MEXICO

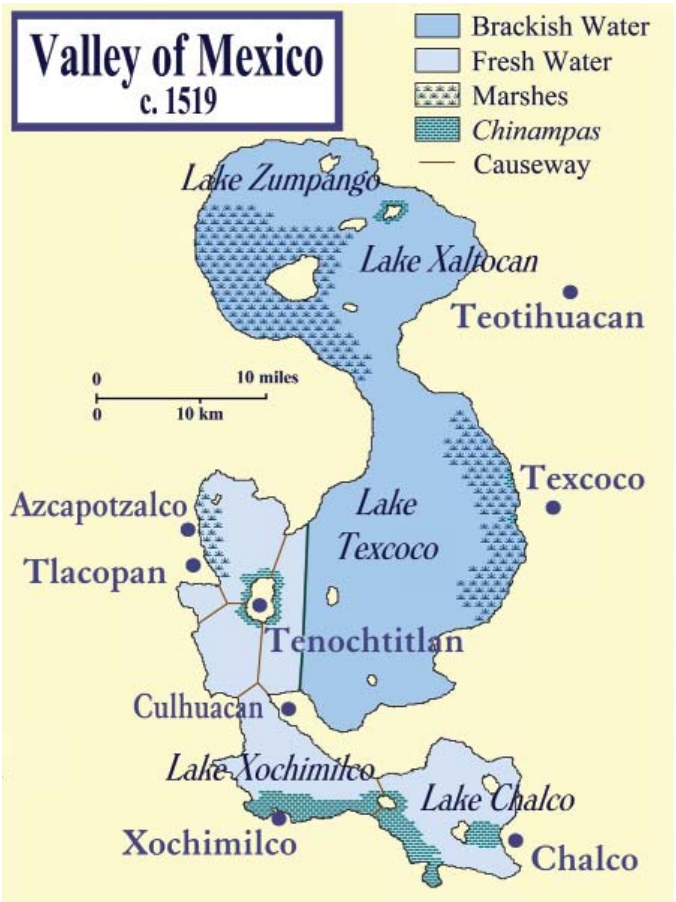
City of Lakes: Searching for Pantitlan

by Ivonne del Valle

In 1325, Tenochtitlan was founded on an island in the lowest depression of a basin without natural outlets through which the excess water of the rainy season and the multiple rivers in the area could drain away. Because of the region's geographic and climatic features, effective management of the water was, and continues to be, vital for the city's very existence.

The body of knowledge developed during the pre-Hispanic era to manage water entailed a complex combination of religious practices and technical skills that allowed for a meaningful relationship to that particular environment. Under this paradigm, lake water was central to the lives of the region's indigenous peoples.

The conquest of 1521 meant a complete break from this model, first because of the destruction of the city and, later, because of the general neglect of the indigenous hydraulic system. Beginning with this rupture, colonial texts reflect several tendencies regarding the integration (or lack thereof) of Indian knowledge of the basin's waters. It is this aspect of colonialism that I would like to address here: the fact that it puts into contact and administers, at will, forms of knowledge of diverse genealogy and morphology. In one stroke, colonialism as a historical force renders forms of knowledge and practice inadequate, simply because they are unfamiliar or because they have been produced by peoples recently transformed into a labor force.



Tenochtitlan and environs, circa 1519. (Image from Wikimedia Commons.)

Here, I will discuss the ways in which indigenous water knowledge could be (and can be) articulated in different colonial and postcolonial projects. I will not delve into all of them, but I would like to mention a few. One of these is the exclusionary paradigm from the university, whose members, whenever they wrote about water, even well into the 18th century, based their observations on Aristotle, Hippocrates and Pliny, never seeming to contemplate the possibility that there existed a similar corpus among the conquered population. From this perspective, Indian knowledge did not exist, and the lakes were mere unpleasant markers of Mexico City's boundaries.

Outside of this context, although from another important colonial institution, the research projects undertaken by priests such as Diego Durán and Bernardino de Sahagún inscribed knowledge about water within an anthropological perspective, which in many instances attempted to understand the indigenous systems on their own terms. Nevertheless, these texts aimed to preserve a memory of the past, while at the same time disassociating the rites and customs they presented from contemporary practices. These writings are the main sources of knowledge on Tláloc, the water deity in whose complex and varied representations, festivals and rituals, knowledge about water and the means to manage it were articulated.

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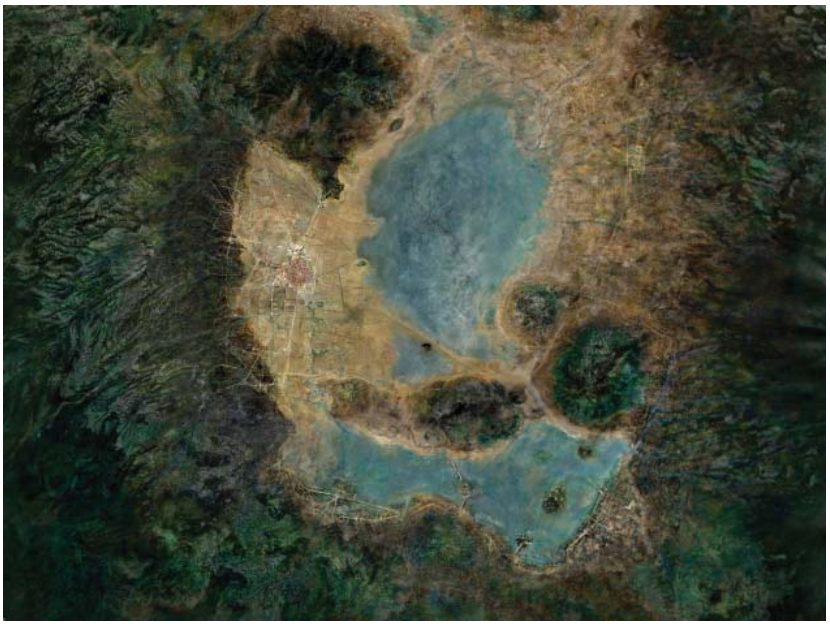
Following pages: La Gran Techochtitlán.



An artist's rendering of the lakes around Mexico City over time: 1520 (top), 1850 (middle) and 2000. (Images by Tomás Filsinger.)

Due to the changing living conditions (erosion caused by cattle, for example) and the neglect of the hydraulic system, colonial Mexico City suffered constant floods from very early on. Finally, in 1607, after a severe flood, the authorities opted for drainage, a radical solution proposed since the first floods of the 16th century.

For most of the 17th century, Jesuits, Franciscans and Mercedarians were in charge of the public works related to water management. Despite being the groups most intimately in contact with Indian knowledge, except for on rare occasions — I will talk about one of them in a bit — the friars, in their roles as technicians and engineers in charge of the hydraulic works, did not refer to the existence of an Indian base of water knowledge. In fact, they committed themselves to the drainage plan, a system contrary to the pre-Hispanic one that their convents jealously preserved in chronicles and ethnographic accounts.

In addition to the dramatic changes drainage brought to the region (imagine a small island surrounded by water in the space now occupied by Mexico City), this decision is relevant because Enrico Martínez, one of its principal promoters, presented it as a product of discerning between genuine knowledge and inadequate or picturesque technical skills. In his dispute with Adrian Boot, an expert brought to Mexico City from Europe to help solve the flooding problems, Martínez asserted that drainage had to be the best option, considering that Boot's proposal consisted of reviving the measures that the Indians had utilized for centuries. Thus, implicit in the drainage plan is the notion that in order to have any chance of being seriously considered, the knowledge employed must be something other than indigenous *techne*.

With drainage, a new body of knowledge emerged in the form of historical-technological archives put together by the city's government as it attempted to respond to the question of how such an environment could be managed. Here, an important transformation took place. The multifaceted indigenous

system that addressed the contingencies of the environment was reduced in the archives to an almost mythological evocation: "Pantitlan," the name-metaphor of a body of technical-religious knowledge converted into a fetish, a final solution that would bring an end to the flooding.

In the historical record created by friars and indigenous chroniclers, Pantitlan, a natural drain or sinkhole in the middle of Lake Texcoco, was one of the sites where human sacrifices and offerings to the water deities, along with what one might presume were technical interventions, took place. Unfortunately, by the beginning of the 17th century, there remained no reliable trace of Pantitlan's location. The rumor of its existence persisted, however, and was kept alive by those who wished to avoid the huge expense of creating a drainage system. The Jesuit priest Francisco Calderón was among those who believed in the existence of Pantitlan, and he convinced the Viceroy to fund search parties to find it.

The irony expressed at the end of the 17th century by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, one of the leading intellectual figures of New Spain, is an indication of the success of Calderón's efforts. Writing in 1692, after another rainy season that had threatened yet more flooding, Sigüenza y Góngora poked fun at those who were still thinking about Pantitlan. One of the search expeditions had returned after having found not a drain, but a fountain, a fact that would be a laughable matter, he wrote, were it not that affairs of the utmost "seriousness" depended on it, which gave the incident a tragic turn.

I would like to conclude this brief recollection of how Pantitlan appears in drainage-related documents with what was said in 1748 by a member of the city government. In case Pantitlan did exist, he pointed out, "it would be in name only, because the slime of more than two centuries would have clogged the drain, and it would not be possible to find it, nor to make it function." This statement presents a crude, though probably accurate, evaluation of the effects of more than 200 years of colonization. In any case, it serves as a double metaphor that accepts the possible existence of an alternative way to proceed with the water at the same time that it recognizes

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A man poles a boat filled with flowers through Lake Xochimilco, one of the few places in Mexico where traditional *chinampa* or lake bed agriculture is still practiced.

Photo by Francisco Martinez.

Photo by Dario Lopez-Mills/Associated Press.

A worker inside one of the tunnels that make up Mexico City's deep-drainage system.

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the impossibility of utilizing it. I want to suggest that, at least in reference to documents about Mexico City, this air of having finally triumphed, not in the form of a supposed Baroque synthesis, but instead in the recognition of the indigenous world as an abated and impenetrable remainder, permeates much of the production of an 18th century.

Pantitlan was never found, and drainage has been the approach used since 1607. One can say that the Gran Canal — inaugurated in 1900 during the Porfiriato, when it was announced that the drainage system was finally completed — was but another milestone in a continuum that persists through today with the construction of the deep-drainage system (Drenaje Profundo), built in the 1970s, and the Eastern Collector (Canal Emisor de Oriente), which will be inaugurated in 2012. Each new measure has promised to end the threat of large-scale flooding once and for all. These projects can be seen as a series of attempts to domesticate something that resists being tamed. They are also an invitation to seriously contemplate the ever-expanding monster that exists below the city's subsoil, without which the city would not be viable, but because of which the problems and threats multiply, such as the possible rupture of one of the enormous subterranean pipes, the sinking of the city and the vulnerability of water-depleted soils to seismic activity.

I don't think it is a coincidence that historical and ethnographic studies on indigenous water knowledge have been revived precisely during the construction of new drainage works, especially since the 1970s. In a dramatic reversal, in recent years the work of the university has been to safeguard practices and know-how on the verge of being dismantled by modern technology. Owing to this effort, Indian water knowledge is currently being revitalized in at least two spaces. The first is the work undertaken by anthropologists and historians interested in preserving forms of knowledge ostensibly in danger of being lost. The second is the series of projects by architects, urban planners and scientists who in one way or another, and making reference to the religious and indigenous archives of the 16th century, propose a "return" to the city of lakes, in other words, to overturn the drainage paradigm either by re-flooding the desolate area surrounding what remains

of Lake Texcoco or by liberating the rivers that have been channeled into the drainage system.

Nevertheless, one must ask, in what way can the university articulate, and not simply archive, the knowledge of those who practice the now "minor" knowledge, who in villages and towns at the foot of the volcanoes in central Mexico, continue interpellating, on another scale and with objectives distinct from those of the pre-Hispanic sorcerers, the gods of water? Another question is whether this preservation is even possible in the face of a technological system that is in opposition to it.

To conclude, let me return to the recognition in the 18th century of the accumulation of slime over Pantitlan, which had undermined technological practices, distorting them beyond recognition after subjugating them for many years. Although much has changed, what remains is the problem of what can be done now with knowledge produced to manage the water of an area that at the moment of conquest had, at most, 2 million inhabitants, and which now — and to a great degree thanks to the expulsion of the water achieved at the beginning of the 20th century — is home to nearly 22 million. In what sense can this knowledge not be condemned, by a simple question of magnitude, to being but an interesting piece of information in the accumulation of historical knowledge or a quaint reminder of a time that is evoked for tourists in Xochimilco but is no longer a coherent and organic possibility? Yet it seems to me that its existence must continue to be proposed as a counterpoint to a developmentalist technology that lacks the capacity for self-reflection. To properly address the historical events that brought about the depreciation of this knowledge, we ought to insist on the colonial character of the relationships I delineate here. This exercise is indispensable for various reasons, among them the need to return to a moment when a decision was possible, when in the history of water management it would have been feasible to choose A, B or C, in order to understand what was at stake in the philosophical or ideological posture that underlay each one of those options.

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Pantitlan still exists in Mexico City's subway system.

Photo by Jon Melnick.