Diego Muñoz Camargo? His authorship and identity were directly linked to his condition as a bilingual (Nahuatl-Spanish) mestizo with close relatives of indigenous ancestry<sup>17</sup>. However, the aim here is to highlight certain aspects of his life that may prove to be of particular interest to this study. Diego Muñoz Camargo (1528-1599) seems to have enjoyed a high social status both in official matters as well as in private business —mainly related to livestock and salt production<sup>18</sup>. His closeness to the colonial regime is also a significant factor, as it allowed him to gain the trust of Tlaxcalan government officials. Muñoz Camargo can be thought of as part of a nation building or project that included in its trajectory the configuration of new, mestizo horizons, as well as efforts to forge a historical understanding of ethnicity<sup>19</sup>.

After being commissioned by Alonso de Nava, then *Alcalde Mayor* (municipal lord) of Tlaxcala, Muñoz Camargo began writing the *Descripción* around 1580, which he later finished in approximately 1584. Moreover, it was personally gifted to King Philip II in 1585, after which it became part of the library at *El Escorial* palace, finally ending up in its present location at the University of Glasgow. Today it is known as the *Glasgow Manuscript* due to its location. In this article, the typeset version (2000) and facsimile edition (1981), both produced by René Acuña, will be used for analysis<sup>20</sup>.

Fundamentally, the *Descripción* is a complex piece of writing in terms of its style and objectives. It is written in a continuous form, beginning with «*Instrucción y*

16. Ortega, 2011, p. 40.

17. Gibson, 1950.

18. Gibson, 1950; Hernández, 2011; Daneri, 2016.

19. Ward, 2001.

20. There is one facsimile edition from 1981 and two other typeset editions published in 1984 and 2000. As previously mentioned, the facsimile edition will be used in the analysis of visual texts. However, said edition is not without controversy. An accusation of academic piracy was levelled by Hanns J. Prem (1985) in a review of Acuña's edition. This led to an incisive rejoinder by Acuña (1986) in which it he clearly demonstrates the relevant and earnest scientific effort undertaken in his editing and disseminating of the *Descripción*.

*Memoria*»<sup>21</sup>—a response to a 50-question survey from Spanish authorities— then offers a section in which the author dedicates the work to King Philip II and clarifies the reasons why he wrote it. The text then divides into two separate books, with the first containing 20 chapters written in prose. The somewhat more chaotic second book contains an account of indigenous times, an indigenous calendar by friar Francisco de las Navas, an explanation of years and leap years—along with a description of Christian days, months and years using Antonio de Guevara's systematization as a reference—a chapter on the flora and fauna of Tlaxcala and, lastly, seven chapters on the four «cabeceras», or internal polities of Tlaxcala (Tepeticpac, Ocotelolco, Tizatlan, Quiahuiztlan), on famous leaders, currency and armaments, and on the matters not discussed in the geographical account.

The *Descripción* had to comply with the same standards as other geographical accounts and respond to the inquiries in «*Instrucción y Memoria*», which, by and large, resulted in a type of territorial description just as focused on rivers, mountains, settlements and towns as it was on potential economic and political opportunities. In spite of the well-defined precedents, Muñoz Camargo offers a more singular perspective. In the alphabetically composed texts he establishes a unique order, and disproportionately discusses some subjects over others, demonstrating his intention to historicize rather than to merely inform. The *Descripción* has a heterogeneous and encompassing style—most notably in the sections on the four internal polities, at times repetitively describing the details of each one.

Moreover, the *Descripción* develops its historic-literary perspective in such a way that it attempts to answer the 50 questions with particular specificity all throughout the text. There are sections that tend to be more incisive than others, reflecting on forms of government and political decision making developed by the Tlaxcaltecs. One of these is the section on the response given by the four internal polities to the Mexicas' demands for their submission, in which the Tlaxcaltecs state, «Señores muy poderosos, Tlaxcala no [o]s debe vasallaje ni, desde que salieron de las Siete Cuevas, jamás reconocieron con tributo ni pecho a ningún rey ni principal del mundo, porque siempre han conservado su libertad»<sup>22</sup>. Here the narrative turns to the conflict between Tlaxcala and the Triple Alliance, about which the author gives an overview of the political position of Tlaxcala before the arrival of the Spanish, stating:

Y, como hubiesen los *mexicanos tenochcas* sujetado la mayor parte deste nuevo mundo y que [su señor] no tuviese ya que ganar desde la *Mar del Sur* a la del norte, y todo lo que tuviese por suyo, procuró muy a su salvo tomar la provincia de *Tlaxcalla* y sujetarla, así como había hecho a las demás. Y ansí, los *mexicanos*, con ánimo denodado, les dieron tantos recuentros y escaramuzas, hasta que los vinieron a acorralar dentro de pocos años en sus p[ro]pias tierras y provincia, donde los tuvieron cercados más de 60 años, necesiándolos de todo cuanto humanam[en]te los pudieron necesitar, por no tenían algodón con que se vestir, oro ni plata con

21. Muñoz Camargo, *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala*, 2000, pp. 27-32.

22. Muñoz Camargo, *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala*, 2000, p. 180.

que se adornar, ni plumería verde de otras colores para sus galas, que es la que más estimaban para sus divi[s]as y plumajes, ni cacao para beber, ni sal para poder comer<sup>23</sup>.

Beyond a mere 60-year-long Mexica siege, the Tlaxcaltecs –according to Muñoz Camargo, in a politico-sacrificial understanding of war– have suffered the consequences of being their necessary and symbolic enemies, which clearly explains the constant belligerence towards them. As such, war functions as a politico-religious affair that generates the need for enemies, thus allowing religious and sacrificial practices and, most of all, the training of new soldiers to continue. Tlaxcala is a place where enemies are produced, which is a role that it plays in Mexica wars waged on religious and/or sacrificial bases<sup>24</sup>.

The *Descripción* also includes two calendar rounds, along with explanations of each one, in response to the indigenous calendar by friar Francisco de las Navas. The first calendar round explains the days, weeks, months and years, while the second describes the months according to a 20-day lunar calendar; both have detailed annotations and comments clarifying the ways in which the native population measured time<sup>25</sup>. The interest in time as a philosophical problem is a crucial aspect of the Mesoamerican cultural world, considering the dichotomy between a seasonal and cyclical, as well as a lineal and teleological, understanding of time, in which complementary opposites are at play, specifically in the way in which chronicles/narratives produced by indigenous authors from the Mayan regions have had an impact on the Christian cultural landscape during the colonial period<sup>26</sup>. However, it can be argued that the *Descripción* actually strives to be in sync, at times even reconcile, with the Christian explanation of time, thus staging a codiphagic gesture; by way of an explanation of the Christian calendar, Muñoz Camargo manages to negotiate using Nahua forms of understanding time. The details of the explanation of friar Francisco de las Navas's indigenous calendar, as well as the celebrations associated with various days<sup>27</sup>, are prime examples of this type of codiphagic negotiation.

The topics discussed in the alphabetic code, as previously mentioned, are in response to the survey «*Instrucción y Memoria*». However, Muñoz Camargo complements these texts with 156 images, or visual texts, many of which include explanations in alphabetic writing. Each image –outlined by hand in black ink– takes up an entire page, while at least 80 contain elements that match, to varying degrees, the famous «*Linen of Tlaxcala*»<sup>28</sup>. In all, the visual history of conquest and colonization told by Muñoz Camargo spans a period from 1519 to 1542. Fundamentally,

23. Muñoz Camargo, *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala*, 2000, pp. 180-181.

24. López Austin, 2014; Domínguez, 2013.

25. Muñoz Camargo, *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala*, 2000, pp. 222-233.

26. Farris, 1985.

27. Muñoz Camargo *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala*, 2000, pp. 222-233.

28. Produced circa 1552, the «*Linen of Tlaxcala*» shows the Tlaxcalan perspective of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The *Linen* is one of the many visual materials/texts produced before and during the colonization of New Spain. The aforementioned correlation between the images found on the *Linen* and in the *Descripción* has been examined by Andrea Martínez. In an analysis of their respective contexts of



in these visual texts at least two interrelated aims can be observed: on the one hand, to show the unmistakable, loyal participation of the Tlaxcaltecs in several facets of conquest and colonization and, on the other, to pursue validation for their actions and merits from the colonial order. The visual texts comprise a hermeneutic exercise attuned to the continuity of a narrative that re-articulates a political message as the backdrop to a codiphagic construction, positing the Tlaxcaltecs as «Conquistadors»<sup>29</sup> and colonizers. Therefore, the *Descripción* provides the tools necessary to identify elements of transfer and negotiation, such as those that can be observed in the two interrelated alphabetic and visual codes contained therein.

In order to clarify Muñoz Camargo's visual proposals we may remark that concerned to the city of Tlaxcala. Muñoz Camargo includes two draws in which relieves the distribution of urban institutions around the main square (Figure 1) and the Franciscan monastery (Figure 2).

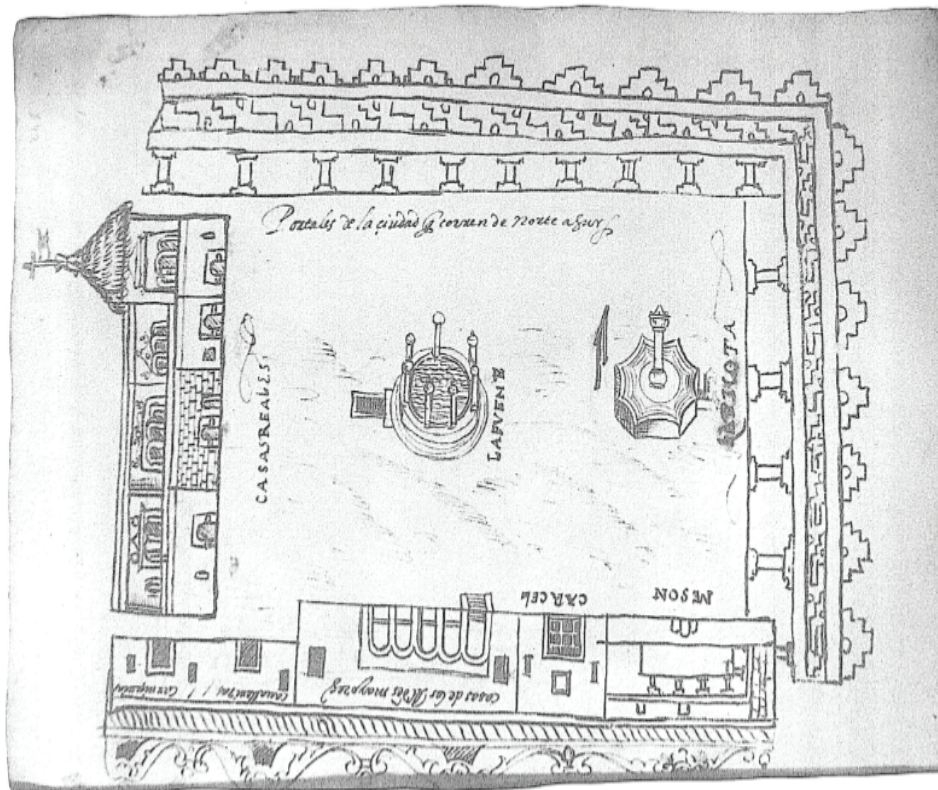


Figure 1. Casas de los al[cal]des mayores. Caballerizas. Carnicerías. Mesón. Cárcel. Casas reales. La fuente. La picota. Portales de la ciudad, que corren de norte a sur (Muñoz Camargo 1981 [1584]: Cuadro 17).

production, Martínez (1990) maintains that it was «a collective work of one or more illustrators commissioned by the indigenous council of Tlaxcala, both as a mural as well as in a transportable version» (p. 153). 29. Restall and Oudijk, 2007.



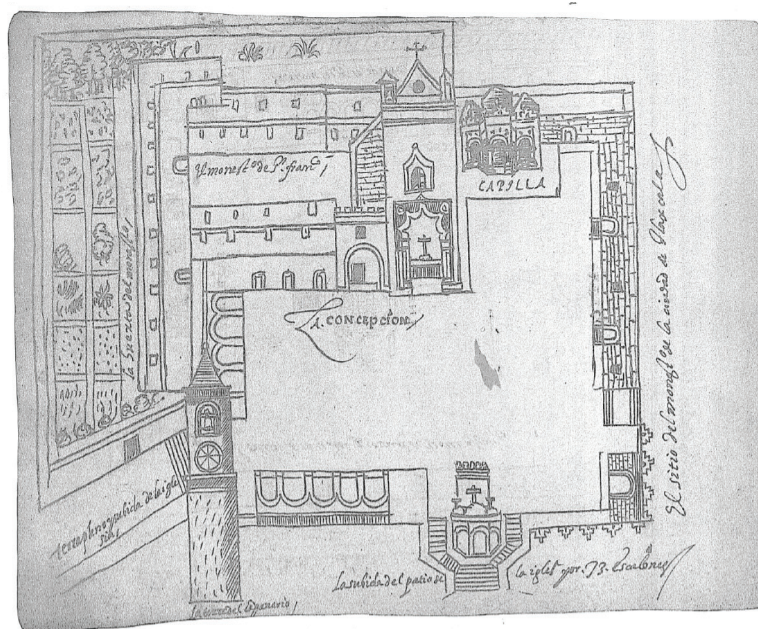


Figure 2. Terraplén y subida de Iglesia. La huerta del monasterio. La torre del campanario. El monasterio de San Francisco. La subida del patio de la iglesia por 73 escalones. La Concepción Capilla. El sitio del monasterio de la ciudad de Tlaxcala (Muñoz Camargo 1981 [1584]: Cuadro 18).

These draws point out the residences of municipal and viceregal officials, stables, butcher shops, an inn, a prison, and a fountain in the main square, the Franciscan monastery of Our Lady of the Assumption of Tlaxcala, located in the highest part of the city. In both draws the urbanistic design (i.e. the grid layout) is evident. The city of Tlaxcala works as an example of a concerted effort to establish an indigenous civility. At this level, it would be constructive to return to idea of civility (*civitas*)<sup>30</sup> in order to understand its particular manifestation in the context of New Spain. Accordingly, we may hold an interpretation of the *Descripción* that attends to the indigenous civility present in the alphabetic and visual texts, as well as in the materiality of the city of *indios* that is Tlaxcala. In fact, said indigenous civility is at the forefront of the civilizational project in Tlaxcala, which, in turn, is directly related to the interaction and appropriation of cultural codes on an urban-spatial and socio-political level. It is precisely the articulation of a new civility that makes it possible to identify this alternative mode of civilization. In this case, the codiphagic gesture in question takes place in the accommodation and adaptation of the spatial dimension, that is, the design is European but the political power continues to be indigenous. The urban-spatial creation of the city of Tlaxcala is an integral part of an indigenous civilizational project willing to negotiate and adapt its cultural codes and socio-political components.

30. Hanke, 1959; Pagden, 1983.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The *crónicas de indios* from the colonial period allow specific historical experiences to be remembered and reconstituted. Therefore, what is needed is to address this matter from a perspective that is open to reflecting on concepts and proposing new readings that can pinpoint the motivations, expectations and vectorizations in a given text. Colonial *crónicas de indios* are replete with efforts to recompose alternative subjectivities—in the case, that of the *indio*— from the discursive positivity of identity elements that have survived and been resemanticized in the encounter/clash with the modern, Western civilizational project. This study seeks to highlight how codiphagic writing directly alludes to said recombination of subjectivities by exchanging and transferring cultural codes—albeit not without their underlying asymmetries—as its core tenet. The *Descripción*'s narrative makes it possible to grasp how this type of writing operates, while also shedding light on how the Tlaxcalan civilizational project materialized. Not only does the *Descripción* re-construct the events of the conquest of Mexico; it also re-articulates the Tlaxcaltecs' very position of enunciation. In that, it lays out a platform from which to reflect on the scope of the singular propositivity of the philosophical and political bases of the text. Muñoz Camargo takes into account the imbrication and propositivity of an enunciative position that does not forget the opportunity to play an active role in a project on a grander—and, of course, civilizational— scale taking place in the «land of the tortilla» or «*Tlaxcallan*», from which he hails.

In the framework of «codiphagia», this article tries to assert that it is possible to identify and explicate the notion of an alternative civility through the *Descripción* in order to entail an alternative reading of the establishment and trajectory of a political and civilizational project in and from the New World. In this sense, Muñoz Camargo might be considered the voice of an alternative civility, of a civilizational project that attends to the exchange of cultural codes from the perspective of their inherent propositivity. When his works are decoded in light of his civilizational project, it then becomes possible to observe how the indigenous elements contained therein are relocated within the colonial structure, as well as how the colonial structure is able to adapt and even acknowledge those elements.

Therefore, this codiphagic gesture can be thought of as the emergence of a discourse on a locality, Tlaxcala, that managed to establish a civilizational project from within the colonial order—by way of its own political points of reference and in texts such as those of Muñoz Camargo—that upholds a historicity built on the basis of a contentious negotiation between the pre-Hispanic and the colonial in a context of survival and radical change in the Nahua cultural world. Tlaxcala and Diego Muñoz Camargo translate and compose a discursive whole; both construct and reconstruct, transmit and transfer—in interrelated yet dissimilar dimensions—a narrative of interethnic collaboration and conviviality. In effect, Muñoz Camargo's bid is preemptive and propositive, in the context of a *mundus novus* in motion, in which there were alternative ways—whether indigenous or Tlaxcalan—in the development of the colonial (and civilizational) order of New Spain.

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