Hermeneutics and Sacred Landscape in the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, Mexico

A long-term perspective on the dynamics of cultural tradition

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Cover image: Ritual offerings deposited at the Cerro del Pedimento in Santa Catarina Yosonotú, Oaxaca, Mexico.
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1. Introduction

It is the aim of the present investigation to explore the relationships between the dynamic character of cultural tradition and the perception of the sacred landscape from the point of view of a specific community. It is therefore necessary to consider the temporal dynamics through which the various socio-historical contexts influencing human action develop and change over time. To understand the meaning of past remains and cultural productions within the total context of cultural tradition as observed from the present, archaeology is engaged in an interpretive epistemology (Shanks and Hodder 1995; Shanks and Tilley 1987). It is argued in this thesis that hermeneutics – broadly defined\(^1\) – constitutes an endeavor that is particularly well-suited to confront the interpretive issues at stake when addressing questions related to the meanings of myriad material, artistic, and intangible expressions within such a cultural tradition. By doing so, the present approach will somewhat challenge Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1981, 351-357) almost exclusive emphasis on texts and written tradition as true sources of historical understanding, in comparison to which all other sources, such as non-literary monuments and oral tradition, are held to have less ontological value and do not achieve ‘full hermeneutic significance’.

Specifically, this thesis presents a hermeneutic approach to the study of the sacred landscape of the Mixtec region in southern Mexico. This will be done through the implementation of a long-term perspective focusing on the different but complementary scales or rhythms of time that interact in history and in the landscape (Braudel 1966; Ingold 2000, 189-208). It will then be argued that the above allows for the historical depth that is necessary to study the dialectic between past and present tradition. The insights to be gained from such a perspective within archaeology have been discussed by Knapp (1992, 10), who stresses the ways in which the general theory of the French Annales School can help illustrate the dynamic relationships between time, space and social change. In the same vein, López Austin (1997, 5-6) describes the Mesoamerican

\(^1\) While traditional hermeneutics is chiefly concerned with the specific problem of textual interpretation, the hermeneutic approach outlined in this thesis seeks to be broader in scope as well as to explore the possibilities for its application to other realms of social action. Likewise, from a methodological and heuristic point of view, the definition of textual materials will be extended beyond that of pure alphabetic writing to also include pictorial manuscripts and hybrid colonial documents.
religious tradition as a structured whole of long duration, in which the parts are differently affected by the rhythms of history.

In general terms, this investigation is in line with a long tradition of research carried out by Leiden University in the Mixtec region over the past decades (Geurds 2007; Geurds and Jansen 2008; Jansen 1982; 1988; Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011). This approach is characterized by a special emphasis on cultural continuity, and clearly stresses the importance of not fundamentally dissociating the study of the archaeological past from that of the contemporary socio-cultural context in the Mixteca. In turn, this enabled the implementation of a multidisciplinary epistemological perspective combining archaeology with oral history, in which Mixtec people are central actors in the narration of their own past. Recently, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011, 181-216) have outlined the theoretical steps towards a hermeneutic approach to the study of Mixtec culture in general and of pictorial manuscripts in particular, while Geurds (2007) used the concept of “landscape narration” to highlight the importance of archaeological sites for contemporary Mixtec communities, in terms of oral history and cultural continuity as a social process. Also, Ruiz Ortiz (2010) approached the deeper meanings of Mesoamerican sacred architecture and landscape in hermeneutic terms.

In similar fashion, the interpretive approach followed here is concerned with the symbolic and ritual significance of meaningful locales within the larger context of the Mixtec sacred landscape. It also explores how human interaction with such meaning-laden surroundings shaped cultural memory, material culture and oral history. Historically, this took place through various stages of social transformations, from precolonial times to the Colony and finally to the Independence of the Mexican nation-state. Together, the distant Mixtec archaeological past, which saw the development and spread of complex societies with their political, economic and religious forms of interaction, as well as the Colonial period (A.D. 1521 – 1810) and the present-day cultural tradition in the area, all provide the various layers of significance and symbolism that are contained in a sacred or ritual landscape that developed through time.

A hermeneutics of the sacred landscape, then, forms an interpretive framework aimed at understanding the history of specific meanings in space and time, along with their importance for cultural memory and identity in contemporary Mixtec communities (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009a, 443). In particular, the process of European colonization that took place in the sixteenth century had a profound impact on traditional religious practice, spatial experience, architecture and artistic creativity (Fernández Christlieb and García Zambrano 2006; Gruzinski 1988; Mundy 1996; Ruiz
This calls for the necessity of combining the exercise of hermeneutics with a postcolonial perspective (Gosden 2004; Jansen 1988; Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011, 181-216), since present-day oral tradition and rituals often express the dynamic ways in which different landscape representations and at times conflicting conceptions of sacredness merged as the result of historical processes of intercultural communication and symbolic negotiation. As Bhabha (1994, 248) argues, ‘the postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation’, which in turn results in the ‘hybrid location of cultural value’. Especially due to the profound historical transformations induced by the European colonization of the Americas, it can thus be said that different philosophies and conceptions of history were made to interact in the creation of hybrid forms of culture. In particular, pictorial maps and documents from the Early Colonial period allude to the fact that Mixtec people were active participants in the creation of new forms of visual culture in this intercultural context (Terraciano 2001, 31). However, postcolonial theory has also often been criticized for its lack of consideration for historical change and material culture (Gosden 2001, 243).

Consequently, the wider background wherein social interaction takes place and the long-term nature of cultural tradition must always be taken into account with regard to the interpretation of individual phenomena, be they expressed in archaeological contexts, material culture or contemporary rituals.

Far from being monolithic, the concept of cultural tradition used here will refer to the totality of the historical processes mentioned above, together with their material and intangible expressions. Concretely, López Austin and López Luján (2009, 19, 27) identify a series of core elements, material as well as ideational, which are recurrent in time and space and which define the persisting nature of the Mesoamerican tradition. Arguably, the defining feature of tradition is its dynamic character and its relation to the present, as is voiced by Gadamer:

‘The fact is that tradition is constantly an element of freedom and of history itself. Even the most genuine and solid tradition does not persist by nature because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated.’ [Gadamer 1981, 250]

As such, a comprehensive hermeneutic approach to landscape symbolism has to develop a methodology that is aware of the historical nature of the meanings contained in the cultural manifestations that it addresses (Jansen and Perez Jiménez 2011, 194). This investigation therefore examines various sources of evidence, including precolonial
archaeological structures, their orientation and spatial relationships within a broader landscape context, ancient pictorial manuscripts known as codices\(^2\), colonial texts and lienzos\(^3\), contemporary oral tradition, as well as ritual objects and the social context of their use. Several of these sources will be considered in each chapter in order to base interpretation on complementary data. Considered jointly they are insightful for understanding the wider historical context within which cultural landscapes are constructed, more so than what a focus on one type of evidence alone would permit.

In addition, it must be emphasized that in the context of any interpretive research taking place in the Mixtec region, just as in other parts of Mesoamerica, a basic knowledge of the indigenous or original language(s) spoken in the region is essential in order to be able to understand cultural concepts and terminologies in their own terms (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009a; Pérez Jiménez 2008). Most importantly, this will also enhance opportunities for meaningful interaction with the social actors who actively participate in the transmission of their own culture and traditions. In the words of Gardner (2010, 39), ‘because its objective is understanding and its method is interpretation, hermeneutics constitutes an approach which has the elements of human communication, language and discourse, at its centre’. During the last two decades, there has been indeed a growing awareness and impulse among archaeologists and anthropologists alike to construct their discourses or narratives on the basis of a reflexive methodology, allowing for multivocality and sustained intercultural dialogue (Hodder 2003; Rodman 1992). In the context of a recent landscape approach to archaeological sites in the Mixtec communities of Santiago Apoala and Santiago Tilantongo, Geurds (2007, 178) states that the insights gained from the implementation of such a reflexive methodology during fieldwork argue against the notion of ‘the community’ as an unproblematic whole, pointing instead towards ‘a heterogeneous grouping of individuals’.

\(^2\) Codices were screenfold pictographic manuscripts on which colorful historical or religious information was depicted, usually from the point of view of the community to which they originally belonged. They consisted of several pieces of deer hide or tree bark that were glued together to form long strips covered with a thin layer of white chalk (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2005, 11-12).

\(^3\) Lienzos are pictorial documents made up from several pieces of cloth assembled into one flat surface. In the Colonial period, they were typically used to convey geographical or genealogical information, a process by which a community could claim its legitimate rights and ties to the land (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2005, 15; Terraciano 2001, 19). These documents constitute excellent examples of hybrid maps mixing indigenous and European conventions of visual and symbolic landscape representation (Mundy 1996; Ramírez Ruiz 2006).
Geopolitically, the Mixtec region is located in what is today the southern part of the Mexican Republic and the western part of the state of Oaxaca, with small fringes of its territory extending beyond the state’s borders to the eastern part of the state of Guerrero and to the southern part of the state of Puebla (fig. 1.1). The Mixtec language belongs to the Otomanguean language family, which according to historical linguistic data began to diversify by as early as 4400 B.C. Between 1500 B.C. and 500 B.C., Mixtec began to develop as an independent language (Hopkins 1984, 31-32, 42). By the time of the Spanish conquest, it had further divided into several dialects spoken across different geographical areas. Spanish friar Antonio de los Reyes, vicar of the town of Teposcolula in the sixteenth century, mentions in the prologue to his *Arte en lengua Mixteca* (1976...
that the two principal dialectical variants, functioning as a sort of *lingua franca* in the region, were spoken in the towns of Teposcolula (Yucu Ndää) and Yanhuitlan (Yodzo Cahi). In Postclassic times, many such independent political entities were known as *yuvui tayu*, literally “mat and throne”, a parallelism or *difrasismo* referring to a sovereign community governed by a married couple with legitimate genealogical rights to rulership (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2005, 14; Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009a, 40-41; Terraciano 2001, 158-197). Despite the hardships of three centuries of colonial administration, internal colonialism following the Mexican Independence (A.D. 1821), and the hostile language policies of the national education system in the twentieth century (Pérez Jiménez and Jansen 2006, 189-191), there are today approximately 400,000 to 450,000 Mixtec speakers across Mexico and the United States (Bartolomé 1999, 142). The majority of them reside in the state of Oaxaca, but there are also many speakers in the neighboring states of Guerrero and Puebla, as well as Mixtec migrants who left for other parts of the Mexican Republic and the United States.

The Spanish term *Mixteca* originally comes from the Nahuatl word *mixtecatl*, designating an ‘inhabitant of the land of the clouds’ (Jansen 1982, 226; Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007a, 7; Terraciano 2001, 319). In the sixteenth century, its original name in *Dzaha Dzaui*, the Mixtec language or ‘Language of the Rain’, was *Ñuu Dzaui*, the ‘Land of the Rain’. Today, modern speakers in the highland region around the town of Chalcatongo de Hidalgo, or Ñuù Ndéyá, refer to their language as Sahín Sàu and to their land as Ñuù Sàu, a term equally designing the Mixtec people itself or the ‘People of the Rain’ (Pérez Jiménez 2008, 13). According to the geographical location of specific villages and communities, more or less dialectical variation is to be found amongst them, since dialect areas roughly correspond to the natural barriers to communication traced by mountain valleys and river systems (Josserand *et al.* 1984, 151). This is also due to the fact that Mixtec is a tonal language, and that words take on a different meaning according to the specific tone (high, medium or low) by which vowels are pronounced. However, as Bartolomé (1999, 143) denotes, mutual understanding between speakers of different dialects is significantly enhanced within specific cultural contexts, such as participation in religious ritual or interaction in the marketplace, much more so than what formal models of linguistic differentiation would project in their statistics.

The landscape research presented in this thesis was conducted in several communities in the Mixtec region: Chalcatongo de Hidalgo and Santa Catarina Yosonotú, both pertaining to the district of Tlaxiaco, as well as San Mateo Sindihui, pertaining to the district of Nochixtlán. All are located in the highlands known as the Mixteca Alta,
whose name in the Teposcolula dialectical variant of the sixteenth century has been transcribed as ñudzaviñuhu (Ñuu Dzaui Ñuhu) or “Sacred Place of the Rain” by Antonio de los Reyes (1976, i). The elevation of most communities and archaeological sites in the Mixteca Alta ranges between 1,500 m and 2,500 m asl. The region’s geographic, geomorphologic and hydraulic features are discussed by Geurds (2007, 13-22), Joyce (2010, 36-42), Kowalewski et al. (2009, 6-9) and Spores (2007, 3-10), whereas Balkansky et al. (2000), Balkansky et al. (2004) and Kowalewski et al. (2009) present recent and extensive archaeological survey data that give a good overview of prehispanic settlement patterns for most parts of the Mixteca Alta highlands, and their possible relation to regional developments in the valley of Oaxaca. This central topic in Oaxacan archaeology is also covered by the influential work edited by Flannery and Marcus (2003), which combines archaeological, iconographic, ethnohistorical and linguistic data into an integrated approach. Although the sites and communities studied in this thesis are thus all located in the Mixteca Alta, the whole Mixtec region also comprises two other subareas that are differentiated on the basis of their elevation and climate (Spores 2007, 7). Those are the northwest lowlands known as the Mixteca Baja (750 m – 1650 m asl) or Ñuniñe (Ñuu Niñe) in the orthography of Antonio de los Reyes (1976, ii), meaning “Hot Land”, and the hot and humid coastal strip extending southwards until reaching the Pacific Ocean, known as the Mixteca de la Costa or Ñundeui (Ñuu Ndevui), “Land of the Sky” (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011, 8).

By focusing on information coming from the three abovementioned places, the emphasis will lie upon a regional landscape approach highlighting the point of view of different communities, rather than being restricted to the discussion of one place in particular. As culture never constitutes a homogeneous whole, and since landscape experience is always related to a specific point of view, a comparative landscape approach may highlight both similarities and differences between sacred places. By doing so, overall cultural patterns appear and point to the unity of cultural tradition. As López Austin and López Luján (2009, 19) stress, it is the contradictory dialectic between unity and diversity which ultimately leads to a shared worldview. In other words, contextualization helps identifying the multiple elements which form this unity, instead of merely pointing to generalities leaving out the specific history of each place. Therefore, the line of interpretation followed in this thesis will move away from both the positivistic and relativistic orientated approaches to tradition and history. This is further implied by the structure of hermeneutic interpretation itself, since the classic notion of the hermeneutic circle involves a back and forth movement from the detail to
the whole and from the whole to the detail, a process in which the whole is continually expanding in concentric circles as it were (Gadamer 1981, 167, 259). In archaeology, two such movements can be identified, namely ‘a moving back and forth from a particular action and its operational meanings to the wider context of historical meanings’, and one ‘between the social and theoretical context of the interpreter, and the historical or cultural context of the object of interpretation’ (Hodder and Hutson 2003, 195-196).

In hermeneutic terms, it can be said that the dialogical event taking place in the present is as important as the recognition of temporal distance by which the meanings of a past element of tradition are apprehended. Accordingly, it is one of the objectives of this thesis to demonstrate that the well-known hermeneutic notion of distanciation as condition for understanding, whether defined in temporal terms (Gadamer 1981, 258-267), or by means of the analogy of the text (Ricœur 1986, 101-117), needs to be called into question or at least expanded and rethought in any situation where intercultural communication takes place. Indeed, it the transmission of the Mixtec cultural tradition must be actualized not only in the contemplation of its vanished archaeological remains and ancient texts, but also in the context of present interactions and dialogue. ⁴ Mixtec archaeological sites are ‘not a mute testimony of a long lost history, but active elements in the present’ (Geurds 2007, 181). In this respect, Shanks and Hodder (1995, 6) make an interesting analogy between the mediating role of interpretation taking place in a situation of intercultural dialogue, and the activity of archaeological interpretation as ‘a dialogue with the past’. In the first case, the dialogical situation brings together subjects who understand each other in spite of cultural barriers and different cultural traditions, while in the second case archaeology produces its discourse by relying on a dialogue across time when listening to the past voices contained in material culture. In both of these situations, a hermeneutic interpretation takes place. As present tradition in the Mixtec region shows cultural continuity with both precolonial and colonial times, the hermeneutic interpretation discussed in this thesis must relate the abovementioned situations to the dialectic between remembering and forgetting in order to understand their significance in the present.

Considering the time-depth of the Ñuu Dzaui cultural tradition, the hermeneutic interpretation of its sacred landscape must focus on the nature of the temporal relations between different elements such as material remains, religious concepts and oral

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⁴ This will be discussed in theoretical terms in Chapter Two. Subsequent chapters will provide several concrete examples from case-studies to help illustrate this point.
history. That is to say, while it is the goal of archaeology to investigate specific socio-historical contexts, the idea of cultural tradition brings these contexts in relation to each other and also reminds us that the past has a normative or referential character because it is interpreted from the perspective of the present. Gadamer (1981, 274-275) defined this with the hermeneutic concept of “application”, entailing the application of something past (for instance, the meaning of an ancient text) to a present situation. It can be argued that this historical perspective is also taking place in archaeological interpretation, since for hermeneutics ‘tradition reaching us speaks into the present and must be understood in this mediation’ (Gadamer 1981, 293).

Several authors have explored the relationships between hermeneutics and archaeology, both disciplines being concerned with the diachronic interpretation of meanings and their long-term relevance. Both Hodder (1991) and Shanks and Tilley (1987, 103-115) have examined the temporal structures that underlie the hermeneutic interpretation of archaeological data, by focusing on the time-depth which separates archaeological contexts and the moment of interpretation itself. Basing herself on the theoretical writings of Paul Ricoeur, Moore (1990, 114-118) explores the possibilities but also potential drawbacks of interpreting archaeological contexts and material culture from a hermeneutic perspective influenced by Ricoeur. For the Mixtec region, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011, 182-183) have also stressed the relevance of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic theory for interpreting the Mixtec cultural tradition. In a theoretical article tackling the relationships between hermeneutics and archaeology, Johnsen and Olsen (1992) call into question approaches influenced by Romantic tradition and focusing solely on the reconstruction of the original historical context. Against this, they argue that interpretation is situated within a dialectical back-and-forth movement between the past and the present. After all, all archaeological interpretation takes place in the present and is influenced by the contemporary concerns of many stakeholders. Similarly, the discussion around cultural heritage should not be motivated by a desire to freeze an image of the past in time, as if it were not related to contemporary society. Rather, it should be recognized that cultural heritage has a changing influence through time, and that it is connected to the present as well as future concerns of a number of stakeholders (Hodder 1991, 14).

Considering all the above, the main research question guiding the structure of this thesis will be concerned with exploring in how far it is possible to speak of a cultural continuity in the perception of the sacred landscape in the Mixteca through different socio-cultural periods and historical transformations. As it focuses on long-term
structures of meaning and it examines the relationships between individual cultural elements and historical contexts, it is argued here that a hermeneutical approach treats these elements as being part of a larger cultural tradition which is open to change. The transmission of tradition therefore rests upon the dialectic between memory and forgetfulness, themselves set into motion by historical and social factors. For instance, contemporary Mixtec tradition and the experience of the sacred landscape is sometimes combined with a Christian religious perspective. It is then important to investigate the origin and history of elements of cultural tradition to understand how and by which means they are transmitted. By doing so, another objective of this thesis is to show how the integration of Mixtec and Christian religious concepts and values in ritual, visual culture and oral tradition always constitutes more than a simple case of syncretism. The importance of a long time-depth and the complementariness of data coming from different time-frames will form the basis for the chapter outline.

Furthermore, the structure of the investigation presented in the following chapters will be based on the temporal structure of what Ricœur defined as the threefold mimèsis of action linking past, present and future in the first volume of his Temps et Récit (1983-1985). Building upon Ricœur’s hermeneutic theory, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011, 192) denote a structural similarity between the three stages of narrative creation and the concept of mimèsis, defining the latter as ‘a narrative representation of human agency and its interpretation’. In Ricœur’s hermeneutics, there is indeed a reciprocal relationship between time and narrative, since time becomes meaningful when it is arranged along the lines of a narrative, whereas the full significance of the latter derives from temporal experience itself (Ricœur 1983, 17, 85). The most valuable insight of Ricœur’s theory of mimèsis for the present investigation comes from the fact that it situates the act of narrative configuration or the narrative event as mediating between a pre-understanding based on the temporal character of human action, and the subsequent reception of this narrative by an audience (Moore 1990, 102-106; Ricœur 1983, 85-87, 102). That is, there is a progression from prefiguration via configuration and towards reconfiguration (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011, 192), where each stage is correlative to a specific domain of human experience. By way of analogy, the argumentation in this thesis builds upon the structure of this triple mimèsis in an attempt to demonstrate not only that the data archaeologists study were produced within specific socio-cultural contexts, but also that these contexts were themselves influenced by past tradition and opened towards their future reception.
It should be noted, however, that this analogy between the structure of this investigation and the threefold temporal structure of Ricœur’s *mimèsis* which links past, present and future operates mainly on heuristic terms, rather than pointing towards a strict structural similarity. In concrete terms, it should be possible, for instance, to relate the interpretation of the Mixtec landscape depicted in a sixteenth century colonial document such as the *Mapa de Teozacoalco* (discussed in Chapter Five) to the analysis of archaeological data and to present-day oral history. This is necessary in order to arrive at a better understanding of the overall symbolism of the document, but also to show what is missing in it and what it cannot convey by itself if the analysis does not focus on a long-term approach to the hermeneutics of the sacred landscape.

Following this introduction, the next two chapters situate the research within a general theoretical framework that will be used to discuss and relate the various case studies with each other. Chapter Two first gives an overview of the early history of hermeneutics, before presenting and critically discussing some major concepts and theoretical arguments by two influential hermeneutic scholars, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur. This chapter is also dedicated to make explicit where the theoretical position adopted in this thesis situates itself with respect to the theories of Gadamer and Ricœur, while in the last section there is a desire to broaden the scope of traditional hermeneutics towards archaeology and the discussion of cultural memory within an intercultural context.

In Chapter Three, the focus is turned towards the landscape, along the lines of an approach linking ritual to spatial and temporal dimensions. Landscape, it is argued, is not an abstract spatial category, but always invokes experience and perception (Ingold 2000, 190-193; 2011, 152). To use a vocabulary borrowed from narrative theory, it can be said that the relation between space and place implies the idea of focalization, which refers to ‘the relations between the elements presented and the vision through which they are presented’ (Bal 1997, 142). A long-term perspective on the Mixtec sacred landscape will be used to discuss ritual symbolism and experience in Chalcatongo de Hidalgo and Santa Catarina Yosonotú.

Moving forward, the final two chapters provide an additional number of case studies highlighting the relationship between landscape experience and cultural tradition in Mixtec communities, each time from a specific perspective. Chapter Four focuses on the link between the rhythms of nature and the observation of celestial bodies, particularly the sun and the moon, and the importance of this observation for rituals accompanying the rain season and for the ritual production of the alcoholic drink.
pulque, respectively. Contextual information comes from the communities of Yutía Ndiji (Plan de Ayala) and Yuku Nikoko (Vicente Guerrero), which both pertain to the municipality of Ñuú Ndéyá (Chalcatongo de Hidalgo).

In Chapter Five, the last case study of this thesis relates the notion of perspective to landscape research, building on the theoretical framework brought to the fore in Chapters Two and Three. This will also be the occasion to incorporate the theoretical discussion on the hermeneutics of cultural tradition to a concrete example of landscape experience on the long-term. In this last chapter, the landscape depicted in the sixteenth century document known as the Mapa de Teozacoalco is analyzed from the point of view or perspective of the modern community of San Mateo Sindihui, a place also appearing on the map and possessing a number of archaeological sites dated to the Postclassic period (A.D. 900-1521). Such an approach has the advantage of demonstrating that the document in itself cannot convey all the information that is necessary to understand the symbolic dimensions of the sacred landscape and its history of change. Therefore, and in contrast to a more traditional approach to hermeneutics that would stress that cultural tradition can only be truly understood by means of textual analysis, this focus argues instead for the integration of the archaeological past, colonial documents and contemporary oral tradition into one single interpretive structure based on the long-term nature of cultural tradition itself.

Finally, the Conclusion provides a discussion of how the analogy with the abovementioned structure of a mimèsis linking past, present and future, can guide archaeological interpretation along the lines of a long-term perspective, based upon the information put forward in the case studies. This will also be the occasion to reflect upon the ways in which the symbolic meanings contained in the sacred landscape of the Mixtec region operate in the formation of cultural memory and oral tradition, and how this is, in turn, reflected in the point of view of several communities.
In general terms, this chapter will present the theoretical framework according to which the information presented in the case studies will be considered from a hermeneutic perspective. The intention is to examine in a critical way the origin of hermeneutic concepts that are relevant for this investigation, as well as to make explicit how they will be used here. Basically, this approach seeks to demonstrate that hermeneutical interpretation can be applied to a wide array of sources and material, and that each type of evidence determines the perspective from which it can be approached (Appadurai 1986; Grassby 2005). Although traditional hermeneutics is mainly concerned with the interpretation of texts and literary tradition, the sources examined here do not constitute a single class of materials. Rather, the present research focuses on a variety of information coming from archaeological contexts as well as from colonial documents and oral tradition. Just as ancient texts contain philosophical concepts showing how the world is perceived from a cultural perspective, so can sacred landscape and ceremonial architecture be interpreted hermeneutically for they express long-term symbolic meanings pertaining to the history of Mesoamerican philosophy (Ruiz Ortíz 2010, 85).

In doing so, the approach taken in this thesis finds support in Jones’ (2000) and Ruiz Ortíz’ (2010) hermeneutic studies of sacred space and architecture. Jones (2000: I, 124-127) argues that the permanence which architectural works have in time fosters the possibility for understanding specific ritual-architectural events, but not necessarily buildings themselves, according to the hermeneutics of textual interpretation, thereby enlarging its field of application. As will be discussed below, it was Paul Ricoeur (1981 [1971]), however, who first argued in favor of applying hermeneutics to the kind of interpretation that takes place in the social sciences, on the basis of the paradigm of textual interpretation. When applied to archaeology, and to the interpretation of past ceremonial contexts in particular, Ricoeur’s theory offers a solid basis for approaching the meaning of ritual events in hermeneutic terms:

‘The meaning of an important event exceeds, overcomes, transcends the social conditions of its production and may be re-enacted in new social contexts. Its importance is its durable relevance and, in some cases, its omni-temporal relevance.’ [Ricoeur 1981, 208]
Notwithstanding the fact that the above represents a move away from an exclusive reliance on texts, written documents and pictorial manuscripts constitute important first-hand sources on the Mixtec experience of the sacred landscape, complementing the information provided by material culture and contextualizing it within a wider social and historical context. Over the course of their history, the Ñuu Dzaui people have produced a significant number of pictorial manuscripts, both in precolonial times and after the Spanish conquest of Mexico (A.D. 1521), of which only a small amount has been preserved. The whole corpus of these manuscripts, consisting of codices, lienzos and other colonial documents represents the Mixtec or Ñuu Dzaui literary tradition insofar as it registers meanings and ideas through time, particularly in the religious domain. Visually, this tradition often takes the form of a pictographic writing system based on a combination of symbolic, metaphorical and phonetic signs and icons (Jansen 1992, 21). Its contents hold a wealth of religious and historical information, as well as geographical data in the form of toponyms and visual representations of the landscape. Of the few precolonial codices that survived until today, almost all were painted in the last decades before European contact. Their historical narratives, on the other hand, span over 600 years of prehispanic history, thereby covering the whole length of the Postclassic period (A.D. 900 – 1521).

Today, the main prehispanic Mixtec manuscripts that have been preserved are known as the Codex Bodley or Ñuu Tnoo-Ndiji Nuu (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2005), Codex Colombino-Becker or Iya Nacuaa (Caso 1966), Codex Vindobonensis or Yuta Tnoho (Anders et al. 1992a), Codex Zouche-Nuttall or Tonindecy (Anders et al. 1992b), as well as Codex Selden or Añute (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007b), which was painted around 1560 but in a fully precolonial style. It was an article by Mexican archaeologist Alfonso Caso (1949) that helped determine the Mixtec origin of these codices. Caso compared the names of some of their protagonists with the royal couples depicted on the colonial painting known as the Mapa de Teozacoalco, painted in the Mixtec town of the same name and discussed in Chapter Five here. This valuable map was originally painted between A.D. 1574 and 1576 as a copy of an earlier lienzo to show the recently-corrected boundaries of the territory of Teozacoalco or Chiyo Cahnu (Jansen and Pérez

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5 The present names of most Mesoamerican manuscripts reflect their history of acquisition by collectors or museums rather than referring to their actual contents or to their community of origin. Therefore, some scholars have proposed to rename these manuscripts in accordance with the original language of the people that produced them (see Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2004).
Jiménez 2005, 25-27; 2011, 50). In A.D. 1580, it was attached to the Relación Geográfica of Teozacoalco (Acuña 1984: II, 129-151; Mundy 1996, 112-117), itself part of the general questionnaire of the Relaciones Geográficas that the Spanish king Philip II commissioned in 1577 to inquire about the history and geography of many towns in New Spain via the intermediary its local colonial officials, the alcaldes mayores and corregidores (Mundy 1996, 32). On the map, the geographical extent of Teozacoalco’s lands is represented on a circular map combining Mixtec pictographic conventions with European influences and Spanish glosses, accompanied by the genealogy of the dynasties of Teozacoalco (Chiyo Cahnu) and Tilantongo (Ñuu Tnoo).

In addition to this first-hand historiography, various Spanish friars have recorded information on the Ñuu Dzaui language and grammar during the enterprise of catholic evangelization. Notable works include fray Francisco de Alvarado’s Vocabulario en Lengua Mixteca (1962 [1593]), which was recently converted from Spanish to Dzaha Dzaui (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009b), and fray Antonio de los Reyes’ Arte en Lengua Mixteca (1976 [1593]). In the seventeenth century, Dominican friar and historian Francisco de Burgoa (1989 [1674]) wrote an extensive account on the geography, history and customs of many Mixtec communities across Oaxaca, based upon his own testimony and that of other Dominican friars who preceded him over a century earlier. Although Burgoa’s baroque prose often indulges in overt exaggerations, the history he narrates is of great interest for the understanding of precolonial codices and the Mixtec cultural tradition that developed until today through various centuries of colonial administration and religious persecution.

Oftentimes, the symbols and metaphors employed by Burgoa and other friars are well in line with similar concepts in Mesoamerican philosophy. The image of the First Sunrise marking the beginnings of a new era and the new foundations of communities, for instance, is a metaphor used in evangelical discourse but already present in the prehispanic Mixtec codices, whose cultural symbolism subsequently became reinterpreted during the Colonial period (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009a, 125, 477). Noteworthy in this respect is Burgoa’s extensive use of metaphors to compare the introduction of the new Christian faith in the Mixteca to the passage from darkness to light, and to the symbolic planting of seeds growing into plants and trees giving many fruits. A brief example of Burgoa’s metaphorical speech is given below:

‘[ … ] y acostumbrados a ritos, y falsas adivinaciones, cubierto el discurso, y la razón con el velo de vanas y mentirosas historias, que les introdujo su liviano, y torcido proceder, sin
dejarles ojos para descubrir, ni por resquicios, la lumbre del legítimo conocimiento del Autor de la Vida, porque les crió cataratas [...] y mi Angélico Maestro, la llama ceguera de corazón, donde el principio de la vida echa las primeras raíces; y de ellas se forma el argumento para conocer al Autor Verdadero único, y solo que la concede, la virtud vegetativa en un pequeño grano, que brota fértil, y se adorna con hojas, y en ufana pompa de frutos enriquece [...]’ [Burgoa 1989: I, 273]

A parallel vegetal symbolism is present in the Mixtec notion of the Center of the Earth (Jansen and Perez Jiménez 2007a, 85), but might also be considered from the point of view of another founding Mesoamerican concept, namely that of the sacred place Tamoanchan, which among many possible interpretations refers to the cosmic place at the center of the Nahua universe, where large flowery trees grew (López Austin 1997, 112-120). It is telling that Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, in the prologues to Book I and Book VIII of his Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España, misinterpreted this place as the earthly paradise (Sahagún 2000: I, 64; II, 719), due to his own Christian referential framework. During the Early Colonial period in the Mixteca Alta, many Ñuu Dzaui and Catholic literary elements frequently came together in the form of theatrical works where Christian doctrines and literature would be traduced in the language of the Mixtec audiences. Although the incentive of the Dominican friars was initially motivated by a desire to replace the indigenous narrative tradition with a Christian one, it soon appeared that Mixtec figures of speech and core elements of the prehispanic worldview were readily being incorporated into this new form of intercultural theater, thereby endowing it with double referential meanings (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009a, 144). More generally, these phenomena point to a number of similarities between the Mixtec and Christian religious traditions, which facilitated religious dialogue during this period of transition inaugurated in the Early Colonial period (Spores 2007, 345).

Considering this time-depth, it becomes clear that the Mixtec literary tradition is a rich and ancient one, transmitting complex meanings from a referential past for the future guidance of the community. Accordingly, the Mixtec cultural tradition is the primary source of reference for understanding the symbolism of its sacred landscape through time. Both in prehispanic and colonial times, sources as pictorial manuscripts, sacred texts and carvings in religious architecture manifested the ways in which Ñuu Dzaui people defined their relationship with the forces of nature dwelling in the landscape (Spores 2007, 345-346). Moving on from the basic analysis of forms and contents, a hermeneutic interpretation of Mixtec prehispanic and colonial literature
should seek to understand the deeper meanings that are transmitted by its literary works, as well as the historical and cultural context they refer to.\footnote{In so doing, the present approach is parallel to, and influenced by the theoretical discussion on the application of a hermeneutic interpretation to the dynamics of the Mixtec cultural tradition provided by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011, 181-216).} From a historical perspective, it is thus possible to consider the structure of the discourse contained in the Mixtec literary tradition as projecting or disclosing a specific world in itself, which in turn can be interpreted in hermeneutic terms (Ricoeur 1986, 102-103). This world, it is argued, is supported by the concept of cultural landscape. Before this can be done, however, it is necessary to make a short detour by turning to the early history of hermeneutics and to the origin of its founding concepts insofar as it helps clarify their contribution to the more recent theories of Gadamer and Ricoeur discussed below. In the subsequent discussion, these concepts will then be critically examined in order to determine their heuristic potential but also their possible limitations. While hermeneutics may be helpful in considering the depth and multiple aspects of the Mixtec cultural tradition, an emphasis on the importance of understanding this tradition in its own terms should prevail. In other words, the application of hermeneutic concepts should not become a substitute for approaching the research data from a Ñuu Dzaui perspective. Quite to the contrary hermeneutics has the potential to facilitate intercultural understanding and to guide interpretation along the point of view of the cultural actors themselves.

2.1 Early hermeneutics

The early history of hermeneutics and the origins of the word can be traced back to Greek Antiquity. It was Hermes, the messenger-god mediating the interpretation of meanings between the divine and the human realms, that gave its etymology to the Greek verb hermeneuein, ‘to interpret’ (Gardner 2010, 36; Jones 2000: I, 5). In its earliest practice as a discipline, in the pre-Enlightenment era and during the Reformation in Europe, hermeneutics was mainly concerned with a technical emphasis on applying the correct method to the interpretation of particular textual materials, and was thus driven above all by philological and exegetical concerns (Gardner 2010, 36; Johnsen and Olsen 1992, 420; Ricoeur 1986, 78).
Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) helped to expand the horizons of the discipline, contributing to a ‘movement from regional to general hermeneutics’ (Gardner 2010, 40; Ricœur 1986, 78). Although Schleiermacher’s early works were predominantly dealing with biblical exegesis, he then expanded his views towards the interpretation of literary productions in general and a philosophical discussion of the nature of human understanding (Jones 2000: I, 6).

Schleiermacher can be seen as the most famous exponent of the Romantic tradition within early hermeneutics, advocating for the need to bridge the temporal gap between the text and its interpreter by placing oneself into the author’s mind in order to recover the hidden meanings behind the text (Gadamer 1981, 164; Johnsen and Olsen 1992, 421; Ricœur 1986, 80). The consequence of this approach is that Schleiermacher completely leaves aside the social and historical context of the interpreter, focusing instead solely on reproducing the original context of a work with the intention to ‘restore it as it was’ (Gadamer 1981, 148).

Despite the several flaws of Schleiermacher’s romantic hermeneutics, he made explicit a concept whose usefulness for the theory of interpretation is still of utmost importance today. This concept, known as the hermeneutic circle, sees the act of understanding an element of tradition as a circular movement of constant return between the whole and the parts, leading to the relative extension of the whole (Gadamer 1981, 167; Gardner 2010, 43). The limits of Schleiermacher’s arguments, however, lie in the fact that this notion of the whole, to which the individual part must be related, does not refer to a social or historical context, but rather to ‘the total context of a man’s life’ (Gadamer 1981, 167). Taking the case of the archaeological interpretation of past material culture and human behavior, it would be highly problematic to relate the meaning of a single object or phenomenon solely to the supposed intentions of its producer (Johnsen and Olsen 1992, 425). To the contrary, it seems more appropriate to view the hermeneutic circle as a possibility to understand the dynamics of a wider socio-historical context itself influenced by the interactions between all participating actors, rather than focusing on the inner mind of one author alone as Schleiermacher intended to. Such an approach will be followed here, since what is of most relevance to this investigation is the wider cultural-historical context within which specific perspectives are being formed (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011, 194).

Following Schleiermacher, the Romantic tradition of hermeneutics was met with the scientific ideals of the Enlightenment through the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-
The main concern of Dilthey’s hermeneutics was to elevate historical understanding to the status of a scientific discipline, by fusing romantic and positivist influences together into one and the same epistemological approach (Gardner 2010, 44-45; Ricœur 1986, 82-83). While still retaining something of Schleiermacher’s psychological approach consisting of entering into the mind of an author, Dilthey also tried to establish the premises upon which a positivist, empirical explanation based on the model of the natural sciences could be applied to the study of the physical objects of history (Gardner 2010, 47; Ricœur 1986, 82). In this move, Dilthey consciously tried to turn romantic hermeneutics into an epistemology leading to the development of a historical method (Gadamer 1981, 174). With him, the notion of the hermeneutic circle as defined by Schleiermacher acquired a historical character. Gadamer summarizes the theoretical model influencing Dilthey’s historical view in the following way:

‘What is true of the written sources, that every sentence in them can be understood only from its context, is also true of their content. Its meaning is not fixed. The historical context in which the individual objects, large or small, of historical research appear in their true relative meaning is itself a whole, in terms of which every individual thing is to be understood in its full significance, and which in turn is to be fully understood in terms of the individual things.’ [Gadamer 1981, 156]

For Dilthey, life produces experience, or Erlebnis, and this can then be objectified in various physical, historical productions (Gardner 2010, 47; Johnsen and Olsen 1992, 422). Precisely because he saw hermeneutics as a method, Dilthey considered it suitable for interpreting, in scientific terms, all the objects of the human sciences (the Geisteswissenschaften), be they languages, religion, art or architecture (Jones 2000: I, 6-7). In general terms, Ricœur (1986, 84-85) defines Dilthey’s hermeneutics as a will to understand the connections between the elements of a structured whole ultimately pointing towards a historical reality, and composed of many signs that have been fixed either in writing or by way of a similar process of inscription. This might encompass physical expressions as diverse as art forms, literature or documentary traces (Gardner 2010, 47). In the context of the present research, it is interesting to note that the above seems to warrant the adoption of a multidisciplinary perspective on what creates the unity of a past historical context.

The latter point is quite relevant for the theoretical framework adopted in this thesis, in particular with regard to the interpretation of archaeological and historical
data. Indeed, this makes it possible to apply the same hermeneutic principles for the interpretation of texts, in the strict sense of the word, to for instance the Mesoamerican pictorial manuscripts and the various forms of visual communication that were adopted during the Colonial period. These physical expressions also rely on inscription to communicate complex meanings across time, and can be re-interpreted in a different historical context. Thus, it is not only alphabetic writing, but rather visual culture in general, that communicates through time and space and that is open to hermeneutic interpretation. In the words of Gadamer (1981, 337), ‘the voice that speaks to us from the past – be it text, work, trace – itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness.’

During the twentieth century, Dilthey’s epistemology was put into question by Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics (Gardner 2010, 37-38). Rather than trying to reconcile hermeneutics with an objectivist approach and a scientific methodology, Heidegger argued for a relational hermeneutics based upon direct engagement with the world in order to do away with the classic Cartesian separation between an interpreting subject acting upon a static object (Jones 2000: I, 7-8). For Heidegger, historical understanding has an ontological character since it is concerned with the temporal experience of ‘being-in-the-world’, in which being becomes equated with time (Gadamer 1981, 228). As a former student of Heidegger, Gadamer (1981, 232) explains that this relational structure of understanding, contrary to the separation between object and subject in the natural sciences, implies that the conscience of existing in time is what makes possible the historical representation of the past in the first place. It follows, that for Heidegger this ontological nature of understanding should guide the historical understanding as practiced within the human sciences (Gadamer 1981, 234).

Probably because of concern with existential questions, however, the structure of Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics has often been criticized as too abstract and hardly applicable to any concrete situation (Gardner 2010, 52). Accordingly, it is thus not the intention here to spend more time than necessary discussing the ontological concerns of Heidegger’s hermeneutics. Nevertheless, some of its elements are of indirect relevance for the theoretical framework adopted in this thesis. For example, Heidegger’s rejection of the positivist foundations of Western metaphysics provides

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7 This seemingly broad and heterogeneous grouping of sources (text, work, trace) stands in marked contrast to Gadamer’s (1981, 351) insistence on an almost exclusive reliance upon written texts as the only true vehicles for the understanding of cultural tradition, as will be discussed below.
hermeneutics with broader conceptual tools for understanding cultural manifestations in their own terms. Taking as an example a basic principle of Mesoamerican philosophy, we note for instance that the opposition between physics and metaphysics simply did not exist during prehispanic times in the Mixteca (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009a, 162; Spores 2007, 346). In this sense, it would be highly misleading to take for granted that the deeper meanings expressed in Mesoamerican thought can be truly understood on the basis of a universal separation between, say, the body and the mind or between the material and the intangible. Accordingly, the structure of interpretation must be determined not by Western epistemological bias, but by the awareness that, just like any element produced by a cultural tradition, interpretation also takes place in time. This element is ‘not something that is merely at hand, something that can simply be established and measured, but it is itself ultimately of the essence of There-being’ (Gadamer 1981, 232). Hence, this temporal essence is something all humans beings share with the objects belonging to a cultural tradition.

To apply this ontological reasoning to the process of interpretation that is practiced in archaeology or history, it might be said that the cultural meanings one sets out to understand can only difficultly arise from a de-contextualized object that would be analyzed according to positivist principles. As Latour (2005, 35, 79) argues under the concept of “Actor-Network-Theory”, any social context rests upon a performative element, which in turn consists of repeated interactions between people and objects. Somewhat parallel to this, Heidegger’s approach emphasized direct engagement with the world through ‘non-objectifying modes of disclosure’ (Heidegger quoted in Jones 2000: I, 8). To understand a tradition, it is necessary to relate individual elements to a wider historical or linguistic context, a principle already expressed in the notion of the hermeneutic circle, but this time from the point of view of the interpreter actively participating in it. For Heidegger, interpretation involves a correspondence between the interpreter and that which he wants to understand (Gadamer 1981, 234). Standing back and merely explaining a cultural phenomenon while not being affected by it would not, according to this view, be a productive condition for understanding. Experience and participation, on the other hand, introduce a common ground making intercultural understanding possible.

This is true as much in the case of contemporary, dialogical situations as in the case of the archaeological interpretation of the distant past. Archaeological discourse should incorporate the narratives transmitted by the social actors themselves, as it represents an example of active social memory. Consequently, archaeology may empower
Indigenous peoples in obtaining official recognition for their own historical accounts, which are ‘stored within genealogies, within the landscape, within weavings and carvings’ (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 33). Similarly, if the past is not objectified as such but if the meanings of material culture become reinterpreted in space and time, then archaeological interpretation enters in direct relation with the past allowing the ‘polyvalent qualities of the past always [being] reinscribed in the here and now’ (Shanks and Tilley 1987, 20).

Obviously, the concepts presented in this section do not do justice to the complexity of the theoretical views expressed in the hermeneutic tradition, but simply indicate in general terms the historical background leading to the development of hermeneutics until the first part of the twentieth century. Modern hermeneutics states that meanings expressed in the past are always open to reinterpretation (Gadamer 1981, 265; Shanks and Tilley 1987, 108-109), but this also applies to the discipline’s analytical concepts. The usefulness of these early hermeneutic theories for contemporary archaeological interpretation, however, is largely due to their subsequent development and critical examination by scholars as Gadamer and Ricœur. This is the object of the next section.

2.2 Two leading hermeneutic scholars: Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and Paul Ricœur (1911-2005)

Contemporary hermeneutic interpretation, whether it is used to understand meanings and phenomena related to archaeological contexts (Shanks and Tilley 1987), history (Gardner 2010), material culture (Moore 1990) or sacred architecture (Jones 2000), to cite a few, has been strongly influenced by the work of Gadamer and Ricœur. As a student of Heidegger, Gadamer built upon the latter’s ontological reflections to argue for ‘the universal aspect of hermeneutics’ (Gadamer 1981, 431-447) and for its application to any possible situation where interpretation takes place. French scholar Paul Ricœur, on the other hand, did not belong to this German school nor did he share most of its views. Rather than standing markedly within one field in particular, Ricœur’s hermeneutics are guided by an interdisciplinary epistemology embracing, among others, linguistics, literary theory, anthropology, social science and history (Gardner 2010, 61). It would be beyond the scope of this thesis, however, to provide a comprehensive discussion embracing the total extent of both of these scholars’ writings. Instead,
several themes that are illustrative of their theories are being discussed here due to their relatedness to specific aspects of this investigation, as they appear in the case studies.

2.2.1 The importance of temporal distance in Gadamer’s thought

Gadamer’s major work, *Truth and Method* (1981 [1960]), deals predominantly with the relationship between temporal distance and the understanding of cultural tradition. Gadamer vigorously rejects the idea that a past experience can be brought back just as it was, as Schleiermacher thought, and this because ‘of the historicity of our being’ (Gadamer 1981, 149). He sees the historical nature of tradition, as well as the notion of temporal distance, not as something to be overcome, but ‘as a positive and productive possibility of understanding’ (Gadamer 1981, 264). In other words, and against the naïve romantic idea of a simultaneity with the past, ‘understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one’s subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused’ (Gadamer 1981, 258).

Similarly, Gadamer dismisses Dilthey’s attempts at reconciling romantic hermeneutics with the scientific principles of the natural sciences. Indeed, he argues that considering that the meaningful context of history is not something fixed in time, but constantly develops itself, then a historical consciousness in the form of Dilthey’s detached, epistemological approach can never attain the objective ideals of positivistic science (Gadamer 1981, 204).

Against this, Gadamer posits the concepts of ‘effective-history’ and ‘application’. Those two concepts are related since, from the point of view of the interpreter which stands in history, understanding takes place through the application of the text, or the element of tradition, to the situation of the interpreter (Gadamer 1981, 274). This, in turn, happens through a recognition of the effective-history of a work, an encounter with tradition as it were. In other words, there is a productive ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer 1981, 273) between the situation of the interpreter on the one hand, and that of the text or work of art on the other.

The validity of Gadamer’s insight concerning the understanding of cultural tradition lies in the fact that it permits us to conceive past human productions not as static or vanished entities and objects like those standing in museums, but as active elements whose ‘horizon’ continually expands through new interpretations, and which
in turn also affect and are affected by the social context of the interpreter. A clear example showing the relevance of adopting a long-term perspective on the meanings disclosed by material culture is provided by Lindsay Jones (2000: I, 190-195) in the context of sacred architecture. By means of the notion of the ‘reception-histories’ of long-lasting works of architecture, Jones stresses that the hermeneutic interpretation of architecture – or, rather, the interpretation of the ritual-architectural event itself – always goes beyond its original meanings and its original context of experience to include its effect on tradition itself, that is, the effective-history discussed by Gadamer:

‘It is the progress of events that brings out new aspects of meaning in historical material. Through being re-actualized in understanding the texts are drawn into a genuine process in the same way as are the events themselves through their continuance. This is what we described as the effective-historical element within the hermeneutic experience’. [Gadamer 1981, 336]

On the other hand, it must be emphasized that Gadamer’s (1981, 351-357) discussion on cultural tradition is biased in favor of his almost exclusive emphasis on texts as true sources of understanding. This goes at the expense of other cultural productions, such as those which archaeologists work with and seek to interpret. The following quote is illustrative of Gadamer’s approach:

‘The understanding of linguistic tradition retains special priority over all other tradition… [it] is tradition in the literal sense of the word, ie something handed down… not just a remnant of the past […] Only in an extended sense do non-literary monuments present a hermeneutical task, for they cannot be understood of themselves’. [Gadamer 1981, 351-352]

Against this, it is necessary to adopt a more inclusive notion of writing and writing systems as general material supports on which cultural information is inscribed. As Boone (1994a, 9) suggests, strict definitions of writing as recorded language express ‘narrow views of what are thought and knowledge and what constitutes the expression of these thoughts and this knowledge’. Therefore, visual culture studies and semiotics can confer to pictography a status as a writing system in its own right without necessarily equating writing to spoken language (Jansen 1988, 88). The Mesoamerican cultural tradition recorded its history by means of a diversity of scripts, in some instances relying also on oral history and theatrical performances. In doing so, and
contrarily to the assumptions brought to the fore by Gadamer, it appears that Mesoamerican texts released their full potential when embedded in a broader system of visual communication relying as much on writing as on interpretation and performance (Houston 1994, 30-33). Burgoa (1989 [1674]: I, 396), for instance, relates how the Mixtec community that settled in Cuilapan in the Oaxaca Valley relied on traditional chants and visual, theatrical representations taking place at important feasts in order to foster the cultural-historical awareness of the audience. In other words, the literary potential of Mesoamerican texts and recorded narratives is liberated through the interplay between writing and orality (Grube and Arrellano Hoffmann 2002, 35-36).

In this sense, it might also be said that Gadamer himself stands within the Western literary tradition going back to Greek Antiquity, and that his definition of literary tradition does not take into account the possibilities for applying hermeneutics to an intercultural context such as colonial Mesoamerica. Similarly, it is necessary to widen the scope of Gadamer’s hermeneutics if we are to use some of its theoretical concepts in a contemporary context of intercultural and interlinguistic communication, as in the case of modern Mixtec communities. Gadamer (1981, 267) sees time, and thereby temporal distance, as a productive process facilitating the understanding of any element of tradition, since it permits to take into account the relation between past and present, known as effective-history, and which determines the historical interpretation of a cultural work. This observation can form a basic principle guiding an investigation into a sacred landscape or the archaeology of cultural landscapes in general, in the sense that understanding is seen as the outcome of direct engagement with the world and with past cultural productions which still make an impact on the present. In a landscape context, past remains and present knowledge indeed interact on a daily basis.

More problematic, however, is Gadamer’s contention that such interaction with cultural tradition is necessarily directed towards the past. Starting in colonial times, Mixtec people often had to reinterpret their living tradition in an intercultural context, a process directly affecting cultural memory and visual forms of religious symbolism (Terraciano 2001, 278-283). It may thus be argued that when social memory engages with cultural tradition, it makes a commitment to present and future generations. Also, as is the case in all living cultures, the Mixtec cultural tradition is very much alive and experienced in the present (this will be the object of Chapters Four and Five). As Geurds (2007, 193) denotes in the case of the Apoala Valley, the information contained in toponyms illustrates the ways in which cultural knowledge interacts with the daily experience of the sacred landscape. Engagement and dialogue not only with the past,
but also with the present and with the contemporary bearers of cultural tradition is thus needed in order to obtain better historical understanding, certainly within a context of cultural continuity. In Gadamer’s hermeneutics, the understanding of a historical tradition truly takes place when the cultural-historical horizon of the past and that of the present merge together so as to produce a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer 1981, 271-273).

However, and considering the above, it might also be said that within an intercultural context, such a fusion of horizons must equally take place in the present in order to facilitate cross-cultural understanding, hence the importance of the dialogical situation. The very notion of cultural tradition implies that it is not only the past as such which must be interpreted, but also how memory is constructed in the present. Within the scope of this thesis, therefore, both the vertical aspect as well as the horizontal one will be taken into consideration. This demarche has also been applied by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011, 194-195) to the interpretation of precolonial Mixtec codices, arguing that the long-term nature of cultural tradition demands that present knowledge and oral tradition in contemporary Mixtec communities be relied upon, in order to make it possible to understand the hermeneutic horizon of a work’s past audience.

From Gadamer, we thus retain the concepts of effective-history and fusion of horizons as particularly relevant for a hermeneutic approach to landscape and cultural tradition. Indeed, cultural landscapes do not consist of sedimented layers of past meanings. They are, rather, constantly in motion and they interact with cultural dynamics that stretch into the present horizon of Mesoamerican communities. On the other hand, Gadamer’s exclusive reliance on written, alphabetic texts as the sole media permitting to bridge temporal distance as well as to understand historical tradition is quite reductive. Again, this idea is not supported by the nature of Mixtec historiography itself, which relied on visual, oral and performative methods of communication.

### 2.2.2 Ricœur and the threefold mimèsis of action

A step further towards the application of hermeneutic interpretation to the more concrete situations occurring in archaeological or historical research is provided by the work of Paul Ricœur. In general terms, part of his writings focused on the narrative structure and on the hermeneutic meanings of ritualized social interaction. Two concepts developed by Ricœur are discussed here since they will guide the theoretical
framework used in the interpretation of the case studies presented below, namely the analogy between text and meaningful action, and the concept of the *mimèsis* of action.

Concerning the first one, Ricœur (1981, 203) posits that ‘meaningful action’ possesses text-like qualities which guide interpretation ‘through a kind of objectification similar to the fixation which occurs in writing’. Ricœur subsumes these qualities under four basic traits of textual discourse, thereby basing the interpretation of social action on the paradigm of the text. These qualities can be summarized as follows:

1) inscription fixes the meaning of discourse and escapes the fleeting or ‘momentary character of the event’,
2) writing dissociates the meaning of the text from the intentions of its author,
3) written discourse opens up a series of ‘non-situational references’ or a ‘world’ constituting ‘the symbolic function of language’, and
4) this fixed discourse is addressed to an audience or series of audiences and escapes the limits of face to face interaction (Ricœur 1981, 198-203).

Ricœur thus contends that hermeneutic interpretation distinguishes a common structure within both written texts and meaningful human action, insofar as the social phenomena in question have a semiological character (Ricœur 1981, 219). In the context of the present research, and bearing in mind the discussion on writing in the previous section, it appears that Mesoamerican pictography possesses similar qualities as what Ricœur defines as “texts” and “inscription”. Moreover, the theatrical representation of historical narratives painted in codices in prehispanic and Early colonial Mixtec communities points towards a correspondence between the structure of these texts or narratives, and symbolic action or performance. According to Boone (1994b, 71), ‘the pictorial histories are closer to being scripts, and their relation to their readers is closer to being that of a play’s script to its actors’. It is therefore important here to depart from general objectifications of cultural phenomena according to Western definitions of writing, focusing instead on the inner logic of these narrative forms as a way to understand the hermeneutic horizon of the past Mixtec audiences themselves (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011, 194).

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8 For a discussion of the applicability of the textual analogy within the human sciences, see Jones (2000: I, 121-133). On the interpretation of sacred architecture, Jones follows Ricœur in ‘imagining the performative occasions in which buildings and people are involved as texts’ (Jones 2000: I, 126; emphasis original).
Similarly, it is argued here that the concept of “meaningful action” can also be ascribed to the formal nature of traditional and religious rituals. Much of the analogy between textual discourse and human action rests upon what Ricœur (1981, 205) calls the ‘noematic structure of action’, in which meaning ‘may be fixed and detached from the process of interaction and become an object to interpret’. Accordingly, the meaning of a specific action may be identified or re-identified as the same when that particular action is repeated in various contexts in time and space, thereby giving it long-term relevance (Ricœur 1981, 208). This is indeed particularly true of the class of highly standardized, repetitive ritual actions. As Rappaport (1999, 29, 52-54) observes, it is ritual’s invariant form which confers full meaning to the substance of particular rituals and which guarantees a reciprocal relationship between, on the one hand, the general or ‘canonical’ meanings of ritual, and its more context-specific or ‘self-referential’ aspects on the other. While ritual performance always takes place in the present, some of its core meanings are set free from the bonds of time and space and may be re-expressed in different contexts. In the same vein, we note that Gadamer (1981, 276) had situated his historical hermeneutics within the ‘process of tradition’ to ‘consider the tension that exists between the identity of the common object and the changing situation in which it must be understood’.

According to this perspective, contemporary and ancient landscape rituals can be situated within the wider context of the Mixtec cultural tradition. In turn, the concept of sacred landscape interacts with various generations of participants and opens up important perspectives on cultural memory. A parallel may be traced here with the ritual-architectural reception histories discussed by Jones (2000: I, 191), in which successive hermeneutical dialogues open up between specific people, buildings and events. Meaningful actions performed during rituals then involve what Megged (2010, 32-33) sees as the memory and reenactment of past events as a ‘sacred commitment’ for the future. This point corroborates the idea that, in a landscape context also, it is human action which is a prime vehicle for the communication of meanings across time. In this respect, Bourdieu (1977, 9) argues that an emphasis on practice and practical understanding exposes the temporal structures which qualify and give meaning to specific actions and decisions. Similarly, the landscape is not a mere container for symbolic or hidden information but, in the first place, it has to be experienced.

To summarize, we see that along Ricœur’s concept of meaningful action, when applied to the hermeneutic interpretation of the sacred landscape, human deeds indeed open up a world of references that is based on memory and directed towards the
future. This is the case of repetitive rituals occurring along the calendric cycle or the
natural cycle of the seasons based on the observation of nature (see Chapter Four).
Furthermore, the very category of ritual contributes to articulate meaningful human
action with the experience of time and space in a landscape context, that is, meanings
are produced within ‘special time and places’ that set them apart from ‘ordinary words
and acts’ (Rappaport 1999, 50).

The second concept used in this thesis to relate hermeneutic interpretation to
human action, past or present, is that of mimèsis.9 The term originated under Aristotle in
Ancient Greek theater as the creative imitation of reality (Shanks and Tilley 1987, 21),
and has been further developed by Ricœur in Temps et Récit (1983-1985). Concerning
the relationship between time and narrative, Ricœur (1983, 13) argues that the act of
narrative configuration, or plotting, is rooted in the domain of human action and its
temporal values. As such, it may somewhat be related to the abovementioned analogy
between text and meaningful action. In Ricœur’s (1983, 76-83) terms, the mimetic
activity taking place during the creation of a narrative is to be described as a creative
operation mediating between a pre-understanding coming from the realm of human
action and its temporal structures, and the refuguration of the latter into a narrative
work referring to a cultural world and opened up towards its reception by an audience.
In short, in the domain of narrative, mimèsis mediates between past and future
experience, hence its threefold structure.

The specific task of hermeneutics then, according to Ricœur (1983, 86), is to
reconstruct the set of operations by which a narrative work, via the process of mimèsis,
mediates between the practical experience of human action and the subsequent
reception of this work by an audience affected by it. To apply this reasoning to the
interpretation of pictorial texts, ritual structures and visual works at large, it is important
to situate this set of operations within a specific cultural horizon. Building forward on
Panofsky’s classical iconological method of interpretation, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez
(2011, 186-199) argue that an articulation between three layers of meaning is required
here, namely a progression from the identification of signs and symbols, to the creation
of thematic meanings and finally to the deeper ideological messages produced within a
particular historical and cultural context. Most importantly, the last stage also demands

9 On the relationship between the hermeneutic interpretation of Mixtec pictorial narratives, classical art-
historical iconological analysis, narrative theory, and Ricœur’s theory of interpretation based on the
concepts of the hermeneutic circle and mimèsis, see Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011, Chapter 5).
practical commitment of the interpreter and participation in an intercultural dialogue (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011, 196-197). As mentioned above, the interpretation taking place under this perspective is effectuated through direct engagement with both the past and the present. Archaeological contexts and oral history create complementary figures in landscape narratives.

At any time, there is an implicit hermeneutic circle in Ricœur’s analysis of the *mimèsis* of action. If the production of a cultural work involves the symbolic mediation of human action, it is so because an individual rite, for instance, has to be placed within a wider ritual, and the latter again into the whole of a culture’s symbolic network (Ricœur 1983, 92). Both visual culture and meaningful action thus open up references towards a “world” (Ricœur 1981, 202, 220) and are situated within a particular hermeneutic horizon. According to Gadamer (1981, 271-273), it is important to note that such a world does not stand on its own. Rather, the understanding of cultural tradition operates dialectically through the fusion of the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present: ‘there is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons’ (Gadamer 1981, 273).

In light of the above, it is now possible to consider pictorial writing and landscape representations, as well as certain archaeological and architectural contexts, as cultural works in which referential meanings and narrative structures unfold. If indeed what they represent is based on a pre-understanding of human action with its semantic, symbolic, and temporal characteristics (Ricœur 1983, 100), they must then communicate the higher meanings of human experience reidentifiable and intelligible under different socio-historical conditions. In the context of the Mesoamerican cultural tradition, these works may be considered as ‘sacred visual texts’ (Ruiz Ortíz 2010, 85) or ‘visual discourses’ (Ramírez Ruiz 2006, 212) that are opened towards hermeneutic interpretation.10 Consequently, one of the challenges encountered in this thesis regarding a long-term perspective on the sacred landscape of the Mixtec region consists in situating as diverse elements as archaeological structures, pictorial manuscripts and contemporary oral history within the wider context of the Mixtec cultural tradition. Because cultural traditions undergo historical change and reinterpretation under

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10 As mentioned above, however, Jones (2000: I, 126-127) warns that it is only the experience of a specific event and the interaction with ritual participants which can confer a narrative character to architectural structures or works of material culture.
different social contexts, shifting frames of reference come into play. Nevertheless, the interplay between continuity and change is itself a driving force of tradition.

The analogy of the threefold structure of *mimèsis* discussed by Ricœur, for instance, may prove quite insightful to help situate a pictorial work such as the sixteenth century Mixtec *Mapa de Teozacoalco* and the landscape it represents within such a long-term perspective on cultural continuity and change. The artist who painted the map relied on tradition, cultural symbols and pictorial conventions to represent historical time (with the genealogies of the rulers of Tilantongo and Teozacoalco) and geographical space (territory is defined by toponyms and landscape features). However, since the map was painted in the context of the Early Colonial period, the pictorial conventions of two cultural traditions, Mesoamerican and European, are visibly interacting on the map. This arrangement, characteristic of colonial landscape representations, produces multiple frames of reference that influence the long-term structure of cultural memory and the way successive generations of audiences may interpret the document in the context of an ongoing tradition (Gruzinski 1988, 62-66; Mundy 1996, 97; Ramírez Ruiz 2006, 212-213). As such, the map is directed towards multiple addressees (Mundy 1996, 71-72) and its threefold narrative structure must be understood within an intercultural context. While the above will be discussed in Chapter Five, the next section examines the relationship between archaeology and cultural memory within hermeneutic interpretation.

2.3 Archaeology, hermeneutics and cultural memory: widening the scope

On first instance, cultural memory and oral history adopt important roles as vehicles of cultural continuity in Mesoamerica and in the Mixtec region. As narrative forms, they transmit cultural references from the past across generations. This knowledge is not passive, however. As a form of relational practice, social memory actively participates in ‘the production of identity and place’ (Jones and Russell 2012, 271). It is then possible to speak of a dialogical production of knowledge based on the transmission and reinterpretation of ancient meanings.

At odds with this idea is Ricœur’s (1986, 113-114) contention that oral discourse, in opposition to a discourse fixed in writing, has only ostensive references limited to the here and now and does not open references to a world beyond the dialogical situation.
Ricœur’s view of this hermeneutic concept known as distanciation will not be followed in the present context, however. Quite to the contrary, it appears that the dialogical situations by which oral knowledge is transmitted actually do refer to a world of cultural tradition that itself extends back in time. Many tangible elements of oral history, moreover, are often present in the landscape in the form of archaeological sites and other places of long-term ritual or symbolic significance. These locales also play a central role in the shaping of the historical identity of the communities to which they belong. Therefore, in order to understand the dynamics of the sacred landscape on the long-term, it is necessary that hermeneutic interpretation focuses both on archaeological contexts and on the oral transmission of cultural memory.

In the landscape surrounding present-day communities, archaeological sites represent the earliest evidence of occupation of a specific territory. In addition to reconstructing ancient social organization, it is important to investigate the grounds on which the ancient settlement may or may not continue to be perceived as exerting a symbolic influence on the modern community. Moreover, a landscape approach may shed light on the reasons why in the past a particular location may have been considered as a significant ritual place in terms of visual and spatial connections with other outstanding landscape elements, such as the mountaintops forming the horizon-line as it can be apprehended from the point of view of a specific location in the landscape. In turn, the oral tradition that is part of present-day Mixtec culture conveys local as well as regional knowledge regarding the importance of such sacred mountains, thereby establishing a connection with the past.

Often located on outlying grounds on the margins of present-day communities, ancient ritual sites were, in prehispanic times, considered as a constitutive part of the settlement itself. As Bernal Graña and García Zambrano (2006, 96) stress, the design of the typical Mesoamerican urban entity known as *altepetl* was consciously based on an ecological and religious relationship with the surrounding landscape. In the Colonial period, however, a new form of urbanism was imposed by the Spanish administration. Consisting of organizing towns with streets and house-blocks traced along a grid-system departing from a central church, it resulted in the resettlement or *congregación* of

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11 The term *altepetl* comes from the Nahuatl parallelism *in atl, in tepetl,* “the water, the mountain”, and refers to the geographical background of Mesoamerican settlements (Lockhart 1992, 14). Its Mixtec or Dzaha Dzaui equivalent is *yuqu nduta* (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007a, 25). A sacred relationship is also implied between mountains and bodies of water.
people into new towns, away from their old settlement or *pueblo viejo* (Ramírez Ruiz 2006, 182-187; Terraciano 2001, 119-121). While in Mesoamerican worldview and practice both agricultural lands and landscape features were integrated into the concept of a sacred city, the Spanish concept of urbanism turned the emphasis away from the surrounding landscape which it merely saw as a resource to exploit economically (Bernal García and García Zambrano 2006, 33). The central plaza and the colonial church had the function to regroup and replace the ancient seats of religious influence dispersed through the landscape (Spores 2007, 186). Nevertheless, the location of the site where the colonial church was to be built often retained a direct visual or symbolic connection with the prehispanic sacred landscape, whether it was situated at the foot of a sacred mountain or whether it was considered to have an underground connection to the *pueblo viejo* (Ramírez Ruiz 2006, 191).

Considering this, archaeological investigation into the sacred landscape in Mesoamerica must take these connections into account and rely on oral tradition as a source of knowledge on the long-term symbolism of landscape features and locales within the context of a cultural tradition. If cultural memory contributes to the forming of identity and place, it is also attached to specific landscape features, most notably sacred mountains, caves, and underground sources of water. Just like the narratives depicted on pictorial manuscripts, oral history relates the cultural significance of the landscape at the level of the community or the region. Building upon Maurice Halbwachs’ writings on collective memory, Assmann (2003, 165-166) argues that this social form of memory relies on a concrete orientation in space and time, in the sense of recalling particular events or through periodic references such as festivals, and by being tied to specific places functioning as identity-symbols and points of reference. Therefore, space and time become conflated in the performance of an event that can itself be situated in a wider social or cultural context.

Again, and as mentioned throughout this chapter, hermeneutic interpretation cannot be based on the disinterested observation of external events. Rather, it must involve active experience and engagement in order to understand how people themselves interpret the past in the context of the present. This is why a sacred landscape is always in motion and interacts with the daily lives of people, since the horizon of the past merges dialectically with that of the present. It follows, that the concept of sacred landscape cannot be dissociated from human action nor from cultural memory.
Recent approaches to social memory, for instance, consider the latter as the outcome of a process involving cultural practices and relationships, both with other social actors and with the environment (Jones and Russell 2012, 270). But what is true of the present may also be true of the past. According to Shanks and Tilley (1987, 105), ‘the nature of archaeological understanding is relational to the context being investigated and involves a dialectical movement back and forth between the parts and the totality’. It is in this sense that oral tradition, colonial documents and archaeological contexts all refer to a wider cultural horizon. This perspective guides the interpretation of the case studies in the chapters that follow, in an attempt to reconcile an approach to the landscape according to a focus on distinct geographical, social, or human temporal scales (Braudel 1966: I, 16), cultural tradition and the long-term nature of its core elements (López Austin 2001, 59), and historical processes of continuity and change.
Building on the previous discussion of cultural tradition, this chapter explores the relationship between the dynamics of tradition and the symbolic layers of the sacred landscape, as it is experienced by human communities. Through time, structures of meaning are created and attached to tangible as well as intangible elements of the landscape, in such a way that it is possible to conceive of ritual communities as producing inscriptions on the landscape by way of their meaningful action. In the first section of this chapter, ancient Mixtec religious concepts are examined from the perspective of the present socio-cultural context in Chalcatongo de Hidalgo. Then, the discussion centers on the relationship between time and space unfolding in the sacred landscape of Santa Catarina Yosonotú, where the mountain known as the Cerro del Pedimento is a regional pilgrimage site for Mixtec and Triqui ritual participants.

3.1 Symbolism and meaningful landscape dimensions

The symbolism of the cardinal directions, connecting worldview to ritual, gives a conceptual frame of reference for human orientation in the sacred landscape. In geographical as well as in symbolic terms, through history, directions have articulated time and space within the cultural horizon of the Mixtec tradition, being often linked to foundational and historical events (Jansen and Pérez Jimenez 2007a, 85; de los Reyes 1976, i). The concept of the four directions, or ndekuun ichi in Chalcatongo Mixtec, is invoked during landscape rituals to maintain a respectful relationship with nature. In Codex Colombino, p. XVII, the Mixtec culture hero Lord 8 Deer is represented as conducting rituals in front of the trees of the cardinal directions before gaining political rulership (Jansen 1997, 82) (fig. 3.1). As will be mentioned in Chapters Four and Five in relation to visual orientation lines in the landscape, Chalcatongo was in ancient times home of the Vehe Kihin, the Cave of Death and symbol of the South. It was the abode of the oracle deity Lady 9 Reed and the pantheon of the Mixtec rulers (Anders et al. 1992b, 184). Nowadays, the Yuku Kasa mountain which pertained to the ancient realm of Chalcatongo marks the geographical south of the Mixteca Alta, and is considered as a meeting place for the souls of the deceased (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007a, 195-196).
If Mesoamerican worldview included a deep-reaching understanding of sacred geography, it is through human action, or ritual, that these concepts could be contextualized and made meaningful for social actors. As Broda (2000, 399) denotes, ‘ritual landscape reproduced not only the concepts of cosmovision, about man’s place and nature in the cosmos, but was also closely tied to state ideology that imbued the physical landscape with political and religious significance’. But while it can be established that landscape rituals form a connection across time and space between human society and fundamental religious values, it is equally necessary to reflect on the nature of cultural transmission when such values become reinterpreted within different socio-historical contexts. That is to say, although the transmission through oral history or ritual of a number of concepts can be set against the wider historical perspective of the Mixtec cultural tradition, the perception of the values they transmit has often been influenced by centuries of Christian discourse.

For instance, in Chalcatongo the word soko (yodzoco in the Early Colonial period), which is the act of making a ritual offering to the Earth Spirit in the form of food or an animal, is sometimes understood as having a negative or even an evil symbolism. In the sixteenth century however, Spanish friar Alvarado registered various entries in his Vocabulario (Alvarado 1962; Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009b) for the verb yodzoco alternatively as “to offer”, “to bless”, or “to dedicate” something, for example blessing food or dedicating a church. It is noteworthy that in Alvarado’s Vocabulario the term yodzoco is associated with sacredness in general, also in the context of the Christian church. Furthermore, in a lecture of prehispanic Mixtec pictorial manuscripts in Sahin Sàu, the Chalcatongo dialect of the contemporary Mixtec language, certain offerings to Earth Spirits dwelling in the landscape can be interpreted as soko (Anders et al. 1992b, 56). In the context of foundation rituals depicted in Codex Vindobonensis, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011, 361-362) also denote a phonetic and conceptual connection
between the representation of a cradle (**dzoco**), and the act of dedicating (**yodzoco**) a political and religious center. It is thus interesting to note that an overall negative symbolism has in more recent times been attached to an action which originally implied a respectful attitude towards landscape Spirits and the wider sacred realm. Under the influence of the Christian worldview, which does not consider the natural landscape as a space where the sacred can manifest itself, certain ritual offerings have come to be seen as propitiatory acts associated with the negative influences of the underworld.

Related to this phenomenon, of course, is the Christian interpretation of the ancient sacred pantheon of the Mixtec rulers, the **Vehe Kihin**, as a place of devilish powers. Oral tradition relates the dire consequences of the contract that is sealed between the people venturing into a cave associated to the underworld and the human-like entity residing in it (either a Spaniard or a devil with a human face), asking for one’s soul in exchange of earthly favors. Additionally, the events of the colony have projected the hardships and the cultural alienation due to life under colonial rule onto an deceitful underworld figure. The long-term perspective that is central to the consideration of tradition thus shows that a dialectic between past and present is what gives its meaning to the hermeneutical horizon of the present, since it is through present action that memory and oral history are transmitted to future generations. In the Mixtec codices, references are opened towards a world in which nature is a source of power linked to the religious symbolism of the cardinal directions (Jansen 1997, 96). On the other hand, these narratives must be related to present experience and oral tradition in order to make the historical dynamics of cultural tradition intelligible within the contemporary socio-cultural context in the Mixteca.

Another figure linked to a liminal element of the landscape, in this case the crossroads, is the **sucun yuu**, the ball of light formed by a person able to change shape and fly through the air. According to oral tradition in Chalcatongo, it is an individual able to move invisibly through the landscape and which typically shifts shape at a crossroad junction. Crossroads are also the place where two **sucun yuu** meet and, in some cases, transpose their heads severed at throat-level. Many stories relate how parents protect their recently-born children after they perceive a ball of light approaching the house at night, aiming at sucking some blood from the children’s throat. In ancient times, Mixtec codices depicted priests in search of a vision during trance as wearing the titles **yaha yahui**, “eagle and fire serpent” (fig. 3.2), alluding to the nahual qualities of the priests and their ability to transform (Jansen 1982, 148-149; 1997, 76-78). Alvarado’s **Vocabulario** translates the term **tay dzqu yahu** as “**hechicero otro**”, while Jansen and
Pérez Jiménez (2007a, 322) point that the term’s literal meaning, “person of neck and mouth”, may also be understood as “person of magic powers”. Moreover, another semantically relevant term appears in Alvarado’s Vocabulario, which translates the sixteenth century Mixtec word dzuq teyuhu as “beheaded person”. Obviously, this being is in no way related to witchcraft, although under the influence of the church the term “witch” is sometimes used to refer erroneously to the sucun yuu. From a Christian perspective, the perception of the yaha yahui and the sucun yuu as similar to witches and sorcerers was probably further motivated by the medieval European association of the crossroads with witches and the Devil (Burkhart 1989, 63), leading to the Eurocentric interpretation of this Mixtec concept.

In the examples discussed above, the projection of Christian moral values upon Mesoamerican religious concepts has produced a spiritual dialogue whose outcome has dramatically altered their former philosophical implications. In this sense, past elements of cultural tradition are always interpreted within the horizon of the present, which involves the dialectic of remembering and forgetting at work in the transmission of social memory. While memory is attached to meaningful places in the landscape, cultural transmission is at the same time also influenced by the a contemporary social context. The Mesoamerican landscape exists until today in relation to a living cultural tradition characterized by the long-term nature of its fundamental concepts in spite of periods of brutal historical and cultural turmoil (López Austin and López Luján 2009, 19-20). With Braudel (1966: I, 325), one can think of “social history” as the interplay between an overarching structure and phenomena of different lengths and rhythms.

In Book I of the Historia General, Sahagún (2000: I, 79) also evokes the crossroads as the place where the chhuopipilti, the women who died during childbirth and who moved through the air, caused harm on people.
3.2 The ritual experience of the sacred landscape

At a distance to the west of Chalcatongo lies the small town of Santa Catarina Yosonotú, an important pilgrimage site for the whole Mixtec region as well as for Triquis and Mixtecs who reside in other parts of the country. Each year on the second Friday of Lent (Cuaresma), and in accordance with tradition, pilgrims arrive at a chapel dedicated to the miraculous Señor de la Columna (Lord of the Column) recently constructed at the foot of the locale known as Cerro del Pedimento (fig. 3.3), a sacred mountain situated along the ridge which forms the natural and municipal limit between the communities of Santa Catarina Yosonotú and San Miguel el Grande. From there, the pilgrims undertake the short ascension leading to the top of the mountain, which holds an ancient ritual site and the remains of a prehispanic ceremonial platform (fig. 3.4). After the ritual journey that a number of people undertake by foot all the way from their home community, propitiatory offerings are deposited on the summit of the mountain in the form of pedimentos. These offerings consist of small replicas made of stone, wood or other materials of the things that people come to ask for, such as a house, a car or truck, or an agricultural estate with livestock (fig. 3.5). Following the Mesoamerican tradition, ritual offerings of candles, flowers and eggs at deposited in front of the mojonera placed at the sacred site, a stone landmark in the form of a cross used during colonial times by Spaniards to mark territorial limits between towns (fig. 3.6).

Figure 3.3. Pilgrimage in Santa Catarina Yosonotú on the second Friday of Lent (Cuaresma). View of the chapel (foreground) located at the foot of the ancient sacred mountain Cerro del Pedimento (background).
Figure 3.4. Prehispanic platform on top of the Cerro del Pedimento.

Figure 3.5. Ritual offerings or *pedimentos*.

Figure 3.6. The *mojonera* on the Cerro del Pedimento.
For the dedicated people who effectuate the pilgrimage on foot, as some do by leaving in the early morning from Chalcatongo, the perception of the landscape takes place according to an understanding of time and space determined by cultural memory. Before arriving at Yosonotú, and depending on the pilgrims’ community of origin, a number of significant locales may be visited in a fixed sequence. The location of these places is communicated across generations and they become included in the ritual route towards the Cerro del Pedimento. Moreover, on each Friday of Lent the religious feast is organized in a different community. Yosonotú is the second community that is visited during the cycle of Lent, as its feast takes place on the second Friday. It is also the most influential one, due to the strong belief in the religious efficacy and miraculous character of its sacred site, now associated with the Lord of the Column. This Saint is a particular manifestation of Jesus Christ and offerings of flowers and money are deposited in front of his image inside the chapel. In this sense, the liturgical calendar fixes the dates for the successive places to be visited, and participants are drawn into a ritual circuit across the Mixtec landscape. The fact that pedimento offerings are realized at different mojoneras and along a number of routes, in a particular sequence, underscores the regional unity implied in the notion of a ritual landscape. As Spores (2007, 346) observes, during colonial times Catholicism substituted its figures to the prehispanic deities and natural entities worshipped during ancient pilgrimages, but little changed in the religious experience of pilgrimage itself. In Yosonotú, the Lord of the Column is the Saint Patron revered during the pilgrimage to the Cerro del Pedimento. His authority and miraculous character can therefore also be related to the sacredness of this ancient ritual locale.

In the prehispanic Mesoamerican worldview, no fundamental separation existed between sacred and profane places in the landscape. This dialectic was introduced by this Christian faith and using this opposition to describe prehispanic ritual places therefore constitutes an anachronism. In the Mixtec worldview, sacredness was a quality that could permeate and manifest itself in each place in the landscape, as in a hierophany. No fundamental separation existed between the human and divine realms, as in Catholicism. Hence, during colonial times the notions of territory or of private property of land stood in marked contrast with the Mesoamerican understanding of the sacred landscape (Bernal García and García Zambrano 2006, 33). But in a striking example of reinterpretation of a European concept from a Mesoamerican perspective, the mojoneras which were used to delimit the newly traced colonial territories now also materialize ideas and values inherited from the prehispanic religious tradition and transmitted by cultural memory. Originally, the Spanish term mojonera or mojón refers
to the landmarks used in medieval Castile to trace the limits of agricultural lands and any space under a certain jurisdiction (Ramírez Ruiz 2006, 170-172). In Mesoamerica, however, *mojoneras* in the form of a stone or a cross could be used to perpetuate ancient landscape rituals, for instance to signal the resting place of a deceased forefather or community founder (Bernal García and García Zambrano 2006, 60). By extension, the use of concrete boundary markers functioning as anchor points for memory replicated the foundation rituals of prehispanic settlements (Ramírez Ruiz 2006, 187).

Since they were used for tracing the administrative limits of communities, and associated with the periphery, these landmarks then came to objectify the four directions expressed in Mesoamerican worldview. The symbol of the Christian cross could in this respect open a direct reference to the symbolism of the cardinal directions of the landscape (Anders et al. 1994, 160). Today, a *mojonera* near Chalcatongo marking a location known as the *punto trino*, or “trine point”, supports this idea. Despite its name, this *mojonera* unites or marks the limits of four communities and thus four directions: Chalcatongo de Hidalgo, Santa Catarina Ticua, San Pedro Molinos and San Miguel el Grande.

The perception of the landscape, as it takes place through the experience of pilgrimage, reveals a network of ritual places and routes interconnected with each other. With the ritual celebrations conducted on each Friday of Lent in another community the Mixteca, different locales are drawn together into one meaningful structure. In heuristic terms, pilgrimage can be connected with what narrative theory identifies as the notion of point-of-view or focalization (Bal 1997, 133). The different symbolic layers that are contained within landscape features become meaningful because they do not simply exist in abstract representational form, as on a map, but they are integrated into ritual paths travelled following a specific sequence (Ingold 2011, 151). Ritual visits and offerings to *mojoneras* are therefore part of a long cultural tradition which articulates spatial experience and knowledge of the landscape with important religious symbolism. Although contemporary *pedimento* rituals have a strong propitiatory character, by their nature they also express the performative aspect of social memory, or what Connerton (1989, 71) calls ‘commemorative ceremonies’. Along the same lines, Barabas (2006a, 14) associates the concept of ‘symbolic action’ with the hermeneutic meanings that are shared within historical contexts.

Because ritual involves formalized social interaction whose codes are defined by tradition, it is possible to consider the implications of Ricœur’s (1981,198-203)
description of the structure of ‘meaningful action’, discussed in Chapter Two, in the context of a long-term perspective on the meanings contained in a sacred or ritual landscape. *Pedimento* rituals, by their structure which combines spatial and temporal dimensions, are literally inscriptions on the landscape evoking references towards a Mesoamerican world or hermeneutical horizon. Where Ricœur (1981, 208) contends that the meaning expressed through certain actions ‘transcends the social conditions of its production and may be re-enacted in new social contexts’, *pedimento* rituals inscribe cultural meanings in the landscape and communicate them through time and space. Building forward on Gadamer’s (1981, 273) concept of ‘fusion of horizons’, in Mesoamerica landscape archaeology must be committed to understand the hermeneutical horizon of a living tradition which is the driving force of cultural memory.
4. Observation of celestial bodies in Ñuù Ndéyá (Chalcatongo)

This chapter discusses the observation of celestial phenomena in relation to the natural cycles of the Mesoamerican landscape. More specifically, the astronomical cycles of the sun and the moon can be seen as regular indicators for the moment in time when a body of traditional knowledge about nature has to be met with the performance of particular rituals. Two examples are treated below, in which respectively the cycle of the sun and that of the moon are indicative of the growth cycles of agricultural crops and of the inner properties of the maguey plant. Contextual information comes from two small communities or rancherías pertaining to the municipio of Chalcatongo de Hidalgo. In each case, a different aspect of the observation of celestial bodies and its ritual importance is highlighted, but the similarities reside in cultural continuity with regard to the relationship between traditional Mesoamerican concepts and the ritual organization of agriculture. The respectful observation of the patterns of nature shows that the landscape has animate qualities and that it is composed of sacred plants which are considered as living beings providing sustenance for human communities.

4.1 The zenith passage in the community of Yutia Ndiji (Plan de Ayala)

During the past decades, a major investigation theme in Mesoamerican archaeology has centered on the movements of celestial bodies and the importance thereof for the design and planning of ancient human settlements and ritual architecture (Aveni 2001; Broda 1991; 2000; 2001a; Tichy 1981). In general terms, an intimate link between the solar calendar and the regular rhythm of the seasons has been materialized in the monumental architecture of most Mesoamerican archaeological sites (Broda 1991, 80). However, it is not only the civic-ceremonial architecture of major centers which partakes in this phenomenon. Oftentimes, natural features of the landscape may also serve as markers for the passage of these celestial bodies, providing human societies with the astronomical knowledge which leads to the implementation of fixed patterns in agricultural life and ritual.
An example of the above is found in the observation of the first passage of the sun through the zenith, an event which in Mesoamerica roughly coincides with the beginning of the rain season in May. In the Valley of Oaxaca, for instance, the first yearly zenith passage of the sun occurs on May 2, and the second passage on August 10 (Aveni 2001, 266). At the latitude of Chalcatongo de Hidalgo in the Mixteca Alta, the first yearly zenith passage can be observed on May 9. For obvious reasons, keeping track of the zenith passages of the sun, as well as determining its sunrise and sunset positions throughout the year, would have had important implications for the correlation between the ancient Mesoamerican solar calendar of 365 days and agricultural activities. However, because a solar calendar would slowly run out of pace with the exact tropical year of 365,2422 days (Aveni 2001, 55), a lag of one day would appear every four years between the two, demanding correction. As Tichy (1981, 233) suggests, solar observatories used to determine the exact days of the zenith passages would have been useful devices for knowing when to perform such a one-day correction to the solar calendar, in order to keep it in track with the exact cycles of nature. The same principle holds with regard to a fixed sunrise position on the horizon (Broda 2001a, 181-183).

In Chalcatongo’s community of Yutia Ndiji (“Visible Well”), an outstanding rock formation known as Kava Tijii or “Rock of the Vulture” (fig. 4.1) constitutes an example of “natural” ritual architecture used as an astronomical observatory. Inside a natural chamber created by an opening through the rock at ground-level, a vertical shaft rises in a right angle towards the sky. By its almost perfectly vertical shape, the narrow tube-like opening is well-suited to function as a natural marker for the zenith passages of the sun. Because of the narrowness of the shaft, only on the days of the zenith passage do the sunbeams reach ground-level at a right angle through the opening (fig. 4.2). The remains of ancient and recent offerings and deposits at the bottom of the vertical shaft, where the sunbeams touch the ground during the zenith passage, attest to the continued ritual importance of the site.

Prominent scholars such as Aveni (2001, 266) and Broda (2000, 414) have even suggested a connection between zenith sighting devices incorporated in ceremonial architecture, the ancient 365-day solar calendar, and the ritual or divinatory 260-day Mesoamerican calendar, based on observations from astronomical caves at the site of Xochicalco, and Building P at Monte Albán. Their arguments rest upon the fact that at a 15° N latitude, the elapsed time between the two zenith passages of the sun (on April 30 and August 13) roughly corresponds to 105 days. At other Mesoamerican latitudes, this differs slightly. To complete the yearly cycle of 365 days, 260 days remain, that is, the length of the divinatory calendar (Broda 2000, 404). Additional contextual evidence, however, would be needed to corroborate this argument.
Figure 4.1. The Kava Tijii, “Rock of the Vulture”:  
\( \text{a, the rock formation as viewed from below; b, entrance to the astronomical shaft.} \)

Figure 4.2. Vertical beam of light inside the Kava Tijii on May 9, day of the first zenith passage.
Figure 4.3. In the distance, the twin peaks of the Cerro de Cuajilotes (left) and the much higher Yuku Kasa mountain line (right) delimit the southern horizon as observed from the Kava Tijii.

Figure 4.4. To the Northeast of the Kava Tijii, the Cerro Negro marks the horizon line.

Apart from its use as a zenith observatory, the elevated position in the landscape attainable from the top of the Kava Tijii also makes it a very suitable location for observing the yearly course of the rising and setting positions of the sun on the horizon, possibly signaling other dates of ritual relevance. The site could thus have functioned both as a zenith observation point and as a natural horizon-calendar. Keeping track of the annual oscillation of the sun on the horizon would have had important implications for the ritual calendar. As it is known, on the day of the summer solstice in the northern hemisphere, the sun reaches its northernmost position in the
sky, as well as its northernmost rising and setting positions on the horizon (Aveni 2001, 62-63). Thus, when the daily position of the rising sun oscillates northwards across the eastern horizon, from the spring equinox (March 21) until the summer solstice (June 21), it signals that the rain season is approaching. From other sources, it is known that the Nahuas saw the North as the direction where the rain came from (Broda 1991, 84).

Moreover, from the Kava Tijii, a number of significant visual lines point towards symbolic features of the Mixtec cultural landscape, both geographically and symbolically. From the situation of an observer situated on the top of the rock formation and looking southwards between the azimuths of 165°-180°, two mountainous formations appear on the horizon. There, the pointed twin mountains of Cuajilotes and the imposing Yuku Kasa range stand markedly on the southern horizon line (fig. 4.3). At their feet flows the Río Verde, ultimately reaching the Pacific Coast. Aside from tracing the geographical southern frontier of the Mixteca Alta, the Yuku Kasa pertained to the precolonial realm of Chalcatongo (Ñuu Ndaya) which held the Vehe Kihin, the Temple of Death and symbol of the South in the Mixtec codices. As mentioned above, the Yuku Kasa is now seen as the place where the souls of the dead travel to (Jansen 1998, 134).

Looking to the Northeast, at an approximate azimuth of 30°, one distinguishes the Yuku Tnoo, “Black Mountain”, on top of which lies the Preclassic civic-ceremonial site of Monte Negro (fig. 4.4). In this context, it is possible that the Cerro Negro mountain, by its location towards the Northeast of Kava Tijii, would have been considered at certain times of the year as materializing a relationship between rain and ritual. This possible reading is further supported by the presence of a rain shrine or vehe sau near the ceremonial site of Monte Negro, possibly already used during the Preclassic period and linking the site to a long tradition of water symbolism manifested in Mixtec codices as well as in contemporary oral tradition from the nearby community (Geurds 2007, 189-191; Geurds and Jansen 2008, 398). Suggesting that the Cerro Negro was possibly linked with the direction of the rain from the perspective of the southern Mixteca Alta, however, by no means implies that it also represented the geographical north of the Mixtec region illustrated in the codices, the latter being situated near Tepeji in the actual state of Puebla (see discussion in Jansen 1998, 133-137).

Interestingly, a similar geographical situation with visual lines towards the Yuku Kasa in the South and Monte Negro in the North is observable from a ceremonial platform on the hill known as Mogote del Gamito in San Mateo Sindihui (see discussion in Chapter Five). From the Kava Tijii, a roughly North-South axis between the Yuku Tnoo and the Yuku Kasa appears on the eastern horizon, while in Sindihui this axis is visible on
the western horizon. Nevertheless, a conceptual similarity between the visual lines used as important visual markers for symbolic orientation is clearly visible. These alignments thus attest to the regional ceremonial influence of the Yuku Kasa and Yuku Tnoo mountains, and point to the fact that the sacred landscape is comprised of networks of interconnected ritual sites. They are clear examples of a sacred geography incorporating the manifold dimensions of the Mesoamerican landscape as it can be experienced in the first place by human agents, calling for interpretation from the perspective of a ‘hermeneutical archaeology of landscape’ (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2008, 109).

In many respects, the first zenith passage of the sun in Mesoamerica may be linked to the contemporary ritual celebration of the day of the Holy Cross (día de la Santa Cruz) on May 2-3 (Broda 2001b, 223). This date marks the end of the dry season and the beginning of the rain season which is conceptually associated with May 15, the day of Isidore the Labourer (San Isidro Labrador). May 3 is the day when people go to the various vehe sau, the “houses of rain”, to perform propitiatory rituals. Traditionally, houses of rain are locations situated in caves or inside mountains where a fresh source of water emerges. They are considered as the abodes of the Rain deity, sacred places demanding respectful interaction. In Yutia Ndiji, a stone basin has been constructed near a such a vehe sau, where a stream of fresh water emerges from a rocky cliff (fig. 4.5). The context of cultural continuity relating the zenith passage of the sun to the feast of the Holy Cross and ultimately to the beginning of the rain season illuminates the interrelationships between ceremonial landscape locations, ritual life and agriculture. As the earth is a source of sustenance, the correct observation of the cycles of nature is the main indicator for correlating natural and social rhythms with the agricultural calendar.

Figure 4.5. Vehe sau or “house of rain” in Yutia Ndiji (Plan de Ayala).
4.2 Pulque rituals in the community of Yuku Nikoko (Vicente Guerrero)\textsuperscript{14}

The second example of celestial observation treated in this chapter is concerned with the relationship between the lunar cycle and the qualities of the maguey plant, whose aguamiel or sweet sap (\textit{ndushi}), when fermented, produces the alcoholic drink pulque (\textit{nducha kuijin}).\textsuperscript{15} The information provided in this section is indebted to the knowledge of doña Concepción Nicolás Jimenez and don Margarito Osorio from the community of Yuku Nikoko (“Densely Forested Mountain”), belonging to Chalcatongo de Hidalgo (fig. 4.6). Strong family ties have ensured that the ancient knowledge of maguey cultivation and pulque production has been passed on across several generations, for instance from father (\textit{taa}) to son (\textit{sehe yii}) or from mother-in-law (\textit{naa chiso}) to daughter-in-law (\textit{sehe janu}), certain activities and rituals being gender-based. Therefore, when pulque production obeys to tradition, it always requires a man and a woman to divide the complementary tasks between themselves. To illustrate the antiquity of the pulque rituals described below, this section will also discuss scenes from Mixtec and Central Mexican codices representing maguey gods and the preparation of pulque.

First and foremost, an essential aspect of pulque production is that it involves a respectful relationship with the maguey plant (\textit{yau}), which is considered as a living being and as having a sacred and delicate (both terms are referred to as \textit{ii}) character. Because of its animate qualities, the maguey, like other plants and trees, is considered as being receptive to the varying influence of the moon (\textit{yoo}) with respect to its position in its synodic cycle. According to the phase of the moon, the perforation or cutting of the maguey (\textit{tahu yau}) in order to extract its sap will produce different results. In this respect, it is often mentioned that the maguey is cut at full moon (\textit{nu nichitu yoo}) because it would increase the abundance (\textit{ndeya}) of the aguamiel (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2010, 68). This is not always the case, however. In Yuku Nikoko, the cutting of a new maguey takes place during the astronomical opposite of the full moon, namely the lunar conjunction inaugurating the new moon phase (\textit{nu ndukoso yoo}, literally “when

\textsuperscript{14} In general terms, the information presented here can be compared with another recent account on pulque production in Chalcatongo, provided by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2010).

\textsuperscript{15} The Mixtec terms and expressions related to the objects and rituals accompanying the preparation of pulque are given here in \textit{Sahin Sàu}, the dialogical variant of the Mixtec language spoken in Chalcatongo.
the moon seats”). The reasons for this are twofold. First, it is often believed in the Mixteca that at full moon, the overall hardness of trees and plants increases (Alavez Chávez 1997, 183). Consequently, it is recommended to cut trees during full moon in order to obtain good quality wood if it is to be used as building material (Alavez Chávez 1997, 183), but in order to extract the sap of the maguey it is preferable to cut the plant when it is softer. Second, with the lunar conjunction, the moon enters in a new phase which is considered as prosperous either for extracting larger quantities of aguamiel (ndushi) or for planting new magueys (chuhun yau) into the ground. The new moon thus signals a new cycle of growth, by opposition to the full moon when it has already reached its peak. During the rain season, when the observation of the exact night when the moon enters into its new phase is made difficult because of the lingering clouds, the cutting of the maguey can take place on the Monday or Tuesday immediately following the lunar conjunction, two days also symbolizing a new cycle.

Today, the maguey is considered as a living being, and the act of cutting it therefore involves killing the plant. This action is expressed in Sahin Sàu as follows:

*You chaku te jahniyo.*
The maguey lives/is alive and we kill it.

The *Virgen de los Remedios*, nowadays the patron of the maguey, has to be addressed during the ritual involving the cutting of the quiote (*yutu yau*), the central stem of the plant which has to be cut before its last two leaves open and it begins to grow tall and slowly decompose. Three crosses are drawn with a machete (*yuchi kahnu ja kuu tahu yau,* “the large knife to cut the maguey”) on the stem of the plant and the following words are pronounced, before the machete first cuts into the maguey:

*Jika tahuyo sa perdonenos Iha Sihi [de los Remedios], ma kiti-inini ja stuiyo seheni yau.*
We are asking for your forgiveness, *Virgen de los Remedios*, don’t get angry because we are hurting your son the maguey.

After the act of ritual blessing and prayer (*nakuatu*), two lower leaves (*ndaha yau*) are cut to grant access to the stem, after which a hole is cut with an iron stake (*nduyu yau*) and the machete (fig. 4.7):

*Shrohanka jahyari uu ndaha yau. Nandoori ja ma tuu ndaha yau, iñu yau.*
First, I cut two leaves of the maguey. I clean it so that its leaves and spines don’t prick.
Figure 4.6. The community of Yuku Nikoko in Chalcatongo and its maguey-cultivation terraces.

Figure 4.7. Don Margarito Osorio cutting the maguey stem (yutu yau) to remove its inner part (shitu yau).

Figure 4.8. Doña Concepción Nicolás scraping the maguey to collect its sap (ndushi).
As the quiote’s white-colored inner part (shitu yau) is removed and a square hole is excavated, the aguamiel starts to drip (too ndushi). To allow the aguamiel to accumulate before being collected, it is important to cover (jasu) the opening (yau) to prevent any impurities to enter into the maguey, and equally to prevent the opossum (jakoo) from drinking the sweet sap. In both cases, it would ruin the quality of the aguamiel.

The blessing of the pulque is an integral part of the preparation process. To ensure that the freshly-cut plant will produce good quality pulque, the same person who cut the maguey must make a blessing (sa-ii, literally “make sacred”) before an altar (nuu Chuchi) located in the pulque storeroom. Every morning, the aguamiel can be collected by rasping (ñii) the maguey with a spoon-like metal implement or “special knife” (yuchi ñukuun), used to remove the maguey’s masa (yusha yau) so that the sap may rise (fig. 4.8). After the aguamiel has been collected, it is poured into a jar (tindoho) or large vessel (kiyä) and mixed with mother pluque (ndau) for fermentation (kuanasaka ndishri, “the alcoholic drink goes mixing”). Each time new pulque is prepared, a blessing is also made by the person who scraped the maguey to collect its sap before an altar in the pulque storeroom. Copal incense (susia kutu) is burned in a tripod ceramic vessel (koho kuu), together with chile (yaha) and salt (ñii) for protection against bad influences and to ensure the drink will have a positive effect on people. All the large pulque vessels are stored in a special room (fig. 4.9), traditionally also containing an altar and an image or photograph of the Virgen de los Remedios, Patron of the maguey. With the use of this special storeroom, utmost care is employed to protect the pulque from the impurities (literally and metaphorically) that may enter into the vessels and ruin the fermentation.
process, such as pollen and insects. This fact illustrates well the double meaning of the Mixtec word *ii*, a word oftentimes used to describe the qualities of deities, sacred beings and sacred places, signifying both “delicate” and “sacred”. The delicate and sacred character of the pulque requiring constant protection from impurities may also have archaeological implications, since it is probable that such storerooms might have been associated with ritual-architectural complexes at sites where libation ceremonies took place. They may therefore be identified as such in the archaeological record.

An ancient Mixtec pictorial manuscript depicting the ritual preparation and consumption of pulque is Codex Vindobonensis, p. 25 (fig. 4.10). On the upper-right corner of the page, two perforated magueys are shown near a pulque jar from which foam (*tiñuhu*) rises (*jaa*) after fermentation. Two characters, Lady 2 Flower and Lady 3 Alligator, present a drinking cup (*yajin*) of pulque to a series of twelve lords and deities. As their calendar names indicate, the successive days 2 Flower and 3 Alligator were likely held as propitious for pulque ritual (Anders et al. 1992a, 128). The same days also mark a pulque offering to Lady 9 Reed on Codex Bodley, p. 30 (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2005, 85). It is important to note here that Lady 3 Alligator is wearing a typical circular nose ornament in the form of a half moon, known as *yacameztli* in Nahuatl and pointing to an intimate relationship between the moon, the maguey and pulque (Caso 1963, 30).

On the basis of information obtained from the group of colonial-period Central Mexican pictorial manuscripts, Nicholson (1991, 172) identified a complex of pulque deities wearing the *yacameztli* nose ornament or otherwise wearing this lunar symbol on their paraphernalia. More recently, Mikulska (2001, 108, 111) pointed to iconographic similarities between representations of the different manifestations of Tlazolteotl, evoking fertility and sexuality, maguey-goddess Mayahuel, and pulque gods such as Pahtecatl, all of them wearing the *yacameztli* nose ornament in different manuscripts (fig. 4.11). In fact, Mayahuel may well have been considered as the personification of the maguey itself (Mikulska 2001, 115). The lunar symbolism of the *yacameztli* iconographic element may thus allude to a larger theme where a connection is implied between the moon, agriculture, the maguey and pulque. Such a connection is not to be understood in absolute terms, however, for each manuscript presents a specific manifestation of pulque and lunar deities. Therefore, an additional number of iconographic themes and associations may appear, and interpretation must take into account all the relevant contextual information provided by the narrative or mantic theme of each particular manuscript (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 193-194). Nevertheless, for the purposes of the present discussion this lunar visual symbolism is noteworthy.
Figure 4.10. Pulque ritual on Codex Vindobonensis, p. 25 (Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz).

Figure 4.11. Gods wearing the yacameztl nose ornament: a, Mayahuel on Codex Magliabechiano, p. 58r (Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz); b, Mayahuel (left) and Pahtecatl (right) as mantic figures on Codex Borgia, p. 57 (Dover Publications).
On the basis of the information provided in ancient Mesoamerican pictorial manuscripts, relevant observations can be made regarding the traditional pulque preparation as it is performed nowadays in Chalcatongo. First, it seems indeed that the influence of the moon on the maguey itself, and on its personification Mayahuel, was of great importance in ancient times, just as it is today. Second, if the maguey was personified by the abovementioned goddess, it is now so as a living being which is seen as the son of its Patron Saint, the Virgen de los Remedios. Finally, another semiotic detail is worth mentioning here, since it permits to understand the ritual blessing of the pulque, as it takes place today in Chalcatongo, from the perspective of the Mesoamerican cultural tradition.

In the pictorial manuscripts, Tlazolteotl, the Central Mexican Mother-goddess associated, according to her particular manifestation, with the Earth, fertility, sexuality, the moon, pulque etc., can also appear as a manifestation of Mayahuel and the maguey plant itself (Mikulska 2001, 118). When she is represented in combination with snakes, the notion of a forthcoming danger or vice is implied (Anders and Jansen 1993, 126; Anders et al. 1994, 191). On Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 17, Tlazolteotl is the Patron of the day 9 Reed and appears as a mantic figure wearing the yacameztli ornament and holding a snake, symbol of vice and danger (Anders et al. 1994, 224). In the Ñuu Dzaui codices, for instance on Codex Vindobonensis, p. 28, the Mixtec deity Lady 9 Reed, Patron of the Maguey plant, wears a headdress composed of two intertwined snakes. This particular representation of Lady 9 Reed establishes a connection with Mayahuel (Anders et al. 1992b, 195), the personification of the maguey on Codex Borgia, p. 68, since they both wear a similar face paint (fig. 4.12).

Figure 4.12. Face paint of maguey deities: a, Lady 9 Reed on Codex Vindobonensis, p. 28 (Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz); b, Mayahuel on Codex Borgia, p. 68 (Dover Publications).
Thematically, a conceptual similarity is to be found between the intertwined serpents in Lady 9 Reed’s headdress on Codex Vindobonensis, p. 28 (fig. 4.12a), and the two snakes which circle the large pulque jar on Codex Vindobonensis, p. 25 (fig. 4.10). In both cases, a certain danger or vice may be implied. The pictorial representation shows a number of ropes interwoven around the jar (fig. 4.10), so as to form a net around it. In practical terms, the net around the pulque jar probably signifies that a large vessel was used, and that it had to be transported to the scene of the ritual, just as today nets are tied around pulque vessels to facilitate transportation to the marketplace (fig. 4.9).

However, on another level the ropes and the net could also be an allusion to the tails of the snakes as if interwoven around the pulque jar, embodying the dangers associated with the consumption of pulque. In Book XI of the Historia General, Sahagún (2000: III, 1045) registered the Nahuatl term coapetlatl, “mat of snakes”, a mat made of intertwined serpents whose heads point outwards. Critically, the depiction of intertwined snakes, such as on Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p.27-28, announces a very negative mantic symbolism (Anders et al. 1994, 243-244).

In light of the above, it is important to note that today in the Mixteca, the ritual blessing of the new pulque in front of an altar dedicated to the Virgen de los Remedios is a central element of the preparation process. The salt and chile which are burned together with copal (chiñuhma, “to perfume or spread the smoke”) in a tripod incense burner, both have the function to protect the drink and to eliminate bad influences from the outside. For instance from other pulque producers if competition is increasing and jealousy may appear. Again, we are reminded of the association of snakes with negative gossip and vice in general which was indicated in the Mesoamerican mantic codices (Anders and Jansen 1993, 126). In relation to this, respectfully blessing the pulque according to tradition does ensure that it has a positive influence on the people who drink it, and helps avoid any negative consequences due to its consumption.

In summary, the iconographic details of the codices must be understood in relation to a larger historical context, which reveals the symbolic and moral values that characterize elements of cultural tradition. Conversely, these references cannot be understood without taking the importance of the details into account. This is the structure of the hermeneutic circle. The observation of the lunar cycle acquires all its importance as the moon is a source of fertility affecting agricultural life. In consequence, sacred plants such as the maguey have animate qualities and are personified by numima who are associated with the qualities of the moon. The maguey and its fermented sap, pulque, are considered sacred, but also delicate: the Mixtec word ii underscores this
ambivalent character, referring to something benevolent and the same time potentially harmful. Just as the Mesoamerican codices prescribe a series of rituals to be performed according to the mantic influence of specific days of the calendar, today it is important to ritually bless the plant and the pulque vessels in order to avoid the harmful consequences that might take place should the sacred maguey plant and its Patron Saint not be treated with respect. When new pulque is produced, a libation is made to pay respect to the Ñuho ndehyu, the Earth Spirit or deity of the wet soil, by pouring (jacha) a small quantity of the liquid into the earth. Furthermore, the sacred character is illustrated by an informal metaphor comparing the quality of good pulque to the temperature of blood:

*Tihika kumani ja kuu niñi Chuchi.*

A little bit more is necessary for it to be like the blood of Christ.

What this metaphor implies is not that pulque would in some way be considered to be like a bodily fluid, as some anthropological interpretations suggest (*cf.* Monaghan 1995, 221). It simply signifies that a comparison can be made between high quality pulque, measured in terms of symbolic temperature, and the blood which is conceived as a sacred mark of reference, the excellent quality of which of course cannot be surpassed. This is in spite of pulque being considered as a cold (*vijin*) liquid.
5. The landscape of San Mateo Sindihui and the *Mapa de Teozacoalco*

This chapter tackles the problematic of the interplay between continuity and change in cultural tradition, through a landscape approach based on the point of view of the modern Mixtec community of San Mateo Sindihui. The analysis centers on the sixteenth century *Mapa de Teozacoalco* (fig. 5.1), a hybrid colonial painting probably copied from an earlier lienzo (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2005, 25). The map was painted between AD 1574-1576 and attached to the AD 1580 *Relación Geográfica de Teozacoalco y Amoltepeque* (Acuña 1984: II, 129-151). Both the manuscript containing the answers to the AD 1577 *Instrucción y Memoria* questionnaire of the *Relaciones Geográficas* and the 138 x 176 cm map are currently held at the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin. The painting uses a combination of Mesoamerican and European pictorial conventions to represent the territory of the colonial community of Teozacoalco or Chiyo Cahnu, “Large Altar”, and a history of the genealogical ties of its rulers to the influential precolonial centre of Tilantongo or Ñuu Tnoo, “Black Town” (Smith 1973, 55-58). As Sindihui was part of Teozacoalco’s territory, the painting offers a contextual frame of reference for the interpretation of its landscape.

In a pioneering study, Mexican archaeologist Alfonso Caso (1949) identified the ruler lists depicted in genealogical columns above the place-signs of Tilantongo and Teozacoalco with historical characters appearing in the corpus of precolonial Mixtec codices. Additionally, Caso (1977, 27) identified the last contemporary married ruler of the Teozacoalco dynasty, whose name is clarified by a gloss on the map as Don Felipe de Santiago, with the ruler that the Dominican chronicler and friar Francisco de Burgoa tells was later baptized as Don Felipe de Austria when he went to rule Tilantongo (Burgoa 1989: I, 371). To ascertain the identity of the historical characters whose genealogy is represented on the map, Caso thus sought information both backwards and forwards in time from the moment the map was painted, by relying on both the Mixtec precolonial screenfold narratives and on Burgoa’s seventeenth century chronicle.

In doing so, however, Caso privileged the genealogical and historical content of the *Mapa de Teozacoalco* over its geographical information (Caso 1989, 33). Although it may have been one of the primary objectives of Mixtec codices to indeed record the
narrative history of the deeds of important rulers and figures, the focus of the present investigation lies not so much on individual biographies as on the geographical, temporal and cultural information that the landscape portrayed on the *Mapa de Teozacoalco* holds for the understanding of the socio-historical context within which this element of the Mixtec cultural tradition was painted. As discussed in Chapter Two, such must be the emphasis of a hermeneutic approach to the deeper meanings expressed in cultural tradition and works of (material) culture, with a dialectical relationship between the parts and the whole.

Figure 5.1. The *Relación Geográfica* map of Teozacoalco (Benson Latin American Collection, Austin).

On the map, thirteen *estancias* or tributary communities of Teozacoalco are indicated by the depiction of a church symbolizing the subject community itself, while the boundaries of Teozacoalco’s territory are indicated all around the radial map through a series of 46 logographic place-names (Mundy 1996, 112). The Teozacoalco toponym itself is represented twice. On the left side of the painting, outside the radial map, it occurs as a Mixtec-style pictorial glyph (fig. 5.2a) at the base of the first genealogical column of Teozacoalco’s rulers. This place sign for Chiyo Cahnu consists of a bent frieze serving as the foundation for a temple. The glyph has to be read phonetically,
since in sixteenth century Dzaha Dzaui, according to the tone by which it was pronounced, cahnu both referred to the adjective “large” and to the transitive verb “to break, bend” (Smith 1973, 57). Then, slightly to the left of the central portion the circle delimiting its territory, Teozacoalco is indicated a second time by means of a large church painted adjacent to the prehispanic palace of rulers, over which its second genealogical column of rulers extends (fig. 5.2b).

![Figure 5.2. The map of Teozacoalco (detail): a, Teozacoalco as a codex-style pictogram; b, Teozacoalco’s colonial church adjacent to the ancient palace of rulers. Below are Yutanduchi and Sindihui.](image)

Departing to the West of Teozacoalco, a road running counterclockwise on the painting leads to two of its estancias, each symbolized by a church (fig. 5.2b). The first one is now Yutanduchi de Guerrero, while the second estancia is Sindihui (Sii Ndevui), indicated by a gloss as Yndigui (Acuña 1984: II, 141), now San Mateo Sindihui. The text of the Relación Geográfica gives as etymology for Sindihui “Celestial Grandfather” or “Clear Grandfather”. This reading is based on a contraction between the terms registered in fray Francisco de Alvarado’s vocabulary as sii, “grandfather”, and andevui, “sky”, or ndevui, “day”. Alternatively, the entry sa sindevui is transcribed by Alvarado as cosa celestial. Today, however, the inhabitants of San Mateo Sindihui refer to the name of their community as Pie del Cielo, “(at the) Foot of the Sky”. Although the phonetic value of the town’s name has been preserved, a different semantic meaning appears between the contemporary name and that which is related in the sixteenth century manuscript.

While it is not possible to ascertain why the meaning of Sindihui’s name changed over the last five centuries, a possible causal factor for this may lie in the successive stages of resettlement of the village itself. According to oral tradition in contemporary Sindihui, the precise location of the settlement changed several times over the course of
its long history. At times, the people of Sindihui were scattered across two or more small settlements, occupied contemporaneously but pertaining to the same community. For instance, it is said that occupation at the ancient prehispanic archaeological site known as Sindihui’s *pueblo viejo* continued for several decades after the Spanish conquest, but that people also lived in other small hamlets such as the locale known as Yuuyivee, a flat portion of land extending between the Río Flor and the foot of Sindihui’s waterfall. The text of Tezocacoalco’s *Relación Geográfica* also mentions how river banks were used to cultivate agricultural crops and fruit trees in the area (Acuña 1984: II, 144-145).

By AD 1580, however, when the text of the *Relación Geográfica* of Teozacoalco was redacted, it is clear that the location of the modern community, the flat plateau at the foot of the Cahua Cuehe mountain, was already occupied on a permanent basis. The text also mentions how a small stream of water emerges from a spring in the Cahua Cuehe and irrigates Sindihui’s agricultural fields (fig. 5.3). This stream and the waterfall it forms by abruptly descending from Sindihui’s plateau are clearly visible on the map (fig. 5.4a-b). This is the area of the modern settlement, situated at an altitude of 1,450 m asl and experiencing a hot and dry climate. The predominant vegetation-type consists of palm trees and small scrubs, and at the exception of the lush fields along the small stream running through the middle of the community, all outlying agricultural lands depend on seasonal streams and gullies filling in the rain season for irrigation. It follows that the necessity for access to good sources of water probably motivated the occupation of different locations in the landscape. But, adding to the Spanish colonial policy of *congregación*, entailing the tracing of permanent settlements around a central
church to bring together the people living in remote rural areas (Gruzinski 1988, 165-166; Ramírez Ruiz 2006, 182-187), a severe decline of population during the second half of the sixteenth century in Teozacoalco’s jurisdiction (Gerhard 1972, 277) probably accounts for the gradual abandonment of ancient settlements.

Figure 5.4. Waterfall in Sindihui: a, the Mapa de Teozacoalco (detail) portrays a stream of water flowing through Sindihui’s grounds before falling off a cliff and joining the Río Flor; b, the waterfall as seen today.

In the reading of Sindihui as “Foot of the Sky”, a contraction with the term saha, “foot”, is probably implied. However, it seems unlikely that in the Mixtec language, the orthography for “Foot of the Sky” would be Sindihui; in this case, the spelling should rather be saha andevui or sandevui. The concept itself is a quite well-known and widespread one in the Mixteca. In the prologue to his grammar, Dominican friar Antonio de los Reyes (1976, ii) mentions that one of the Dzaha Dzahui names for the coastal region of the Mixteca was Sahaandevui, literally, “at the Foot of the Sky”, a term alluding to the inland horizon as observable from the coast. The names of other communities, such as an early Mixtec name for Cuilapan which reads Saha Yucu, “(at the) Foot of the Mountain” (Acuña 1984: I, 178-179; Smith 1973, 64), also express the geographical situation of lying at the base of a prominent landscape feature, in this case the central hill in the Valley of Oaxaca supporting the Classic center of Monte Alban on its top.  

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The text of the Relación Geográfica of the town of Cuilapan mentions that although by AD 1581 its Mixtec name was Yuchaticaha, about 25 years earlier it was known as Saha Yucu. As a reason for this change of name, the text invokes the fact that the latter used to be situated at a different location lacking fertile lands and in shortage of water, upon which it was relocated on better grounds (Acuña 1984: I, 179). Likewise, in the contemporary location of San Mateo Sindihui and due to its hot and arid climate, year-round irrigation of fields is made possible by the water source originating at the foot of the Cahua Cuehe.
Alternatively, in the *Relación Geográfica* of Tilantongo, the town of Mitlatongo appears both as Dzandaya and Sandaya (Acuña 1984: II, 230, 237), the latter being a contraction of *saha andaya*, “Foot of the Underworld”. Probably due to historical processes of relocation and movements of people, the semantic meaning of Sindihui’s name experienced a conflict between a former etymology and an outstanding geographical setting. Indeed, the modern community of San Mateo Sindihui lies at the foot of the Cahua Cuehe mountain above which only the clear horizon is observable (fig. 5.5).

![Figure 5.5](image)

*Figure 5.5* San Mateo Sindihui is located on a flat plateau (center left) at the foot of the Cahua Cuehe, “Red Mountain” (right).

Other important pictorial elements on the painting are the major roads, mountains, and rivers, although the smaller seasonal streams that are observable today are missing. The abovementioned road departing from Teozacoalco and leading counterclockwise around the Cahua Cuehe, “Red/Colored Mountain”, connects Teozacoalco via Yutanduchi to Sindihui. As a Spanish gloss on the map clarifies, Sindihui is one of the thirteen estancias of Teozacoalco. It is located to the West of the latter at the other side of the Cahua Cuehe mountain which separates the two communities (fig. 5.2b). The road is still in use today and is the sole access for motorized vehicles to San Mateo Sindihui. Many footpaths, however, connect Sindihui with other localities and even with the city of Oaxaca, such as those following the course of rivers and the ancient colonial trail known as the *camino real*, now for most parts fallen into disuse (fig. 5.6).
Recently, two studies have presented a detailed analysis of the landscape represented on the *Mapa de Teozacoalco* as it can be observed today. Anders *et al.* (1992b, 35-53) rely on historical documents as well as on contemporary linguistic and geographical information to identify the many toponyms and landscape features that form the “cultural landscape” of Teozacoalco as it appears on the painting. An archaeological approach to the same landscape is provided by Whittington (2003), who conducted a settlement pattern survey of the area around the modern community of San Pedro Teozacoalco. This led to the identification of several archaeological sites and in-context materials such as ceramics, stone artifacts and obsidian indicating residential as well as ceremonial activities. Interestingly, although some of the archaeological sites concur with the toponyms indicated on the *Mapa de Teozacoalco*, the data from Whittington’s survey reveal that many important Postclassic (AD 900-1521) sites of human activity are clearly absent from representation in the colonial map.

The approach followed in this chapter, by contrast, focalizes specifically on the lands and symbolic locales around the community of San Mateo Sindihui, one of the thirteen subject towns depicted on the sixteenth century map of Teozacoalco. It is not the intention to restrain interpretation to the limits of site-based analysis, however, but to clearly situate interpretation within a perspective that is rooted in the landscape itself, instead of adopting a more abstract, aerial view such as that coming forth from
the exterior visualization of a map for instance. Focalization on a particular location, it is argued here, does not entail limiting spatial analysis to a set of boundaries but, on the contrary, it has the advantage of opening landscape analysis to the surrounding area so that the meanings of the sacred landscape can be contextualized in space and time from the vantage point of a specific community or locale. Moreover, archaeological evidence from the area around San Mateo Sindihui suggests that referential points in the sacred landscape, connected by means of symbolic visual lines to a particular ceremonial location, are located outside the closed landscape area represented on the map of Teozacoalco (see below).

A diachronic view is thus adopted, since archaeological data and oral tradition will complement the information that is at hand in the colonial map. Building upon Ricoeur’s discussion of the threefold structure of mimesis (see Chapter Two), this focus on discrete but complementary sources of data will show what the map in itself cannot convey if we are to understand the cultural dynamics of landscape perception and experience from a long-term perspective.

5.1 The altepetl and the local perception of landscape

The Mapa de Teozacoalco painting offers a representation of cultural and geographic features which together can be seen as conceptual tools alluding to the deeper meanings that the intersection between time and space holds in relation to the idea of an ancestral, sacred landscape. Although the painting responded to legal purposes, such as establishing the boundaries of Teozacoalco and the legitimacy of its successive rulers by indicating their genealogical ties to the dynastic line of Tilantongo, the landscape on the map presents two interacting worldviews and frames of reference, namely Mesoamerican and European.

The depiction of a European-style sun motif on the top of the painting indicates that the map is orientated towards the East. The habit of visually situating the East on the superior edge of maps was common practice within both the European and the Mesoamerican pictorial traditions (Anders et al. 1992b, 39; Mundy 1996, 116-17), although in Mesoamerican terms the iconography of the sunrise may also symbolically allude to the new beginnings of sacred history (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2005, 26). The Christian tradition, on the other hand, dictates that the choir of churches be directed towards the Orient, so that the churches represented on colonial paintings are opened
towards the Occident (Gruzinski 1988, 64). This is also what gives its orientation to the *Mapa de Teozacoalco*, a painting opened towards different audiences and invoking different cultural traditions.

Most strikingly, the map of Teozacoalco offers a conceptual representation of space, from the point of view of the central community. It is the symbolism of the central place and its royal history that is emphasized, rather than the perception of the landscape from lived experience. An idealized territory is depicted in a perfect circle form, with a series of toponyms indicating its boundaries in glyphic fashion according to the prehispanic Mixtec pictorial tradition. The space inside the circle is symbolically demarcated thereof, since in it communities are depicted through the pictorial representation of a church, and landscape features such as mountains give an illusionistic impression of space according to the European tradition (Mundy 1996, 80).

On the relationship between churches and glyphic place signs, Mary Elizabeth Smith (1973, 163) has observed that the use of the latter in maps showing the boundaries of political entities would enhance the antiquity and thus the authenticity of these boundaries in cases of land disputes. In practice, however, this resulted in an opposition between places depicted by churches in the center, serving as metonyms for the community, and more distant places and boundaries represented according to the prehispanic tradition.

The above indeed suggests that ‘such a communicentric projection is centered on the heart of the community, often a palace or temple structure’ (Mundy 1996, 116). On the *Mapa de Teozacoalco*, next to Teozacoalco’s church, the representation of the ancient palace of the *caciques* or *Iya*, the Postclassic lords, is reminiscent of this notion of “heart of the community” while simultaneously implying that the Catholic church now symbolically acquired that dimension. In prehispanic times, the concept experienced as “Heart of the People” or “Heart of the Community” was materialized in the form of a religious bundle containing precious stones and serving as an oracle (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007b, 199). Burgoa (1989: I, 331-333) provides substantial evidence for the destruction by friar Benito Hernández of a sanctuary located in a cave near Achiutla and containing such a sacred bundle. Codex Selden (Añute) illustrates a scene in which the oracle was consulted during times of distress in prehispanic Mixtec history (fig. 5.7a). Furthermore, Anders *et al.* (1992a, 170) and Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2007a, 85) denote that the pictorial representation of the Center of the Mixtec world in Codex Vindobonensis (Yuta Tnoho) reads *Ini Ñuhu*, literally “Heart of the Earth” (fig. 5.7b), a concept referring, among other things, to fertility and germinating seeds.
The Heart of the People and the Heart of the Earth in Mixtec codices: a, Lord 2 Rain, Twenty Jaguars (Ocoñaña), consults the Heart of the People located inside a cave near Achiutla (Ñuu Ndecu) in Codex Selden (Añute), p. 6-II (The Bodleian Library, Oxford, M.S. Arch. Selden. A.2.); b, Codex Vindobonensis (Yuta Tnoho), p. 12 shows the Heart of the Earth (Ini Ñuhu, lower right) located in the Center of the Mixtec world, the realm of Lady 7 Flint and Lady 5 Flint which both receive the given name of Maize Flower (Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz).

In Chapter Two, it was already mentioned that the colonial Christian doctrine in the Mixteca (Burgoa 1989: I, 273) relied on vegetal metaphors also intelligible from the point of view of the prehispanic Mixtec religious tradition. In present-day San Pedro Teozacoalco, a wall of the church’s courtyard displays just such a poetic and metaphorical text cross-referencing between the Catholic church, the Kingdom of God, and the Heart of the People or Heart of the Community (fig. 5.8), reading as follows:
Iglesia Sencilla,
Semilla del Reino.

Iglesia Bonita,
Corazón del Pueblo.

The use of such a metaphor can be contextualized within the long-term structures governing ideology or religious symbolism that refer to both the ancient Ñuu Dzaui worldview and Biblical scripture. In this parallel construction, the church is metaphorically compared to the seed that brings forth the Kingdom of God, according to the Bible. In a certain way, the church thus refers to something beyond itself, a symbolic world but which can nevertheless come into being. In the ancient Mesoamerican worldview, “hearts” and “seeds” located inside a sacred mountain were invested with animistic force and linked to ancestors and fertility (López Austin 1997, 201-202; López Austin and López Luján 2009, 53-54).

On the other hand, the church, standing at the ideological and spatial centre of the community, is integrated through the metaphor into what in precolonial times was venerated as the Heart of the People. As Anders and Jansen (1996, 61) denote, the concept described in Codex Vaticanus A, p. 4-V as altepetl iyollo, the “Heart of the Community”, is still an important source of power and legitimacy for the authorities governing contemporary communities. It is thus not a simple case of religious syncretism, but rather a historical process of conscious negotiation and appropriation that must be considered in relation to long-term dynamics. These long-term structures are best appreciated in the context of the ancient Mesoamerican cultural tradition. Emphatically, López Austin and López Luján (2009, 138-139) stress that the legitimacy of prehispanic rulers was based upon a fundamental correspondence between a primordial sacred mountain and temple pyramids, as well as between the Earth Spirit and the lineage founders. In practice, a relationship of respect and obedience towards nature and its sacred powers would help protect the community. Just as the primordial, sacred mountain could be seen as the Heart of the World, the ruler (in Nahuatl tlatoani) would be the Heart of the People (Lopez Austin and López Luján 2009, 139). Then, in the colonial period, prehispanic iconography appearing churches ensured the relationship between the mountain containing water and the man-built pyramid was preserved, only this time by substituting the latter with the church itself (Ruiz Medrano 2001, 154).

In hermeneutic terms, Ricœur (1972, 100) argues that metaphors may be interpreted in a manner similar as texts are, that is, based on a dialectic between the
sense of the individual parts, or words, and the wider meaning of the whole construction, which becomes known as the reference, or what it points to. According to Ricœur, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the hermeneutic circle always refers to a specific world. What the reader, or the audience, then understands through the process that Gadamer (1981, 274-275) described as ‘application’, is the specific horizon that is opened by a specific text or artwork, leading ultimately to a form of self-knowledge (Ricœur 1972, 108). It is therefore important to understand the larger social and historical context within which the reception of a particular text or work by an audience takes place. During the sixteenth century in the Mixteca, the use of such metaphors would probably strengthen a community’s sense of identity in times of social stress, through referring to a world of tradition in a certain way still integrated into the present.

In the case of Teozacoalco, the prehispanic place sign (fig. 5.2a) outside the central circle on the left of the map representing a temple at the base of Teozacoalco’s first dynasty (right column) clearly aims at indicating the antiquity of the policy and its religious and political bonds with the influential dynasty of Tilantongo (left column), which has been described by fray Francisco de Burgoa (1989: I, 276, 369) as the most important prehispanic center in the Mixteca. Moreover, and contrarily to European sketches and alphabetic writing, the intrinsic polysemy of pictographic writing articulates a complementary body of knowledge about origins and cosmology (Gruzinski 1988, 66).

In light of this, it seems quite appropriate here to again refer back to the hermeneutic notion of “world” (Ricœur 1981, 202; 1983, 122) opened up by the references of a work of art or tradition and which, in turn, discloses its own temporality and meaningful structures. Aside from the European stylistic influences, the painting thus refers to the world of Teozacoalco and its cultural tradition. A similar pictorial interpretation, according to Terraciano (2001, 24), would stress that the portrayal of places (ñuu) and people (ñayevui) alludes to the sixteenth century Dzaha Dzaui term for “world”, ñuu ñayevui. The Mixtec language furthermore emphasizes the relationship between foundations and identity. In fray Francisco de Alvarado’s vocabulary, the term chiyondi, consisting of the word for “altar”, chiyo, and the first person possessive suffix -ndi, translates as “naturaleza, tierra de donde soy”.

Therefore, the altepetl of Chiyo Cahnu itself seems to be the real subject of the painting. The depiction on the map of mountains and sources of water, alluding to the Mixtec geographical parallelism for community yucu, nduta reinforces this reading. Likewise, the married couples seated on reed mats indicate the concept of yuvui tayu, “mat and throne”, the community as political entity (Terraciano 2001, 103-104). It can
therefore be said that the idea of space rendered on the *Mapa de Teozacoalco* is determined throughout by the narrative concept of ‘focalization’ (Bal 1997, 133), with a special emphasis on the central place. The narrative elements of the map, showing the departure of ancient lords from Tilantongo to become rulers in Teozacoalco, support an idea expressed in the theory of narrative, namely that memory operates as ‘the joint between time and space’ (Bal 1997, 147). Memory is also attached to the semantic value of the pictorial toponyms marking Teozacoalco’s territory, just as it is expressed in the border correction on the upper-right hand of the central circle of the map indicating that the place sign Elotepec (Yucu Ndedzi) used to, but no longer pertains to the jurisdiction of Teozacoalco. The focalization implied, however, is an external one, since the whole territory is represented according to an aerial or map-like point of view.

This chapter, by contrast, shifts focalization to a perspective situated in the landscape itself, from the point of view of the community of Sindihui. In so doing, it challenges both the emphasis on centrality and the aerial visualization of the landscape as it is presented on the map. While the Map of Teozacoalco gives a geographically accurate view of its territory, it does not as such describe any experience of the landscape, a concept in itself quite different from that of ‘space’ (Ingold 2000, 191, 241).

### 5.2 Visual lines: the orientation of architectonic features

A long-term perspective embedded in the landscape itself offers the contextual information that is needed in order to observe patterns of continuity and change in landscape experience within the context of a cultural tradition. In this sense, archaeological remains become integrated into a multidisciplinary perspective (Geurds and Jansen 2008). According to Tilley (2010, 34), the long-term interaction between humans and their environments creates a set of multiple narratives that can be apprehended through landscape research. In the area around San Mateo Sindihui, archaeology presents the earliest evidence for occupation and documents the ways in which the relation between built structures and the perception of the geographical environment is influenced by the materiality of the landscape (Tilley 2010, 26).

Two important archaeological zones to the southwest of San Mateo Sindihui are the *pueblo viejo*, the seat of the prehispanic settlement dating to the Postclassic period (Whittington 2003), and a hilltop ceremonial site flanked by a number of terraces and known as the Mogote del Gamito, or “Hill of the Small Deer”. Due to land conflicts and
related issues, it was not possible to access pueblo viejo at the time of research. Residents of San Mateo Sindihui, however, consider that the pueblo viejo once formed an integral part of the community, possessing its own church, and that it was simply abandoned during the colonial period. In this case also, no fundamental difference exists between the Catholic church and the ancient temple-pyramid, which is equally referred to as “church”. In the Mixtec language as it is spoken today in Chalcatongo de Hidalgo, both the ancient sacred temples and the Catholic church are called vehe ñuhu, “sacred house”. In Whittington’s (2003) report, the site is described as presenting a 1.5 m high mound on top of a 2 m high platform, built on top of a hill flanked by terraces. The text of the Relación Geográfica of Teozacoalco actually reports that in ancient times, many of the subject communities of Teozacoalco had fortress sites posted on the top of mountains (Acuña 1984: II, 147). The Mogote del Gamito is also such a mountaintop site (fig. 5.9), and material and visual evidence suggests it performed a ceremonial function.

![Figure 5.9. Hilltop site El Mogote del Gamito (background) seen from San Mateo Sindihui.](image)

Although modern agriculture and livestock keeping seriously altered the original layout of the architectonic features of the site, its overall configuration appears similar to that of the pueblo viejo described by Whittington (2003). While the circumference of the hill is flanked by a number of terraces and architectonic structures (fig. 5.10), most of these have been modified through time to support small-scale milpas or agricultural fields by simply reusing the ancient stones and rebuilding the terrace foundations. On
the western slope of the hill, an elongated flat stretch holds what could be the remains of a small ballcourt (fig. 5.11), but more detailed archaeological survey is required in order to corroborate this interpretation. On the top are a number of terraces and plazas, now disturbed and used as *milpa*. The summit also holds the remains of a ceremonial platform and mound (fig. 5.12). Because of intensive plough activities, many ceramic sherds are readily visible on the surface, predominantly from polychrome vessels.

*Figure 5.10. Ancient wall on the slopes of Mogote del Gamito.*

*Figure 5.11. Possible remains of a ballcourt.*
From the top of the mound, a number of lines of sight connect the site with other peaks on the mountainous horizon. Looking north, one perceives the Cerro Negro or Yucu Tnoo, “Black Mountain” (fig. 5.13), on top of which lies the important Formative site of Monte Negro associated with the Postclassic kingdom of Ñuu Tnoo or Tilantongo, “Black Town”, itself located at the foot of this mountain on its north side. The fact that the ceremonial site Mogote del Gamito is visually connected with Monte Negro suggests that a direct reference is made to Tilantongo’s influence as the origin of Teozacoalco’s dynasty. Moreover, on Codex Nuttall (Tonindeye), p. 22, the Formative period ceremonial site of Monte Negro appears incorporated into the ritual landscape of Postclassic Tilantongo and its rulers (fig. 5.14). The codex portrays the sacred foundation of dynasties in Monte Negro with Lord 7 Death and Lady 1 Serpent as ancestors seated upon ceremonial altars on top of the Cerro Negro mountain, at the foot of which lies Ñuu Tnoo or Tilantongo (Anders et al. 1992b, 137; Geurds and Jansen 2008, 395-397). As the Mapa de Teozacoalco indicates pictorially, Tilantongo is the place of origin of the royal dynasty of Teozacoalco. On an ideological and cosmological level, Mixtec codices and colonial documents mention that the rulers of Tilantongo were born from the Sacred Tree of Origin in Apoala and claimed the right to appoint their own rulers as dynastic successors within other political entities (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011, 42). Bearing in mind that the community of Sindihui pertained to the yuvui tayu of Chiyo Cahnu, it appears that the hill-top site Mogote del Gamito was visually connected in the
landscape with the *yuvui tayu* out of which the founders of the Teozacoalco dynasty had originated. This line of sight is an indicator that ceremonial architecture situated in a landscape context can support ideological and political connections.

**Figure 5.13.** From the ceremonial mound on top of Mogote del Gamito, a line of sight connects the site with the Cerro Negro and the archaeological site of Monte Negro on the horizon (background). In the center of the picture lies San Mateo Sindihui, recognizable through a lush patch of vegetation.

**Figure 5.14.** Tilantongo at the foot of the Cerro Negro and the ceremonial site of Monte Negro on Codex Nuttall (Tonindeye), p. 22.
Figure 5.15. From the Mogote del Gamito, the highest peak visible on the western horizon is the Yuku Sutu, situated on the grounds of Chalcatongo.

Figure 5.16. Yuku Kasa as observable from the ceremonial mound on Mogote del Gamito.

From the top of the mound on the Mogote del Gamito, looking West, another visual line connects the ceremonial platform with the highest peak on the western horizon, the Yuku Sutu, “Mountain of the Father/Priest”, pertaining to the lands of Chalcatongo (fig. 5.15). Due to its elevated position on the horizon of the West, further astronomical observations may indicate whether the Yuku Sutu as seen from the top of
Mogote del Gamito marks the position of singular astronomical events on specific dates of the solar cycle. To the Southwest, a third visual line is directed towards one of the peaks of the Yuku Kasa (fig. 5.16), “Potent Mountain” (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011, 315). On its top is a rain house, or *vehe sau* (Monaghan 1995, 108). This mountain marking the natural southern boundary of the Mixteca Alta likely pertained to Chalcatongo in ancient times, and is nowadays considered as the realm where the deceased go to in the afterlife, for example in the oral tradition of San Antonio Huitepec (Julián Caballero 2009, 48-49). Importantly, it is to be remembered that Burgoa (1989: I, 337-339) reported about a cave near Chalcatongo within which was located the pantheon of the deceased Mixtec kings. Along an axis running roughly north to south then, from the Cerro Negro to the Yuku Kasa, the horizon as observable from the structure on top of the Mogote del Gamito unfolds a particular sequence of focal points of symbolic meanings referring to both the origin of the dynastic line of Teozacoalco, and the sacred realm of the deceased rulers in the pantheon known as the *Vehe kihin*, the “Temple of Death”. As it was mentioned in Chapter Four, a North-South axis connecting the Cerro Negro and the Yuku Kasa by a visual line on the horizon is also observable from the ritual solar observatory at the site of Kava Tijii near Chalcatongo de Hidalgo. Both in Sindihui and in Chalcatongo, there emerges a pattern where the spatial orientation of ritual places is perceived in relation to a cultural geography functioning as a frame of reference for ceremonial life.

With these multiple lines of sight, several dimensions of the sacred landscape may be actualized, whether from the perspective of the community, a specific architectural structure, or the past actors themselves. In hermeneutic terms, imagining particular rituals around architectural buildings would foster the understanding of a ‘superabundance and autonomy of symbols’ (Jones 2000: I, 26). For Tilley (2010, 39), ‘the meaningful spaces of landscapes are constructed through the temporalities of historical acts, forming both the medium for, and outcome of, movement and memory’. While the landscape of the *Mapa de Teozacoalco* takes the form of a closed territory, the concept of focalization when applied to a landscape perspective allows highlighting some of the meanings that cannot be expressed in a painting alone. According to Bal (1997, 161-163), focalization is itself a form of interpretation within what can be termed ‘visual narratology’. Situating interpretation within a perspective embedded in the landscape shows that, in the case of Sindihui, important referential frames for ideology, worldview and memory are opened towards the outside of the territory depicted on the map. Contrary to the notion of territory, the landscape is a fundamentally open entity.
5.3 Meaningful locales

As it is known, meaningful locales in the landscape constitute a direct link between past events and their actualization in the present through the work of memory. It is not only the archaeological sites that have this potential, but also what can be termed the ‘unaltered features of the landscape’ (Bradley 2000, 33). In San Mateo Sindihui, as in other places in the Mixteca, these meaningful features often take the form of outstanding rock formations. Memory is thus also triggered in the face of the daily experience of the materiality of the landscape, where a connection between past and present illustrates the continuity of cultural tradition. As expressed in Nora’s influential views on the notion of ‘lieux de mémoire’, these locales directly pertain to tradition because of a will to remember which distinguishes them from mere ‘lieux d’histoire’ (Nora 1989, 20-21). Gardner describes the working of memory as follows:

‘Unlike history, which is predicated – as is hermeneutics – upon the recovery of meaning in the face of the distance, difference and dislocation that separate present from past, memory operating in living human consciousness establishes an intimate and continuous connection between the two. For history, distance between present and past has to be bridged; for memory, the two are always already connected.’ [Gardner 2010, 89]

One of the prime vehicles for cultural memory is oral tradition. Cultural memory, in a landscape context, operates by relating the narrative histories of short-term events, or what could be termed the ‘histoire événementielle’ described by Braudel (1966: I, 16), to the long-term significance of specific locales that endure because of their sheer materiality as geographical features. In the landscape of present-day Sindihui, one particular site is considered as a symbol for the community’s identity and sense of past, and as such it is the main referent of contemporary oral tradition. This locale is a dark volcanic rock formation known as ‘la Culebra’ because of its elongated and serpentine shape. Its nature responds well to Nora’s threefold characterization of ‘lieux de mémoire’ as it is routinely experienced on the material, symbolic, and functional planes (Nora 1989, 19).

La Culebra is situated on the path that leads from the center of San Mateo Sindihui to the pueblo viejo. After passing through a number of stone enclosures and ancient plazas at the foot of the Mogote del Gamito, this path continues by plunging into a small canyon hollowed out by an arroyo. The site of la Culebra is located precisely
above the seasonal stream bed, forming a natural bridge above it (fig. 5.17) and extending in both directions of the path. As such, the act of crossing the stone bridge literally entails walking over the serpent’s body. Residents of Sindihui also describe this rock formation as a seven-headed snake because of the several ramifications at one of its ends, the other end constituting its tail (fig. 5.18).

Figure 5.17. The site known as ‘la Culebra’ forms a stone bridge across a small seasonal stream.

Figure 5.18. The end or “tail” of la Culebra running along the path leading from Sindihui to the pueblo viejo.
During the dry season, when the water level in the arroyo is at its lowest, resulting in an almost-dry streambed, it is possible to see an additional water source emerging from underneath the very rock that is la Culebra. Water flowing from this small spring joins and follows the course of the arroyo. Although the water dripping from the rock contains a high level of salt minerals, resulting in a white deposit of salt crystals under the bridge (fig. 5.19), it is perfectly drinkable water. Because of its salty taste, residents of Sindihui consider this source to form an underground connection with the sea.

This notion of a tunnel surfacing into the sea was already widespread in ancient Mesoamerica. In the sixteenth century, fray Diego Durán mentioned that it was believed that the waters of Lake Tetzcoco took their origin in the sea, since a squash that was deposited in a river at the coast reappeared in the waters of the lake in Central Mexico (Durán 1967: I, 91). Similarly, and going back at least to the Classic period (AD 250-900), Schele and Mathews (1998, 45-46, 254) argue that the ceremonial plazas of various Maya sites, such as in Copán in Honduras, as well as the sacred cenote of Chichén Itzá, functioned as portals leading to a subterranean connection with the Primordial Sea. Broda (2000, 401) also suggests that the depiction of marine elements in Teotihuacan’s mural paintings refers to the same conceptual association between mountains or pyramids, caves, and the sea, and posits a continuity in symbolism from Teotihuacan to Tenochtitlan. Although these accounts are expressed in various media such as oral
tradition, a sixteenth century chronicle, ceremonial architecture, and murals, they all point to the long-term nature and relevance of fundamental Mesoamerican concepts.

The oral tradition explaining the origin of the site of La Culebra refers to crucial events in the history of Sindihui taking place in the first decades following the Spanish colonial presence in the Mixteca. On the symbolic level, the narrative attached to the site expresses a condensed history of the relationship between the prehispanic tradition and the Christian doctrine. Today, as in the colonial period, the stone bridge also forms a natural and practical connection between Sindihui and its pueblo viejo, so that the memory of the past events related in oral tradition comes to light when people tread this path.

According to this oral tradition then, it is said that in the Early Colonial period, back and forth movement between the then still-inhabited pueblo viejo and Sindihui’s modern location was made perilous because of the presence of a giant, seven-headed serpent that would repeatedly attack individuals attempting to cross the arroyo at the bottom of the small canyon. Because of this dangerous situation, the pueblo viejo remained in relative isolation from the other small settlements pertaining to the community of Sindihui, until the day that a Spanish priest residing in Teozacoalco came to the area. The inhabitants of Sindihui then informed the friar about the presence of a giant serpent impeding travel in both directions of the path leading to the pueblo viejo, upon which the priest went to the location occupied by the snake and blessed the animal, which turned to stone. It has remained in that form in the landscape since then, the stone bridge being its petrified body and the various ramifications its seven heads.

The text of the Relación Geográfica of Teozacoalco, written by the hand of its corregidor Hernando de Cervantes, mentions that the investigation necessary to answer the questionnaire was conducted by a certain friar Juan Ruiz Zuazo, functioning as an interpreter travelling through the hinterlands of Teozacoalco and Amoltepec and well-versed in the Mixtec language (Acuña 1984: II, 131, 141, 151). According to archival documents, a secular curate was staying in Teozacoalco from AD 1550 onwards, and by the decade of 1570 his parish also included the community of Amoltepec (Gerhard 1972, 276). Considering the above, it is thus probable that the priest who turned a seven-headed serpent into stone according to contemporary oral tradition from Sindihui is the friar Juan Ruiz Zuazo mentioned in the 1580 Relación of Teozacoalco. Today, the weekly mass in San Mateo Sindihui is still conducted by a priest from neighboring San Pedro Teozacoalco.
In hermeneutic terms, it was mentioned in Chapter Two that the structure of the hermeneutic circle guides the interpretation of an element of tradition along a back and forth movement between its constituent parts and the whole. An important corollary of this process is that this object can then be placed within a wider historical and cultural context, and ultimately related to a human, hermeneutic horizon. In the line of art historian Erwin Panofsky, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2011, 191-196) identify a threefold progression from the identification of signs and symbols, to the discussion of thematic meanings and lastly to a specific historical context leading to intercultural dialogue. These three interrelated levels of analysis will be considered briefly here in relation to the oral tradition about the site of *la Culebra* in Sindihui.

At first, it appears that the concept of a seven-headed snake holds a religious symbolism going back at least to the lapidary tradition of the Classic period (AD 250 – 900), as can be inferred from two examples. A ballcourt relief from coastal Veracruz, known as the “Aparicio stela”, depicts a headless ballplayer from whose neck emerge seven serpents symbolizing streams of blood, whereas another relief from a panel on the Great Ballcourt at Chichén Itzá shows a similar scene, with six serpents gushing out from the head of a ballplayer and the seventh being replaced by a sprouting vine or plant (Echeverría García and López Hernández 2010, 146-149; Moser 1973, 16, 22; Schele and Mathews 1998, 246). On the thematic level, Baquedano and Graulich (1993, 167-169) suggest a correspondence between decapitation in the ballcourt and agricultural fertility by arguing that the seven streams of blood depicted as serpents may be read as an early iconographic representation of the later Postclassic Central Mexican goddess Chicomecoatl, “Seven Snake”. Chicomecoatl has indeed been described by Sahagún in Book I of the *Historia General* (2000: I, 75, 121-122) as the goddess of sustenance (maize), food and beverage.

It would be problematic, however, to suggest a direct link between the mention of a seven-headed serpent in contemporary oral tradition from Sindihui on the one hand, and either the ancient Central Mexican goddess Chicomecoatl or an association between snakes, decapitation and the ballgame on the other. Given the ubiquitous examples of the representation of blood, serpents, heads and ballcourts in Mesoamerican pictorial manuscripts and reliefs, it remains tentative to argue for the association of this symbolic complex with one goddess in particular, as Baquedano and Graulich (1993, 168) do. In fact, multiple deities partake in this thematic symbolism linking ballcourt rituals and agricultural fertility (Moser 1973, 38). Rather, it would be more appropriate to consider the narrative around *la Culebra* in the context of the
Mixtec cultural tradition proper as it developed since the sixteenth century. In this colonial and intercultural socio-historical context, the narrative appeals to both Mesoamerican and Christian symbolism.

Across the state of Oaxaca, the narrative theme of a giant serpent attacking the residents of a community is widespread. Both on colonial lienzos (the Codex Baranda, the Selden Roll, and the Lienzo de Tlapiltepec) and in contemporary oral tradition, this narrative theme describes foundation rituals and involves brave men and warriors decapitating a giant serpent that threatens to devour the inhabitants of a particular community (Hermann Lejarazu 2010, 186-187). On the symbolic level, the decapitation of the snake may further be seen as putting an end to the destructive powers of nature which it embodies, such as the inundations provoked by a malevolent rain serpent (Hermann Lejarazu 2010, 191). Although based on a similar thematic, the narrative being told in Sindihui is somewhat different since in it the character defeating the snake is a Spanish priest. Moreover, in Christian terms the presence of the seven-headed Mesoamerican serpent can also allude to the biblical demons described in the Book of Revelation.

In colonial Mesoamerica, it was indeed a common practice for friars to equate animals and entities mentioned in the prehispanic worldview, and especially so snakes, with demons (Burkhart 1989, 43). In the Mesoamerican tradition also, snakes often represented a source of danger, either in direct physical terms or as omens. Ruiz de Alarcón, for instance, mentions in his First Treatise how among the Nahuas of Guerrero it was considered a very ill omen to encounter oneself with a viper or snake crossing one’s path (Ruiz de Alarcón 1984, 69). The road itself, due to its dangerous character, was metaphorically called a serpent (Burkhart 1989, 63). Interestingly, Sahagún related in Book IX of the Historia General that the calendar days Ce Coatl, “One Snake”, and Chicome Coatl, “Seven Snake”, were propitious travelling days for merchants (Sahagún 2000: II, 798). Thus, in order to gain influence, colonial Christian doctrine had to open references from the Mesoamerican worldview and ‘spatial-moral orientation’ (Burkhart 1989, 65), while at the same time interpreting them from the perspective of its own moral discourse.

The above has important implications for the perception of space and place as it may have been experienced in the conflicting colonial context of the sixteenth century. According to oral tradition in Sindihui, the pueblo viejo was abandoned shortly after the episode of the giant serpent being turned to stone. Consequently, the early influence of the Christian church may be measured in terms of positing a spatial opposition between
the ancient prehispanic civic-ceremonial site and the newly-founded colonial community and church, symbolizing a new form of sacredness. It did so, however, by incorporating references from both the Mesoamerican and the Christian traditions. As is exemplified in the painting of the Map of Teozacoalco, the space occupied by the colonial church in the Mixteca symbolizes the central place as well as the concept of “Heart of the Community”, having displaced the experience of the sacred from ancient ritual places such as temple-pyramids and mountain shrines. This was also a means of equating the “periphery” with a source of negative influences, as in a simplified dichotomy.

In recent times, another rock formation has come to play an important role in the sacred landscape of San Mateo Sindihui. In the decade of the 1980s, the Virgin of Guadalupe manifested herself in the landscape just on the outskirts of the community, at the junction where the footpath leading towards the Mogote del Gamito and the pueblo viejo departs from an unpaved road descending towards the Río Flor. At the site of the hierophany, a small chapel holds a sacred stone which is said to be the materialization of the shape of the Virgin herself, constituting a tangible mark left by her apparition (fig. 5.20). On December 12, the national celebration day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a procession in charge of the person serving as mayordomo arrives at the chapel and deposits ritual offerings in honor of the Virgin.

Figure 5.20. The stone symbolizing the face of the Virgin of Guadalupe, here covered with a purple cloth, is placed on an altar built on the site of its manifestation.
Figure 5.21. Visual connection between the chapel in Sindihui and the Yuku Sutu mountain peak on the grounds of Chalcatongo.

In spatial terms, the location of the sacred stone integrates in two ways with the symbolic qualities of the sacred landscape. First, the liminal character of the crossroads, a long-term attested Mesoamerican spatial symbolism, actualizes the site as a potentially sacred and ambivalent place. Second, the entrance of the chapel opens a straight line of sight to the Yuku Sutu (fig. 5.21), the highest peak on the western horizon, just as the ceremonial platform atop the Mogote del Gamito does. This orientation indicates that sacred places are often connected with symbolic focal points in their wider natural surroundings, sometimes beyond the limits of a community’s territory. In this sense, the ritual importance of sacred mountains acquires a local as well as a pan-regional character. Just as was the case with the orientation of prehispanic civil-ceremonial centers, there is a cultural continuity in the tradition of visual lines connecting sacred space and worldview (Ruiz Ortíz 2010, 109).  

Across the state of Oaxaca, the apparition of Catholic Saints and Virgins in the symbolic territory of a community, generally followed by the construction of a sanctuary, is an important religious phenomenon related to the reinforcement of collective identities and to the fostering of collective memory (Barabas 2006b, 231). An early example of such a miraculous apparition is mentioned by Francisco de Burgoa. The

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17 For a detailed analysis of the spatial relations between archaeological sites and sacred landscape features according to geometrical and philosophical principles, see Ruiz Ortíz (2010).
friar relates how in the seventeenth century, in the vicinity of the village of Tecomaxtlahuaca in the Mixteca Baja, Saint Sebastian manifested himself to a disconsolate man wandering the fields, demanding him that the told the religious authorities of Tecomaxtlahuaca to build and dedicate a chapel in his name in exchange for the protection of the community (Burgoa 1989: I, 367). In the long-term context of the Mixtec cultural tradition, the sacred qualities of these numina offering protection when treated with reverence and respect are similar to the qualities of the Earth Spirits nowadays in the Mixteca known as Ñùhù or Dueño del Lugar, and addressed in traditional orations as “San Cristobal, San Cristina, Santo Lugar” (Pérez Jiménez 2008, 81). On Codex Vindobonensis, p. 34, and Codex Zouche-Nuttall, p. 20, these entities are described as deified ancestors living in Spirit form in the landscape (Anders et al. 1992a, 123-125; 1992b, 130).

Alicia Barabas has compared the apparition of Saints and Virgins in the Oaxacan landscape to traditional religious texts being reinterpreted in new situations and forming a guide for action (Barabas 2006b, 232), in the form of ritual. This is indeed also the hermeneutic reading that Ricœur (1981, 205) distinguished as the ‘noematic structure’ or the ‘propositional content of action’, and which forms the basis of the dialectic between event and meaning. In other words, ritual action shares a fundamental trait with important elements of tradition, which is to ‘open up new references’ and to ‘overcome the conditions of their social production’ (Ricœur 1981, 208). Given the endurance in time of propitiatory rituals directed at a numen which is associated through its manifestation with a particular place or community, it can be said that the experience of the sacred landscape participates in the constant re-actualization of long-term structures of meaning within changing historical and hermeneutical contexts.

5.4 Landscape and cultural tradition: time, space and perception

Although the Ñuu Dzaui region has been the scene of numerous changes in the political and religious structure of its society over time, its sacred geography forms a long-term symbolic frame of reference capable of putting into perspective a ‘social history’ which Braudel (1966: I, 325) qualified as being at the intersection of a rather fixed structure with a more rapidly changing conjuncture. If there are indeed three different rhythms or levels in history, corresponding to a geographical time, a social time, and an individual
time (Braudel 1966: I, 17), then sacred geography defines the terms in which these rhythms intersect with each other and at the same time it receives its significance from human action (Ricœur 1983, 292).

Although the Map of Teozacoalco and the accompanying text of its Relación Geográfica questionnaire are valuable documentary sources shedding light on the larger historical context within which they were produced, they lack important elements with regard to the transmission of cultural tradition. Going back to the threefold temporal structure of the mimèsis defined by Ricœur (1983-1985), it appears that a written or pictorial document alone cannot convey all the symbolic layers contained in the context of a sacred landscape. Rather, the latter are the products of a multilayered and long-established tradition which forms the basis for future ritual action and cultural memory. Moreover, in the colonial situation of the sixteenth century, native sacred places were purposely excluded from representation on the map, whose pictorial structure emphasized the implementation of a new religious doctrine while at the same time using the pictorial conventions of two cultural traditions as historical references. Therefore, a multidisciplinary perspective has to be adopted which takes into account the complementary media in which cultural tradition is expressed.

By taking the three successive stages of Ricœur’s description of the mimèsis of action as a heuristic device, it is possible to examine the temporal structure of tangible as well as intangible cultural works and to situate them within the larger perspective of a cultural tradition. The case study presented in this chapter focused on the colonial Mapa de Teozacoalco and on the sacred landscape of San Mateo Sindihui in order to determine the interrelations between time, space, and narrative within a long-term perspective. A distinctive feature of colonial maps from Mesoamerica is that they establish ‘a nexus where history and landscape conjoin’ (Leibsohn 1995, 270). In turn, the specific context of cultural continuity within which oral narratives are transmitted makes it necessary to understand past tradition from the perspective, or horizon, of the contemporary Mixtec culture.

In the community of San Mateo Sindihui oral tradition is, along with participation in ritual and landscape experience, a vehicle for cultural memory, even though the Mixtec language has practically disappeared from daily usage. In heuristic terms, this confirms Ricœur’s contention that it is the symbolic and temporal structure of human action (mimèsis I) which forms the basis for the narrative mediation (mimèsis II) of the latter in cultural works, as well its subsequent transmission and reception (mimèsis III) by future audiences (Ricœur 1983, 87, 102, 109). As Ricœur (1983, 106)
insists, it is the concept of tradition which permits to link past and future, insofar as it is based on the living transmission of its constitutive elements. Similarly, Connerton (1989, 45) demonstrated that in order to establish continuity between past and present, ritual performances rely on formal acts and utterances as they re-enact a particular narrative of events. Ritual thus has the potential of re-actualizing fundamental cultural values, both in different historical contexts and through meaningful human action. The Mixtec sacred landscape, which becomes fully meaningful at the moment it can be related to the human experience and perception of space and time, is a good example thereof.
6. Conclusion

It has been argued throughout the chapters of this thesis that the long-term structures of meaning which unite cultural tradition and the sacred landscape are actualized through ritual and the transmission of oral tradition. For in both cases it is human action that contextualizes certain aspects of worldview in relation to a particular historical and cultural situation, the discussion presented in the case-studies highlighted the perception and experience of particular communities and their specific histories. The unifying theme has been an emphasis on the transmission of the Mixtec or Ñuu Dzaui cultural tradition through time, but its core elements and symbols always must be related to the point-of-view of human actors for them to be intelligible in hermeneutic terms. It should also be noted, that although in each chapter a different aspect of landscape experience has been explored, this by no means constitutes an exhaustive enumeration of all the qualities of the sacred landscape that are relevant from the point of view of contemporary Mesoamerican communities. The reason for this selection of case studies is that in each of them the emphasis is put on living tradition. It has been the intention to demonstrate that with a hermeneutical approach focusing on the long-term nature of the sacred landscape and religious symbols, the past and the present can best be considered in relation to the other.

In Chapter Two, a general discussion of hermeneutic terms and notions as they were developed by Gadamer and Ricœur sought to make explicit in how far this theoretical perspective on hermeneutic interpretation could be applied to the meanings of the Mixtec ritual landscape. In this respect, the drawbacks have been signaled of an approach strongly biased towards the consideration of written documents as primary vehicles for cultural transmission, which Gadamer (1981, 351-357) privileges at the expense of other sources. Clearly, the historical and symbolic meanings contained in the Mixtec sacred landscape are transmitted through narratives which are expressed in a wide variety of media, so that Gadamer’s priorities do not reflect the empirical experience of the Mixtec and Mesoamerican cultural traditions. As put to the fore in the case-studies, ritual offerings and the orientation patterns of ceremonial architecture contribute to inscribe hermeneutic “texts” on the landscape, while oral history often produces narratives tied to tangible landscape features. In the meantime, we are hereby reminded that the notion ‘fusion of horizons’ which characterizes hermeneutic
interpretation through time, stressing the interrelatedness of the horizon of the past with that of the present, must also be a necessary premise for intercultural communication and understanding in the present.

In heuristic terms, it can be argued that an analogy with the threefold temporal structure of the mimèsis as discussed by Ricœur allows to contextualize the cultural elements which influence the contemporary horizon of a people with respect to a past tradition and an open future. Specifically, it is through the ritual experience of symbolic places in the landscape that what Ricœur (1981, 205) calls the ‘noematic structure of action’ transmits traditional knowledge to the people who reinterpret this information within another socio-historical context. To put the emphasis on the importance of human action for cultural transmission, Chapter Five applied Ricœur’s theory of mimèsis to a long-term perspective on the landscape of San Mateo Sindihui. As Ricœur (1983, 91) denoted, the public character of meaningful action leads to the symbolic mediation of practice. It was then the purpose of the discussion in Chapter Five to insist on the fact that the information fixed in a document as the Map of Teozacoalco is relying on such a previous mediation.

Consequently, hermeneutic interpretation must always take a plurality of sources into account. An approach to the particular ways in which the sacred landscape is perceived within different communities has the advantage of registering the different and complementary ways in which social memory is transmitted, by relying both on a practical and a symbolic understanding of the landscape. As memory is attached to sacred and ritual places, the Mesoamerican landscape is a hermeneutical symbolic resource supporting the long-term persistence of fundamental religious concepts, in spite of abrupt disrupting events introduced on the short term.
English abstract

The hermeneutic interpretation of cultural tradition moves away from the surface meanings of material culture or ritual to focus on the historical and social context within which these meanings are produced, transmitted, or reinterpreted through time. This thesis takes a long-term perspective on the perception of the Mixtec or Ñuu Dzaui sacred landscape, and strives to understand the meaning of cultural concepts in the terms of the Mixtec people themselves. Due to its temporal depth, it is argued that the Mixtec cultural tradition can be approached by investigating the symbolism of its sacred landscape from a multidisciplinary perspective focusing on archaeological contexts, pictorial manuscripts as well as contemporary rituals and oral history. In light of this, hermeneutical historical interpretation offers important insights for landscape archaeology. In both cases, the past and the present are approached in relation to each other, a relationship which is materialized in the concept of the sacred landscape. From the perspective of individual communities, sacred geography and ceremonial sites foster cultural continuity insofar as religious symbolism is transmitted through rituals conducted in meaningful landscape locations.
Resumen en Español

Al interpretar los elementos que en conjunto constituyen el concepto de tradición cultural, la hermenéutica no sólo toma en cuenta el análisis formal de los restos materiales o de los rituales religiosos, sino más bien se enfoca en significados más profundos relacionados con el contexto histórico y social en el que estos elementos fueron producidos, transmitidos y reinterpretados a lo largo de su historia. El presente trabajo se acerca a la percepción del paisaje sagrado del pueblo Mixteco o Ñuu Dzauí, desde una perspectiva histórica de largo plazo. Para ello, el significado de los diversos símbolos históricos y conceptos religiosos se interpreta en términos definidos por las voces de la cultura Mixteca propia. Debido a su antigüedad, la tradición cultural Mixteca, así como el simbolismo de su paisaje cultural deben ser interpretados desde un enfoque multidisciplinario. Es decir, el estudio de sitios arqueológicos se relaciona con la investigación de materiales pictográficos tanto prehispánicos como coloniales, sin olvidarse de los rituales contemporáneos y de la historia transmitida oralmente. Con base en lo anterior, la hermenéutica ofrece importantes perspectivas para la arqueología del paisaje. En ambos casos, la interpretación esta basada en la relación dialéctica entre el pasado y el presente. Esta relación esta materializada en el concepto de paisaje sagrado, un espacio en el cual los restos reminiscen tes de acontecimientos pasados suelen ser interpretados desde la perspectiva del presente. Además, la geografía sagrada y los sitios ceremoniales son importantes vehículos para la memoria cultural debido a que siguen siendo incorporados en rituales contemporáneos.


Tilley, C., 2010. *Interpreting landscapes: geologies, topographies, identities*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press (= Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology No. 3).
