

# The Influence of Indigenous Artists in the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas

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In the late sixteenth century the Spanish cosmographer López de Velasco ordered maps of cities and towns in America to be produced and returned to Spain to gain a more accurate understanding of Spanish territory in the New World. His instructions known as the Relación Geográfica questionnaire was disseminated to local officials in towns across the Viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru. In some cases Spanish government officials living in the Americas enlisted indigenous artists and cartographers, particularly those in New Spain. As a result, the maps vary in distinct ways from Spanish and European maps of the same time period. By analyzing the differences in the two types of maps, it becomes possible to gain a unique perspective into spatial viewpoints of native peoples in early colonial America. My research is aimed at describing specific spatial patterns of representation used by indigenous artists in depicting early Latin American towns. These maps communicated many aspects of indigenous art and thought back to the Iberian Peninsula.

Much of the scholarship on the maps of the Relaciones Geográficas has focused on identifying indigenous iconography and toponymy. This valuable scholarship has allowed categorization of map features specific to indigenous artists and, in some cases, related these characteristics to pre-Hispanic traditions. This research expands interest in native influence to include particular methods of

spatial orientation distinctive to native artists. This orientation will be seen almost exclusively in representations of buildings and structures in town maps. Native peoples viewed the built environment in a way that is fundamentally different than the dominant cartographic views of their European contemporaries.

The Relaciones Geográficas sought to gather a variety of data sets on land, resources, cities and towns, and population demographics in Spanish territorial holdings of the late sixteenth century. Juan de Ovando y Godoy, the Spanish Visitor to the Council of Indies, began forming survey expeditions and ordinances aimed at gathering greater understanding of Spanish holdings in the New World (Haring, 102-105). One of these ordinances allowed the creation of the position of Principal Royal Chronicler-Cosmographer, a position filled by the principal enactor of the Relaciones Geográficas, Juan López de Velasco.<sup>1</sup> López de Velasco's solicitations were carefully delineated questions seeking systematic replies to political and environmental concerns, maritime information, biogeography, surveys of native languages and traditions, among other areas. Spanish officials in the areas specified by the questionnaire could answer most items in writing; however, the questionnaire also asked for maps depicting physical locations. The complexity of local town and village systems made coordinated responses to the questionnaire difficult because López de Velasco did not specify how responses in these complex

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Lopez de Velasco and Justo Zaragoza 1894. *Geografia y Derscripcion Universal De Las Indias*. University of California Libraries. accessed February 29, 2012, <http://www.archive.org/details/sixteenthcent00lbopr/ch>. VI.

local hierarchies ought to be organized.<sup>2</sup> The variety of the eventual responses reflects a composite image of many different document sources.

Although López de Velasco sent questionnaires across the empire and even to the Philippines, but the responses received were inconsistent. Viceroy in the Indies exercised power in arbitrary ways and obeyed mandates from Spain as they saw fit.<sup>3</sup> Many officials eventually overcame barriers of communication and space to add to the project but many did not. Communities in New Spain were the most responsive. New Spain contributed 166 total documents with South America offering 40 and the Caribbean only 2. Most of the documents were sent back between 1579-1581, two years after the original publication of the questionnaire in May of 1577. In New Spain alone, 71 of these documents contained maps.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note that while questions 10, 42, and 47 of the questionnaire specifically asked for maps of various kinds, not all respondents included them with their written responses. This disparity can be attributed to several factors. First, Spanish bureaucrats preferred the written word as the principle and most esteemed form of communication. Writing allowed hierarchical order to be imposed on illiterate populations of both indigenous and European ancestry from a small, specialized group of educated leaders and administrators.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Howard F. Cline 1964. "The Relaciones Geograficas of the Spanish Indies, 1577-1586." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 44 (3): 341-374. 348.

<sup>3</sup>Lyle N. McAlister 1984. *Spain and Portugal in the New World, 1492-1700*. University of Minnesota Press. 203-207.

<sup>4</sup>Cline, "The Relaciones Geograficas of the Spanish Indies, 1577-1586." 352.

<sup>5</sup>Ángel Rama and John Charles Chasteen. 1996. *The Lettered City*. Duke University Press. 16-20

Many times maps went unattributed while the accompanying written descriptions were unmistakably signed. Question 10 of the survey asked for a description of towns and their surrounding geography including elevation and orientation. The architectural layout of streets, plazas, and monasteries were to be depicted in maps taking into account structure and proportion.

Because of their knowledge of the skills of native cartographers, many officials in New Spain enlisted the help of native cartographers, especially in answering item 10 on the questionnaire, even though López de Velasco meant this item to be fulfilled by the local officials themselves and only in segregated Spanish towns.<sup>6</sup> Any artistic pursuits were widely viewed with suspicion by Spanish colonialists due to art's close association with native religious practices. Within the requests for items 10 and 42, López de Velasco inadvertently used the word "pintura", a word colonialists associated with native art.<sup>7</sup> Pre-established colonial associations of Native peoples with artistic talents also encouraged the majority of local officials to use native artists to depict the requirements of questions 10 and 42.

Pre-Hispanic maps from central Mexico depict imagery that contains both historical and religious narratives and physical landscape depictions of time and

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<sup>6</sup>Barbara E. Mundy 1996. *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*. University of Chicago Press. 32.

<sup>7</sup>Howard F. Cline 1972. *Handbook of Middle American Indians*. University of Texas Press. 237-240.

space.<sup>8</sup> Because of the complexity of their content, indigenous maps contain diverse artistic qualities that portray both metaphysical and physical qualities.<sup>9</sup>

By the time the Relaciones Geográficas map went out; however, indigenous artists were one or two generations removed from pre-Hispanic artists. These traditions were kept alive largely in Catholic monasteries aimed at educating native elites, the same populations previously trained as Tlacuilo or Nahuatl scribes. Because few of the religious priests and monks were artistically trained, older generations were encouraged to train younger ones in the arts. Through this training, artists who were alive before the colonization period were able to pass down pictographic knowledge and traditions that also contained metaphysical subject matter.<sup>10</sup> Many of these students, who are a few steps detached from the original source, made up the talent pool tapped to create the cartographic responses to the Relaciones Geográficas questionnaire.

The close relationship of the Catholic Church to the education of native painters had a direct impact on the imagery of the maps created from indigenous involvement and distinguished them from the maps created by government officials. One of the most important organizing markers is the centrality of the local mission.

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<sup>8</sup>Eduardo de J. Douglas 2010. *In the Palace of Nezahualcoyotl: Painting Manuscripts, Writing the pre-Hispanic Past in Early Colonial Period Tetzaco, Mexico*. University of Texas Press. 36-37

<sup>9</sup> Dana Leibsohn 1995. "Colony and Cartography: Shifting Signs on Indigenous Maps of New Spain." in *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650*, Claire J. Fargo 1995. Yale University Press. 266.

<sup>10</sup> Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*. 80-81.

This characteristic is seen in several maps in both dense urban and sparse rural areas (See fig. 1, fig. 2). In many maps (see below) corresponding churches represent communities large and small. As the indigenous communities came more and more to identify with the Catholic Church, the religion of the colonizer became the central aspect of native interaction with Spanish rulers. In the case of the Cholula map (fig. 2), the image of the church is superimposed on native imagery, reinforcing the centrality of this interaction to native life. Cholula rested on the site of a pre-Hispanic pyramid depicted in the upper-right hand section of the map.<sup>11</sup> The two opposing motivations inherent in the artist's work go a long way to explain the hybrid nature of maps created for the *Relaciones Geográficas*.

The confluence of Spanish colonial and bureaucratic interests with the talents of local artists created a wide variety of maps that survived. Of the 71 maps that survived from New Spain, 69 are attributed to either native or non-native artist origination. Of these, 45 of the maps are attributable to indigenous artists. The majority of the artists only produced a single map but 4 artists produced multiple maps.<sup>12</sup> Maps from monastic towns were slightly more likely to be penned by

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<sup>11</sup>Geoffery McCafferty. "Mountain if Heaven, Mountain of Earth: The Great Pyramid of Cholula as Sacred Landscape." in *Landscape and Power in Ancient Mesoamerica*, edited by Rex Koontz, Kathryn Reese-Taylor, and Annabeth Headrick. Westview Press 2001

<sup>12</sup> Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*. 30

indigenous artists (71 percent) as opposed to secular town maps (61 percent of indigenous origin).<sup>13</sup>

Maps that depict two types of areas, rural and urban, display various overlapping characteristics. In rural maps, monasteries typically denote the presence of sparsely distributed towns along roads and streams. Usually these maps use a single structure to show the presence of a larger human settlement (See Fig. 1). This group of maps displays many indigenous markers such as pictographic imagery and place name hybridization.<sup>14</sup> Rural maps are used to depict large, less densely populated areas. They also carry some, usually minor, spatial orientation markers. Because rural maps showed larger, more varied spaces, they tend to have greater variations of native signals. They are not, however, the most applicable to the unique depictions of spatial orientation seen in more urban map representations.

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<sup>13</sup> Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*. 74

<sup>14</sup> Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*. 100

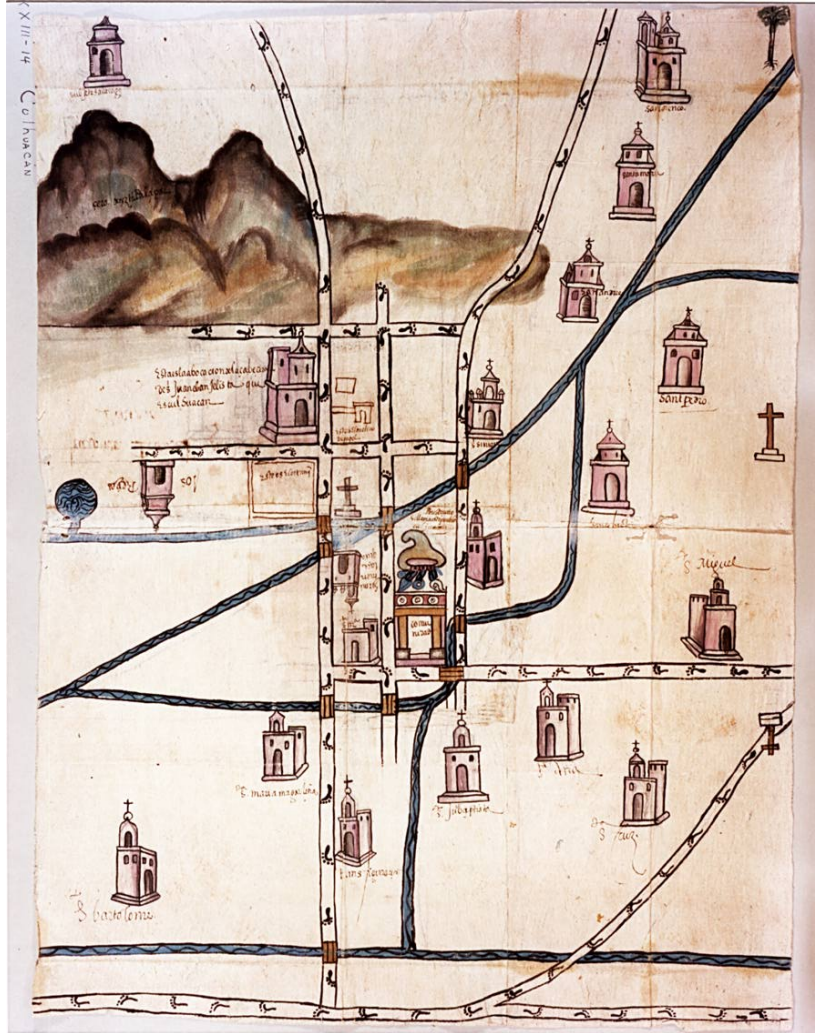


Figure 1. The Relación Geográfica map of Culhuacán, 1580. Courtesy of the Benson Latin American Collection, The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

The urban map of the Relaciones Geográficas offers the best opportunity to observe the unique spatial relationship between native artists, buildings and formations in RG maps. Exemplified by the map of Cholula (fig. 2), urban mapping outlines the density and nature of urban settlements in New Spain from the perspective of an indigenous artist. Before the conquest, Cholula was a major city, holding some 100,000 people. By the time the RG was created, that number had



dwindled to 9,000.<sup>15</sup> The map is set out in a grid pattern typical of Spanish colonial settlements. These grid patterns were decreed by the Crown and then imposed on the landscape.<sup>16</sup> Each block within the grid shows either smaller structures, or is dominated by a monastery.

The urban setting of the Cholula map is much more densely planned than maps of rural settings and the monasteries associated with the two areas followed this pattern. Land topography and existing human settlement dictated the spread of small monasteries across large rural areas separated by long distances. In rural settings, monasteries were able to exist closely due to the higher density of the population. This meant that many monasteries could be placed onto a single grid structure within one city giving increasing significance to the monastery's location in relation to the central cathedral.<sup>18</sup> As a result, smaller structures, organized around the monasteries, were subject to the same restrictions of the strict grid system. The artist who painted the Cholula map formed nearly all his depictions into this method of grid organization, even when those things he was depicting (see pyramid in fig. 3) would not have fit into a grid pattern.

The ability for indigenous artists to both acquiesce to Spanish constraints, and portray native imagery forms the basis for hybrid spatial interpretations in the

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<sup>15</sup> Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*. 127

<sup>16</sup>Richard L. Kagan and Fernando Marías. 2000. *Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493-1793*. Yale University Press. 28-33.

<sup>18</sup>Richard L. Kagan "Projecting Order." in *Mapping Latin America: A Cartographic Reader*, edited by Jordana Dym, and Karl Offen. 2011. University of Chicago Press. 46-49.

Cholula map. Local people have seen one of the most populated areas of New Spain radically transformed into an idealized creation of Spanish city planning and still link aspects of the old city to the new colonial system. The grid pattern is laid-over relicts of previous generations.<sup>19</sup> These efforts are not always simple or the grid pattern completely realized but the effort to establish uniform patterns on previously inhabited spaces is a condition worth noting as it has direct impacts the way in which indigenous people view the landscape. The native populations were not strangers to the grid pattern, it was used in Aztec city planning, but the Spanish used the grid method more extensively and methodologically than the Aztecs.

The goal of a strict framework of urban structuring was as much control as it was logic. At the time of Cortez's arrival, Aztec cities were already highly organized. While not planned with hard-line grid patterns, this existing organization fell in line with Cortez's view of how a city ought to function.<sup>20</sup> When the Spanish urban plan was then brought in to replace this organization, it created a shift from one developed civilization to another. By reordering the physical environment of the colonized people, Spanish officials believed that the minds of the local people would likewise be rearranged.<sup>21</sup> The Cholula map (Fig. 2) demonstrates that local artists were able to incorporate these new colonial ideals while not completely losing sight of their cultural history.

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<sup>19</sup>Dora P. Couch, Daniel J. Garr and Axel I. Mundigo. 1982. *Spanish City Planning in North America*. Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1982. 1-4.

<sup>20</sup>Jay Kinsbruner 2005. *The Colonial Spanish-American City: Urban Life in the Age of Atlantic Capitalism*. University of Texas Press. 18-19.

<sup>21</sup>Richard L. Kagan and Fernando Marías. 2000. *Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493-1793*. Yale University Press. 28-38.

The map of the Spanish town of Cholula demonstrates the density of a modern colonial town while simultaneously merging those Spanish elements with images of Indigenous life. Images and place names are both used to show Spanish and indigenous influences in the city. The mounds that are set behind images of Catholic missions are related to early religious iconography of Mesoamerican cultures. The author of the map goes so far as to list two separate names, one Spanish, one Indian, for the town.<sup>22</sup>

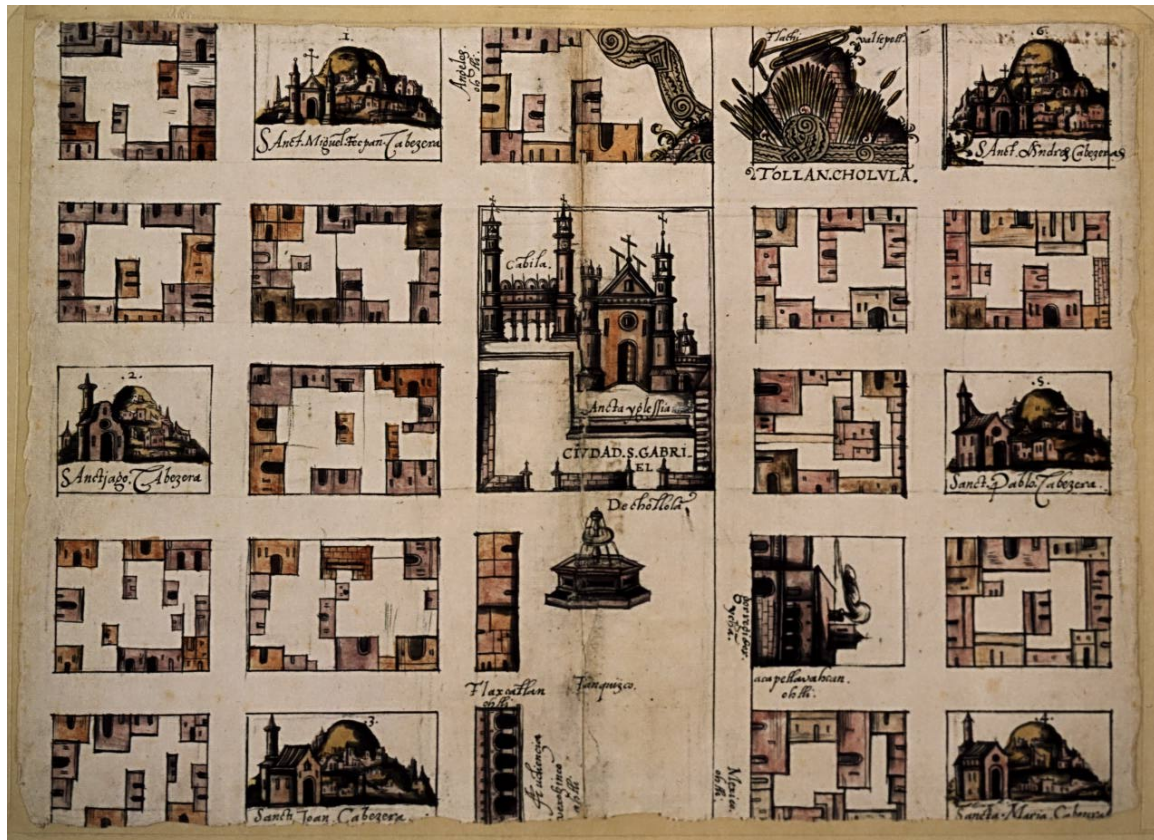


Figure 2. The *Relación Geográfica* map of Cholula, 1581. Courtesy of the Benson Latin American Collection, The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>22</sup>Barbara E. Mundy. "Hybrid Space" in *Mapping Latin America: A Cartographic Reader*, edited by Jordana Dym, and Karl Offen. 2011. University of Chicago Press. 53

In rural maps of the RG, broader landscapes allow for greater separation of colonial and indigenous imagery in one map. Usually, missions stand alone in the landscape and only border, for example, a river that might carry a native symbol of a water to delineate the stream from the surrounding area. It is rare to see a rural map with native imagery superimposed on depictions of Spanish architecture or vice versa. The effect of this lack of density in rural maps is the creation of clear distinctions between decidedly new landscape aspects such as mission structures and natural or indigenous landforms that had a longer history. One exception to this rule might be footpaths that connect mission towns. These paths are highways between Spanish cities but are in many cases marked with a Native foot symbol (See fig. 1).

Because it would have been impossible for the artist of the Cholula map to draw such a crowded urban landscape that separately depicts both native and colonial aspects of the town in the field area of the map, he choose to integrate both aspects into one space. This type of representation is also spatially accurate. The new Spanish town, as stated above, was established on the conquered land of the ancient city of Cholula.<sup>23</sup> In many cases, the main plaza of the new Spanish city was laid directly on the plaza of the old Aztec city.<sup>24</sup> Layering is an integral aspect of any city with a diverse heritage but it takes on special meaning with a city like Cholula, caught between the old and new religious tradition. Concentrating on the specific manner in which this layering was accomplished will allow a unique perspective on

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<sup>23</sup> Kagan and Marías. *Urban Images of the Hispanic World*. 29

<sup>24</sup> Kinsbruner, *The Colonial Spanish-American City: Urban Life in the Age of Atlantic Capitalism*. 26-27

one artist who was in a position to draw a distinctive view of a city in transition between two significant time periods.

Layering is one of the spatial features that set the urban Cholula map drastically apart from its rural counterparts. The most easily understood example of layering in the map of Cholula is the overlapping of mission churches on indigenous mountain iconographic symbols (See fig. 2).<sup>25</sup> The first item to focus on in terms of spatial relationships is the primacy of the church in relation to the drawing of the hill. The author again reminds us that he is drawing a map for a Spanish audience and that the Catholic Church has taken over the metaphysical space of Aztec and indigenous spiritual practices. Both pictures are physical objects that occupy space.

Also, the relationship between the church and the mountain is not a dependant one; it is based on historical connection. By setting the church in front, the artist only acknowledges the presence of a past dogma and tradition as one would on a timeline of events, connected but not dependent. It is also interesting to note that the houses in these drawings are themselves set on the hillside above the church. These drawings do not depict actual hills, so by setting structures in an imaginary space, the author points to a metaphysical connection with the land. This might be explained by pure necessity; however, given the symbolic nature of these depictions, the author could be describing a greater connection between the local community and pre-colonial religious practices. Because many of the local people

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<sup>25</sup> Mundy, "Hybrid Space" in *Mapping Latin America: A Cartographic Reader*. 53

would have been of mixed heritage, many individuals would have had connections to both Catholic and ancient religious traditions.

The next spatial example of layering in the Cholula map is the illustration of the hill and native imagery in the upper right hand section of the map (Fig. 3). This image is made up primarily of indigenous symbolism with only a hint of a man-made structure and symbol displayed by the brick structure and trumpet above the hill. The section also has the local Nahuatl name for the city inscribed below it.<sup>27</sup> Indigenous water imagery almost completely engulfs the structure and highlights the presence of the mountain rising above it. Although these symbols are purely native, they are drawn almost entirely within a grid square, again suggesting the hybrid lens that local peoples are view their new environment through. The grid format of cities by this time has shaped local views so extensively that even pictures and symbols, well established before the formation of the town, are still observed as existing within the Spanish colonial framework.



Figure 3. Inset image of the Cholula Map highlights the upper-right portion of the larger map of Cholula.

Close inspection of the grid section reveals reeds bursting out from the boundaries of the square. Subtle and profound, the artist is communicating volumes

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<sup>27</sup> Mundy, "Hybrid Space" in *Mapping Latin America: A Cartographic Reader*. 53

about the influence of ancient religious practices. The square seems to say, “We live in your city, but our spirit grows beyond your borders.” Any Spanish official would not have given a second look to this symbolism, but to the local artist, and to us, it can be observed as an action aimed at holding onto some sort of identity in a place where Spanish rule was overwhelming. The density of images in this small section is unlike any of the images in other RG maps.

One of the more exciting elements in this map is the stream that flows in the above-mentioned segment and in the section adjacent to it. The river is depicted with indigenous imagery and looks like many other streams in other RG maps.<sup>28</sup> What is different about this stream is that it is completely bisected by a grid border element. Even the mountain trails off into the bottom right corner of the adjacent square. This is undoubtedly the same waterway. By tracing the line of one stream, it is easy to see that it intersects exactly with the border of the other. The symbols also follow a distinctly similar pattern. The other structure in these squares is the Cholula pyramid, a pyramid with a long history and a significant pilgrimage to indigenous people before the Spanish conquest. The pyramid had a very large base and low height.<sup>29</sup>

There is a possible connection between the map, the pyramid, and the Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios church present in modern Cholula. The church

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<sup>28</sup> Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*. 149

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Mundy and Dana Leibsohn “Map of Cholula.” in *Painting a New World: Mexican Art and Life, 1521-1821*, edited by Donna Pierce, et al. 2004. University of Texas Press. 113-114.

today sits directly on top of the pyramid depicted in these grid segments. The Cholula Pyramid has the largest base of any pyramid in Mexico and was eventually covered up by the establishment of the Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios church that was built directly on top of the pyramid in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century through the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The pyramid was a pilgrimage site for indigenous peoples and the sanctuary to the Virgin Mary took its place after an icon of the virgin was discovered and brought to the area. It is this church and pyramid that seems to be depicted on the adjoining squares of the RG Cholula map.

Modern archaeology has uncovered this brick structure directly underneath the Iglesia church. In the map segments, the bricks form a clear stepped pyramid shape that extends between the two squares with what would be the apex in the main segment.<sup>30</sup> The image even seems to trickle over into the grid segment on the right, giving the hint of the tail end of the pyramid structure. At what would be the top of the pyramid, barely visible above the reeds, is a small dome that tops the remains of the pyramid. This dome is visible in the modern structure of the Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios church. The dome also carries the red coloration of both the bricks below it and the other churches drawn in the map. The reddish color sets this dome section apart from the mountain behind it. None of the other churches in the Cholula map consist of segmented brick construction that is visible. The capping of the brick structure with a dome is an item that was not present in the construction of the original pyramid.

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<sup>30</sup> Mundy and Leibsohn, "Map of Cholula." in *Painting a New World: Mexican Art and Life, 1521-1821*. 113-114.



The artist of this map was an observer to a very unique time in the life of both the pyramid and the church. Just as the sanctuary was being built on top of the pyramid, the ancient monument was crumbling purposefully underneath it. The artist captures this moment in time. The simultaneous existence of an important indigenous structure and an important Catholic shrine on the exact same location and their overlapping position in the RG map is an important insight into a period at the intersection of declining indigenous power and the rise of Spanish colonial power. The Cholula map depiction is both photographic and politically, culturally, and spiritually descriptive of one of the most transformative periods in the history of Latin America.

Another important hybrid spatial representation is demonstrated in the layout and orientation of buildings on the grid pattern. The blocks of smaller buildings are not exact depictions but instead represent larger city sections. The orientation of the buildings is not typical of a European single-point perspective and instead displays the buildings using multiple perspectives.<sup>31</sup> Even though the map shows an aerial view, no roofs are shown. By painting the buildings in the manner, the artist shows the building faces as they would appear on the street, a more descriptive viewpoint of the city that European maps would seek to portray. A single-point perspective would have eliminated much of the information about the orientation and direction of the buildings in relation to the streets and internal courtyards shown in the map. This method puts the viewer on every street from a single vantage point. A single perspective would have necessarily not allowed the

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<sup>31</sup> Mundy, "Hybrid Space" in *Mapping Latin America: A Cartographic Reader*. 54.

viewer to see, for example, many of the doorways opening up onto either the streets or courtyards of the city blocks. By grounding and firmly directing the doorways, we get a clear view of each structure. The map is drawn by a person who appears to be walking through the city instead of rising above it.

Alteration of traditional perspective is also shown in the drawing of the main church on the center square. The artist takes a particular head-on view of the front side of the church. Clearly the most important structure in the map, the artist wanted to show the importance of the church by displaying its main architectural features clearly without alteration. Many of the smaller churches are shown with a skewed angle but the central cathedral is depicted in its full splendor. The walls around the main courtyard are all oriented in towards the church invoking a containment and isolation of the cathedral. Spatial patterns underscore the tension between the indigenous artist and his colonial subject matter.

The *Relación Geográfica* questionnaire was largely seen as a failure at the time of its distribution and reception. The map images that were created were not what Juan Lopez de Velasco intended to receive back and they did not allow him to fill in the figurate blank spaces of the New World as he hoped to do. The system of bureaucracy that López de Velasco was reliant upon to produce the maps used Spanish colonial bureaucratic methods to delegate the production of the images to native artists. This fault, while detrimental at the time, produced some of the most stunning cartography from the colonial time period in New Spain and offers unique insight into certain aspects of Central Mexican forms of representation and

cartographic design in the early colonial period. The late 16<sup>th</sup> century was a time of turmoil, reorganization, and shifting focuses from classical Mesoamerican civilizations to a global colonial system. The urban environment is a dense microcosm of the relationship between Spaniards and Latin American Indians. The RG map of Cholula shows spatial patterns favored by indigenous artists intermingling and being filtered by loose adherence to the instructions from Spain.

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