Monumentality of the Landscape: the Coixtlahuaca Valley Archaeology and the Lienzo Seler II[1]
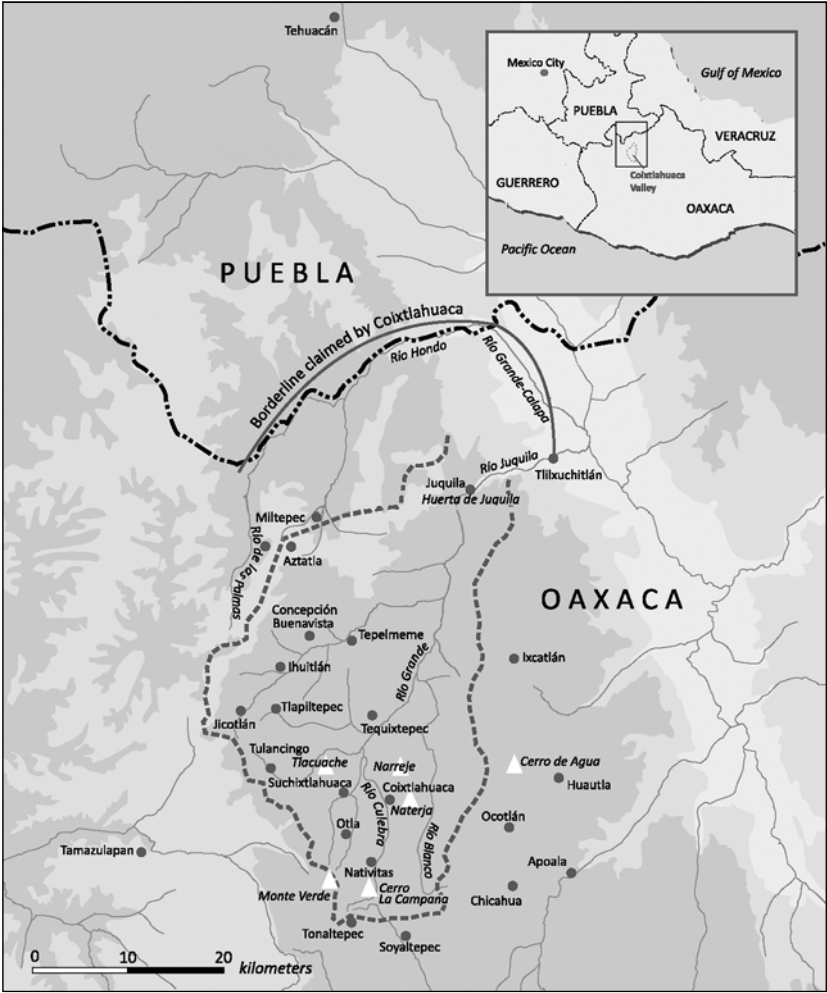
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When we think about Mesoamerican monumentality in Mexico, an image of the archaeological site of Teotihuacan comes to mind, or maybe the popular Mayan site of Chichen Itza, La Venta – also an excellent example of an early monumental site in the Mexican Gulf Coast. Throughout time, monumental buildings have been part of Mesoamerican urban planning. Mesoamerica, a cultural area defined geographically over half a century ago by Paul Kirchhoff (2009), describes a territory extending from northern Mexico to Central America. Mesoamerica covered an area where several cultures developed from the ancient Olmec to the 16th century Aztecs. In Germany, the most popular cultures associated with the area are the Maya and the Aztec, which have proven to be 'blockbusters' at museum exhibitions across the country. However, many of the most popular pyramids or archaeological sites in Mexico, like Teotihuacán or Monte Albán, are neither Aztec nor Maya, since these cultures were not the only ones to have monumental urban planning. Less known internationally are the cultures that developed in Oaxaca, especially in the Mixtec area in the northeastern part of the modern state of Oaxaca in Mexico, although many of the most exquisite examples of their pictographic writing and mapping are found in European collections.[2] Mixteca is a cultural and historical term used in the literature, named after one of the most prominent ethnic groups that inhabited the area: the Mixtecs (Terraciano 2001: 1). The focus of this paper is the Coixtlahuaca Valley (Figure 1) located in the northern part of the Mixtec area, in the Mixteca Alta, and the development of its city-state, known by its *náhuatl* name Coixtlahuaca, from the Late Postclassic through Early Colonial Times (ca. 1200–1600 CE).

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2   The Codex Becker I and II in the Weltmuseum and Codex Vindobonensis housed in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, both in Vienna; the Codex Zouche-Nuttall and the Codex Sánchez Solís or Egerton 2895, both at the British Museum in London; Codex Bodley, Codex Selden, and Selden Roll, all in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England.

Figure 1: The Coixtlahuaca Valley, white pyramids are important mountains in the landscape, the dotted line delimitates the territory claimed by Lienzo Seler II (modified version of a map by Renate Sander in König 2017b, Map 2)

No less than three different documents[3] specifically recount the development of the city-state or *señorío* of Coixtlahuaca, its territory, lineage, and history. These

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3   Rincón Mautner (2000: 30) enumerates these three *lienzos*: Lienzo Seler or Coixtlahuaca II in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin; Lienzo de Coixtlahuaca I, Biblioteca del Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Ciudad de México; and the Lienzo A or Meixueiro, a copy of a lost document from the Coixtlahuaca area, in Tulane University, USA. There are other documents con-

documents are made of bands of cotton cloth and are named after their Spanish term *lienzo* (Rincón Mautner 2000: 25). These *lienzos* were fabricated with back-strap looms, which was the indigenous technique of producing textiles. The biggest and most complex of these *lienzos*, the Lienzo Seler/Coixtlahuaca II, measuring a total of about 16 m², is housed today at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, Germany (König 2017a: 45) and is a mythological-historical account of Coixtlahuaca's multiethnic lineages, recording not only events and noble descendant lines but also territory and some architectural features. This paper will address the apparent lack of monumentality in the area during the Late Postclassic (1200–1520 CE) while considering in general the information recorded in the Seler II, in other words, its discourse, and how this contrasts with the archaeological data and certain aspects reflected in the written Mixtec ethnohistorical documents during the first decades of the colonial period (1521–1810 CE). While the archaeological information may seem to contradict the Seler II's discourse, as will be shown, it actually complements it and together with the ethnohistorical sources provides a better picture of the society and its territorial organization.

The Lienzo Seler II discourse

At first glance, the Seler II seems to be a type of geographical map, but on a closer look it becomes apparent that it not only maps a territory but is the historical account of the upper echelons of its city-state and the relationship of its noble lineages to the territory and other *señorios* or communities. Such documents were created under the instruction of the noble lords, registering only the lineages and events relevant to their history so as to exalt and legitimate their royal houses. Nevertheless, as the full discourse of the Seler II is interpreted, several layers of information emerge.

First, along its right side and outside the territory's frontier, the Lienzo depicts a migration or path that connects different city-states and royal houses even beyond the Coixtlahuaca Valley borders. Mythological and historical places are represented along the way, creating a mythical and historical account that ultimately links several city-states to Coixtlahuaca's history (Figure 2). The territorial border is shown by a black dotted and yellow band representing a jaguar skin, a feature associated with royalty in ancient Mesoamerica. Directly on the jaguar band several toponyms mark the boundaries of the territory. Inside the territory, several other toponyms or places are represented together with their ruling couple or founders on top, some lineages extending to several generations. The toponyms

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sidered to come from Coixtlahuaca too; these form the Coixtlahuaca Group, like the Tlapiltepec Lienzo (Brownstone 2015).

Figure 2: The Lienzo Seler II. Depiction of several paths linking different city-states related to the Coixtlahuaca city-state history (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum; Photo by Claudia Obrocki)

Figure 3: The Coatepec (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum; Photo by Claudia Obrocki)
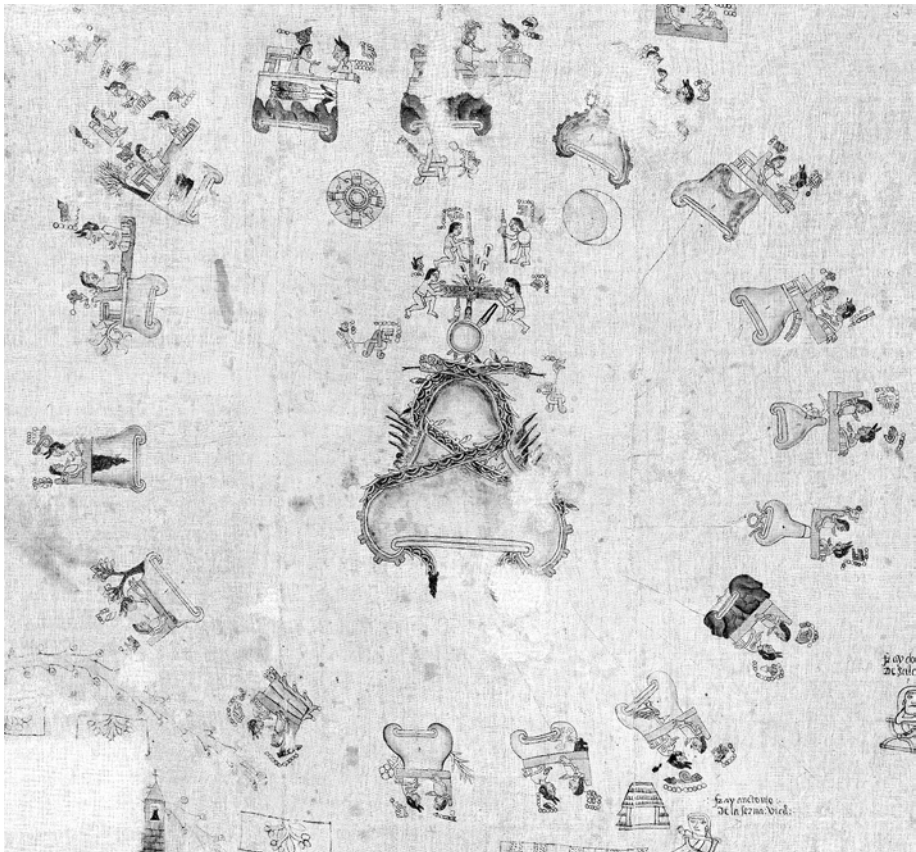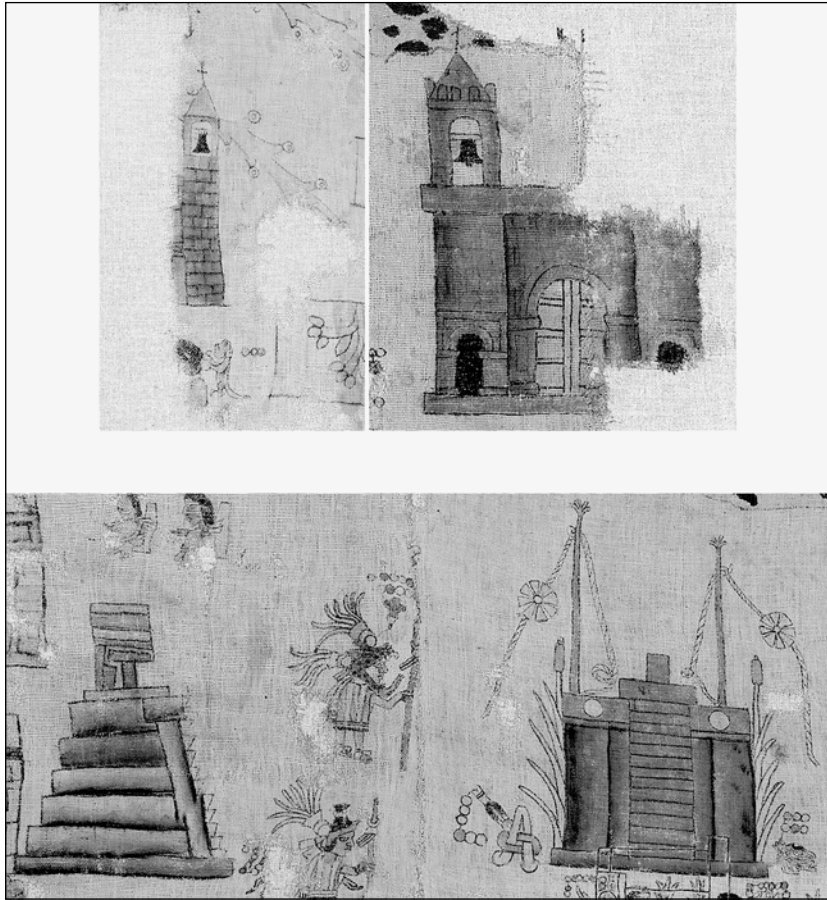
Figure 4: Churches and pyramids in the Lienzo (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum; Photo by Claudia Obrocki)

or places are represented by an inverted U-shape that symbolizes a mountain, the depiction of certain objects associated with it give the name of the place.

Continuing with the information recorded, natural features of the landscape are ubiquitous, such as rivers and an impressive mountain surrounded by two serpents (Figure 3) (identified as Coatepec or the Mount of Intertwined Serpents), the latter signifying a geographical and/or a mythical place or mountain (Rincón Mautner 2007; Castañeda de la Paz/Doesburg 2008; Pacheco Silva 2017; König 2017b).

Additionally, architectural elements are represented (Figure 4): two Spanish colonial churches (one in the lower mutilated part of the Lienzo, recognized only by its right bell tower) and two pyramids: one represented in a frontal view while another multicolored structure or pyramid is shown in profile. Along with mythi-

cal, historical, architectonical, and topographical features, events are represented: a foundation ritual, a warrior meeting, a war scene, and the hanging of a noble native ruler next to a Spanish *conquistador*. Judging only from the nature, complexity, and the amount of information contained in the Seler II and within the broader cultural and archaeological Mesoamerican context, it could be inferred that the document emerged not only from a stratified society but also from an urbanized culture with monumental architecture, as the two pyramids represented in the Seler II could be taken as good examples of the existence of such monumentality.

The foundation of the city-state of Coixtlahuaca depicted in the Seler II, goes back several generations, possibly to the beginning of the 13th century CE, which would correspond to the Late Postclassic (1200–1520 CE). Coixtlahuaca is depicted with two ruling lineages or houses (Figure 5), one ruling over the 'Heart-Place or Mountain' and the other over the 'Blood-Place', both united under the feather serpent which embodies the Valley of Coixtlahuaca.

Figure 5: Coixtlahuaca's toponym (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum; Photo by Claudia Obrocki)

This city-state is known to have been located within the Coixtlahuaca Valley and at least one of its civic-ceremonial centers, known as the archaeological site of Inguiteria, is situated not far from the modern municipal and religious buildings of Coixtlahuaca. With two ancient lineage houses, an impressive colonial church, and at least the representation in the Lienzo of two pyramids within its territory, one could expect monumental architectonical findings. Also, the Aztec interest in controlling the area as portrayed in the Codex Mendoza, an early colonial document, points to Coixtlahuaca's importance within the Mesoamerican economy (Berdan/Anawalt 1997: 105, n.1; Berdan/Anawalt 1992: 102–103).

We could interpret directly just from looking at the Seler II:

1. The Coixtlahuaca Valley was a multiethnic area inhabited by speakers of at least three different languages: *ngiwa* or chocholteco, mixtec, and nahua,[4] which are the languages of the glosses in Latin alphabet around the border.
2. There are two royal lineages whose ancestors came to found and rule the area from outside Coixtlahuaca centuries back. Furthermore, the royal lineages of Coixtlahuaca were not only related to other lineages within the Mixtec area but also outside of it, with links to the Valleys of Mexico and Puebla as other documents, such as the Map of Cuauhtinchan No. 2, indicate (Boone 2007: 30).
3. They utilized architectonical structures as well as natural features, such as mountains, as the setting for their ritual life, as represented by the ritual scene in front of Tulancingo's pyramid and the New Fire Ceremony on the Mount of Intertwined Serpents.
4. Furthermore, it could be implied that Coixtlahuaca ruled throughout the Valley as a hegemonic center with the subject towns under its control represented inside its frontiers, boasting at least one monumental civic-ceremonial site represented by the big plumed serpent with two mounds on its back where the lineage houses were founded and a third house, represented further up the Heart-Place lineage, by a circular element with a palace on top and the multi-colored pyramid associated.

As previously mentioned, the *lienzos* as well as the indigenous Mixtec books known as *códices*, were created by the elites. In them, the elites seek not only to assert their right to power, control, and territory but to recount and preserve their version of history. The Seler II is a document created by the elite, and most probably for the elites, where there is no trace of the commoners or the greater mass of the population, apart from the depiction of architectural features that suggest an important number of laborers at hand. The archaeological record, however, reflects a different picture that does not necessarily contradict the elite discourse displayed in the Seler II but complements it from a different angle.

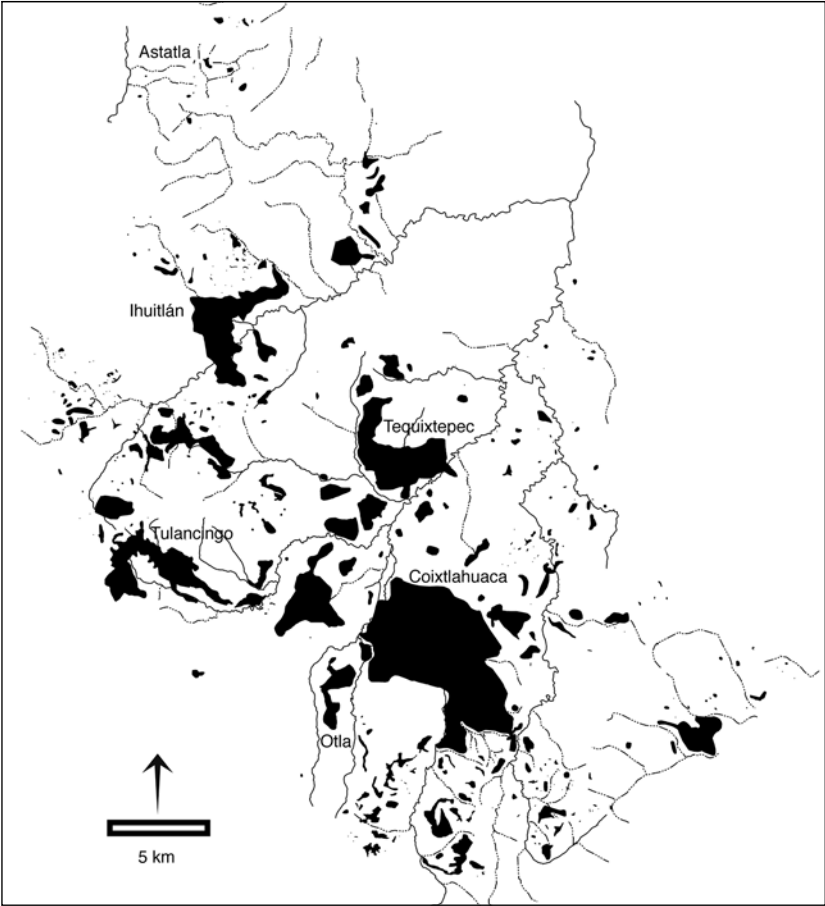## Archaeology and the ethnohistorical documents

Archaeological evidence reflects a society in its entirety, as the elite and the commoners create their mark on the landscape. Since the commoners were larger in numbers than the elite, the archaeological evidence for this part of the population can overwhelm that of the upper echelons of society, which found expression mainly in public civic-ceremonial architecture and residential palaces. The

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4 Furthermore, the pictographic nature of the Seler II made its reading possible to people speaking different languages.

archaeological remains complement the elite's discourse of the Seler II, but unlike it reflect a more neutral or unbiased image of the society. Now, we will consider what the most recent research in archaeology and in written ethnohistorical documents of the area has presented about Coixtlahuaca and its social and political organization.

After 1200 CE, the Mixteca Alta region reached its peak in terms of number of settlements and estimated population. It became one of Mesoamerica's largest and wealthiest economies, and it is estimated that during this time Coixtlahuaca occupied an area of at least 30 km² as shown by the latest archaeological surveys of the area (Spores/Balkansky 2013: 91; Kowalewski 2009: 315).

Figure 6: Late Postclassic (1200–1520 CE) settlements found in the Coixtlahuaca Valley by the Recorrido Arqueológico de Coixtlahuaca (used by permission of the project director Stephen A. Kowalewski)

Postclassic (1000–1520 CE) Mixtec society was basically organized in three major hierarchies: the ruling class, a class of nobles, and the commoners. Among the commoners were landless peasants under the control of the ruling class, and slaves, who were not *per se* a social class (Spores/Balkansky 2013: 112; Lind 2000: 570–571). These hierarchies can be partly seen in the archaeological record: the distribution, number, and size of mounds which could be the remains of public architecture or palaces, and the different agricultural and water-drainage systems, which were constructed and maintained around rivers and tributaries by the commoners.

On the other hand, the ethnohistorical documents of the area, as Terraciano (2001) has shown through his work, give a more detailed picture of the socioeconomic organization in the Mixteca. Terraciano (2001: 102–132) identifies different levels of sociopolitical organization. He finds that the Mixtecs referred to any given settlement as *ñuu*, and settlements such as Coixtlahuaca were called *ñuu* in the most general sense. The biggest settlements were named *yuhuitayu* which is translated as 'seat or pair of the reed mat', a direct reference to the pictography of the noble couple sitting atop their city-state or mountain, which is the toponym of place for the seat of rulership (the first ruling couples of Coixtlahuaca can be seen in Figure 5). Following this argument, the representation of the royal couple facing each other seated on a mat would then represent the political level of *yuhuitayu* itself. However, an essential aspect of the *yuhuitayu* is that it united the resources and rulership of at least two *ñuu* or communities without compromising their autonomy and individuality. And while a *yuhuitayu* was considered a *ñuu*, not all *ñuu* were *yuhuitayu*, since only *ñuu* of a considerable size and represented by a royal couple could be considered a *yuhuitayu*. In general, *ñuu* was not utilized for smaller settlements that lacked a "lordly establishment" (Terraciano 2001: 104). This is an interesting aspect when considering which political and territorial level is being represented in the Seler II, which is depicted with at least two noble lineages or *ñuu* (Place of the Blood-Mountain, Place of the Heart and Place of the Palace and Temple where the circular stone element might represent a plaza or open space), who apparently jointly ruled a vast territory that comprised much of the Coixtlahuaca Valley, while incorporating other city-states or *señorios*.[5] These other city-states: Tequixtepec, Aztatla, and Tulancingo, were not ruled by Coixtlahuaca as direct overlords but possibly as adjoining or confederated[6] city-states, or as settlements that together with Coixtlahuaca were part of a cultural tradition that developed within the Coixtlahuaca Valley. This idea might be supported by

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5 Here the 'smaller' settlements like Tequixtepec and Aztatla were probably not considered *yuhuitayu* but were independent city-states. *Señorío* was the word used by the Spanish for the prehispanic city-states.

6 As Pohl (2010: 61) has suggested that Coixtlahuaca was confederated with states in the Puebla Valley.

the archaeological evidence, since the settlement pattern found by Kowalewski (2017) and his colleagues shows that there are several centers or groups of mounds varying in size and number throughout the area (Figure 7). This type of pattern indicates a rather decentralized political and social organization as we will see later, suggesting cities and towns were mere aggregates of smaller units such as *barrios* (Kowalewski et al. 2017: 364). The units of a *yuhuitayu* as well, which would be considered a community, *ñuu* or *pueblo* in Spanish, could have the same characteristics as the *yuhuitayu*: a noble ruling couple, a temple organization, boundary-shrines, and a political identity of its own (Kowalewski 2017b: 8). This would apply for the cities represented inside the borders of Coixtlahuaca, such as the ones mentioned above, which although they had a lordly establishment were not a *yuhuitayu*.

The communities or *ñuu* are believed to have been divided into smaller units referred to as *siqui*, *siña*, or *dzini* in Mixtec ethnohistorical documents, *sindi* in chocholtec, and translated as *barrio* by the Spanish. These *barrios* and the associated structures would form part of a *ñuu* or directly the *yuhuitayu* of Coixtlahuaca, mainly represented by the two royal lineages.
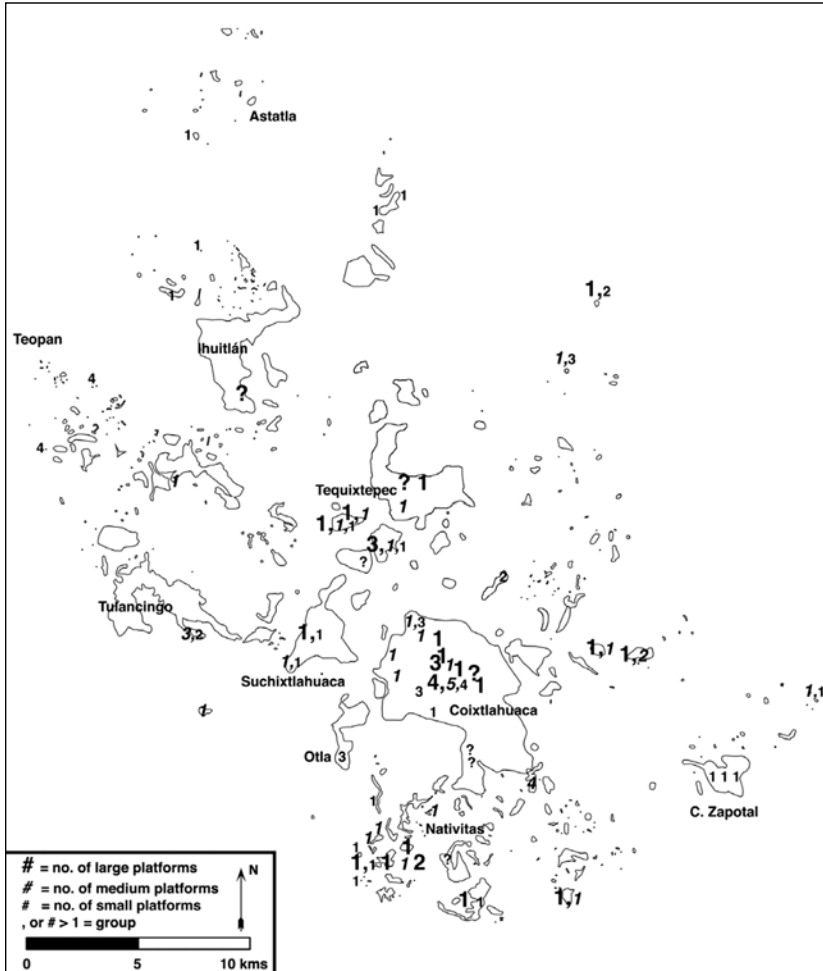
As aforementioned, the *yuhuitayu* did not compromise the autonomy and independence of the *ñuu* and subsequent *barrios* that formed it, therefore it could co-exist or be imposed upon a more ancient or basic type of socioeconomic organization. Surely, the more stable socioeconomic, territorial, and political organization would lie beyond the *yuhuitayu*.[7] The *barrio* could be this more ancient form of sociopolitical organization, existing before the formation of a *yuhuitayu* and continuing to exist at its dissolution. This corresponds to recent studies that show that community organization existed before the king and the state itself and was powerful enough to even challenge such institutions (Kowalewski et al. 2017: 354, 367). Furthermore, this would also point to the idea that the *yuhuitayu* could be a construct brought and legitimized by elites arriving in the Valley at the dawn of the Postclassic (1000 CE).[8]

The consistent usage of the term for *barrio* in different native languages in the colonial documentation attests to its existence as a distinctly defined sub-entity, and while Terraciano interprets it "as a corporate group unified by ethnic and kinship ties, common origin, and political and economic relations...with ethnicity as one organizing principle of the siqui" (2001: 106), I believe the *siqui* to be organized around territory or, more specifically, a given number of agricultural plots or fields. Ethnicity could be linked to this given territory with language being the central characteristic tied to it.

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7   Kowalewski (2017b: 4) concludes that investment in agricultural terracing as landesque capital gave the local communities and *barrios* their stability and strength.

8   Thinking of the Seler II's account of the arrival and subsequent foundation of Coixtlahuaca, supported by archaeological evidence by Kowalewski et al. (2017: 361) that might suggest a repopulation of the valley in Early Postclassic times (1000–1200 CE).

Figure 7: Late Postclassic (1200–1520 CE) civic-ceremonial platform distribution by number and size. Size was divided into large, with an area bigger than 200 m², medium: area below 200 m² and small, with dimensions bigger than 10 m² (Kowalewski et al. 2017: 365)

The *barrios*, in turn, were made of smaller units: a group of people working in a field and living within the same household would form the smallest social organizational unit. Check-dams, contour terraces on the hillsides as well as along the streams, were maintained by these household task-groups, who were therefore directly related and tied to the land. The *yuhuitayu*, on the other hand, was rather related and tied to a noble lineage or couple of rulers, which would once

more point to the origin of this level of organization being strongly tied to and promoted by the elites.

The interdependent work of several of the task/household groups was essential to manage whole drainage systems and reflects intricate social organization, supporting the existence of the *siqui* or *barrios*. As Kowalewski and his colleagues (2017: 366–367) found in their fieldwork, the lands of these *barrios* coincided with segments of stream drainage, and a community or *ñuu* territory would in turn correspond to a drainage basin. The territories of these *barrios* and communities were marked by shrines or temples, separated by divides, with each being allocated in a different basin. Therefore, the *barrio* and the community is a logical (common-sense) form of organization for administrating not only the land but its water resources. Altogether, the household task-groups, *barrios*, and communities formed economic, territorial, and social organizations that can be identified in the archaeology as the remains of agro-drainage systems of dams and terraces, and formed cohesive groups with attached identities like language, religion, and cultural traits that would link them in turn to a bigger political identity like the *yuhuitayu*.

The ethnohistorical documents register yet another aspect of these subunits: they record some of the names of the *siqui*. These were based on diverse geographical features such as rivers or slopes, while some others were named after a certain animal or insect. The fact that the name of the *siqui* is related to the word 'river' or 'slope' reinforces the evidence found in the archaeology, as the communities and their *barrios* were organized and settled around a segment of stream drainage and/or near mountain slopes as already mentioned. Furthermore, this points to the strong relationship of the settlement and the people with the landscape. In contrast, the names of the *ñuu* or *yuhuitayu* are related to hills or mountains, which might in turn also signalize where the palaces or civic-ceremonial centers might be situated. In summary, 16th-century historic description of *señorios* and *cacicazgos* is similar to the hierarchy and integration of the *ñuu* and/or *yuhuitayu* reconstructed from archaeological data (Terraciano 2001: 107; Kowalewski 2009: 367, 315).

Land Tenure

Another important aspect of the territorial and social organization is the land tenure. The basic Mixtec organization, the household, played a central role in the structure of land tenure and use, as people residing in the same household relied on each other for working the fields and producing goods. And even though lands and properties were owned individually and members of a household could have the right to individual plots, the land was worked jointly by a household so that the

produce and tribute was also generated per household. The household was composed of multiple houses organized around a patio and tribute was calculated per household. The nobles had cultivators who worked their lands, plus the tribute they received based on each household's lands and resources. The land where the household and the cultivable land was located was called *ñuhu huahi*, and the best and oldest plot of land was inherited through generations so that it became patrimonial land. For the nobles, their palace or *aniñe* was usually tied to specific lands or arable fields, so that nobles and commoners both had possession or access to patrimonial land (Terraciano 2001: 199, 201, 203–204).

Other properties or land called *ytu* were plots scattered in marginal areas or at the periphery of the community's borders. The holdings of a given household thus consisted of the land where the household was, the cultivable lands associated with it, and plots in other areas *(ytu)* – these lands could be traded, sold, or lost. This system of multiple types of land tenure could have been a way to distribute fertile lands evenly among the community and the different members of a household while promoting agricultural variety in an area with ecological diversity such as the Mixteca. The nobles relied on others to work on their lands and the ownership of land by the commoners and caciques of a *ñuu* was scattered throughout the landscape in a rather fragmented pattern, with one household possibly owning plots in different *barrios*, and maybe even in other *señorios*. The difference between the commoners and lords might have been found not only in the amount of land owned but also in the quality of the land. Furthermore, there were lands that did not belong to specific individuals, a household, or an *aniñe*, and could be considered as corporate lands belonging to a certain *barrio* or *siña.* Even though these *barrios* were part of a certain *ñuu* or *señorio*, their lands belonged to them as a corporate entity or *barrio* and not to the *ñuu* to which they were politically ascribed. These corporate lands owned by a *siña* could be reallocated or reassigned according to their needs and the households working these lands payed tribute to the *siña* directly (Terraciano 2001: 204–205), which would make the *barrio* a powerful entity, even contesting the power of the noble lord or the *ñuu* and his holdings – as previously stated.

In summary, the household or *huahui* was the smallest unit and the foundation of all social and land-tenure organization. Organized intrinsically in *barrios*, the households managed all the drainages and every hillside, creating a terraced landscape that transformed the Coixtlahuaca Valley into a monumental agroecosystem. Their organization as a wider corporate unit, such as *barrios* and communities, might also have been a response to protect their labor investment, *ergo* their land (Kowalewski 2017b: 4). Both smallholders and the elite owned the land, one force contesting the other and keeping a certain balance in the production and distribution of power in the *señorio* or city-state.

Urbanization: Centralization vs. decentralization

The archaeological survey of the Coixtlahuaca Valley made by Kowalewski (2008) and his colleagues showed that in the Late Postclassic (1200–1520 CE) the cities were large but the states were relatively small, reflected in large settlements with rather small and few public civic-ceremonial architectural structures. Intensive rural development was present as the settlement distribution located farmers near their fields, which formed a dispersed settlement pattern. The city of Coixtlahuaca extended continuously over 3000 ha and had a population of approximately 100,000 people. Oaxaca and the Central Mexico regions, in comparison with other regions worldwide, were more urbanized and had more rural development than those in Early Modern Europe (Kowalewski 2017b: 2, 4; Kowalewski et al. 2017: 355, 361, 366).

On one hand, the Seler II portrays two pyramids and the depiction of two colonial churches, which would account for the existence of a settlement and a population of considerable size. This could yield at least one center with monumental architecture, as portrayed by the pyramid[9] (Figure 4) associated with one *barrio* of Coixtlahuaca. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence of the Valley of Coixtlahuaca shows that there were relatively few civic-ceremonial structures, the major site Inguiteria has fewer and smaller platform mounds than smaller settlements in the same region and in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca. The small number of platforms and their size is characteristic for the entire Coixtlahuaca sequence. Therefore, the concentration of public architecture of imposing dimensions is rather weak in the Valley of Coixtlahuaca. The architectural remains seem to be widely distributed rather than concentrated in one place, which suggests that the cities and their public architecture were merely aggregates of the *barrios* rather than centralized and institutionalized places. At Coixtlahuaca, 19 of 32 platforms are located in outlying sectors and only 13 are in a central precinct. The *barrios* of other *ñuu*, such as Tequixtepec, all had civic-ceremonial architecture, but none of it was grouped in one place (Kowalewski et al. 2017: 364).

Considering the discourse of the Seler II, it could be interpreted or expected that the government embodied in the noble couples on top of every city-state toponym would find archaeological expression as a civic-ceremonial center. And it could be expected that such architecture would be found centralized or as a single monumental center governing a rural hinterland. However, the Seler II also illustrates at least two ruling houses for Coixtlahuaca, with two different lineages lines,[10] which

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9   The multicolored pyramid on the left, which is part of a toponym, forms one of the two lineages of Coixtlahuaca in the Lienzo de Coixtlahuaca I and could be considered as one of the *yuhuitayu barrios* in the Seler II.

10   At least two, because there are in fact three lineages portrayed, as stated before and in my doctoral thesis, Pacheco Silva (2019).

already speaks against a centralization of power and a single architectonical expression of it. The Seler II does portray different architectural features, some even in a monumental fashion (pyramids), but these can be easily accounted as symbolic representations, or better said, as a standardized representation of an idea: a ritual place. In further support of this idea (regardless of the exact date of creation of the Seler II which could be dated to the first or second half of the 16th century[11]), the church construction was not initiated before 1576 so that by the end of that century the church as represented in the Seler II did not exist fully constructed, an indication that it may not be an actual portrayal of the colonial church itself[12] but also a pictographic convention for showing the existence of an ecclesiastical organization in the area. Tulancingo is represented by a pyramid and a ritual scene surrounding it, also within the borders of Coixtlahuaca's territory, but the area of Tulancingo displays little public construction during the Postclassic (1000–1520 CE) apart from five platform mounds atop a mountain which may actually be the pyramid depicted in the Seler II (Kowalewski et al. 2017: 365; Johnson 2015: 111, 121; Doesburg 2004; Kowalewski 2017a: 85). Nonetheless, these mounds are not a single feature with 13 steps, so that it seems we are dealing here with a pictographic convention once more, for a place where important ritual events took place in some sort of architectonical enclosure.

In summary, the architectural representations in the Seler II do not reflect archaeological or historical reality, since there are no archaeological remains of monumental architecture and the ethnohistorical documents of the area and for Coixtlahuaca record a later date for the final construction of its church. From the archaeological point of view, during the Postclassic (1000–1520 CE), urbanization was strongly tied to the best agricultural land and farmers made intensive use of the land; the settlements during this time were associated with *lama-bordos* or terraces and water-drainage systems. During Natividad (1200–1520 CE), corresponding to the Late Postclassic, the sites were spread from valley floors to mountain crests, creating an evenness in site distribution with fewer gaps of uninhabited areas (Kowalewski 2009: 318–319). Thus, the archaeological evidence reflects uninterrupted occupation of the landscape, a strongly dispersed settlement pattern and decentralization, based in the optimal use of agricultural land and water resources. The *barrios* and households with their control of most of the agricultural land, formed the backbone of society while the elite, with their palaces and scant 'urban' architecture made of stone, were mere aggregates to the *barrios* of their city-states.

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11 There are valid arguments for dating the Lienzo before 1556 and around 1570, see Pacheco Silva (2016); van Doesburg (2017).

12 The actual church has one bell tower on its left and none on its right as portrayed in the Lienzo, and the two adjacent small doors are also missing from the original.

Monumentality in the landscape

Apparently, the archaeological evidence differs from the information in the Lienzo Seler II in regard to the type of political organization, length of power, and monumental architecture. The elite of the Coixtlahuaca *yuhuitayu* wanted to represent a powerful, probably centralized city-state with ultra regional ties, allies, and conquests, one that encompassed a large territory that incorporated most of the Valley as well as the city-states that inhabited it (Figure 1). The archaeological record, however, reflects a highly urbanized state in which the cities were rather aggregates of the rural development, creating a very dispersed settlement pattern. Moreover, evidence of elite power, expressed heavily through monumentality during the Classic (400–800 CE), is rather weak in the Valley during the Late Postclassic (1200–1520 CE).

This apparent discrepancy can be accounted for the moment we change the perspective on the interpretation, not only of the archaeological data but also of the way the landscape and the ethnographical information is understood. Foremost, there is a pervasive element in the Coixtlahuaca Valley: its landscape. It bears the signs of concentrated labor and symbolic meaning through its completely terraced nature and monumental work dating from early prehispanic times (Kowalewski et al. 2017: 364).

Figure 8: The landscape in the Valley of Coixtlahuaca (Photo by Mónica Pacheco Silva 2014)

The Lienzo portrays its most dominating scene in the context of a natural feature: a monumental mountain (Figure 3) as the stage for the New Fire Ceremony considered as the foundational ceremony of the Coixtlahuaca city-state. Moreover, 16 different city-states participate in the ritual, showing not only its importance as a state ceremony of the elites, but the power and legitimation the Coixtlahuaca city-state was to exert. The Mount of Intertwined Serpents as the

natural stage for rituals shows the special relation the elite and the state had to the landscape.[13]

From an ethnographic point of view, nowadays the landscape plays an active role in the ritual life of the modern inhabitants of the Valley of Coixtlahuaca, who still have an important relationship with the landscape. Every mountain has a name, and behind it a story which sometimes interconnects with other mountains in the surroundings. Every year, people from the Coixtlahuaca area and adjacent communities come together in a procession to the Cerro de Agua (Water Mountain) requesting rain and a good harvest, a practice well rooted in prehispanic times (Rincón Mautner 2005). This mountain in the Valley of Coixtlahuaca, hosts two emblematic caves (Medina Jaen/Peñaflores Ramírez/Rivera Guzmán 2013). Mixtec religious life did not develop exclusively in architectural ceremonial spaces within the core settlement itself, but also in landscape features such as caves, springs, and mountains (Spores/Balkansky 2013: 93). This points to the fact that such features within the landscape, mountains being especially monumental in size and importance, should be considered as part of the settlement itself, making the settlement an all-encompassing unit of architectural and natural features. Bernal-García (1993: 32, 38) in her work about mythological urban planning in Mesoamerica, points to the significant role certain mountains play in the life of Mesoamerican settlements, a fact recognized since the 1970s. In turn, the impressive double temple of Tenochtitlan was identified as the 'Mountain of the Sustenance', also a mythological mountain. Mountains formed a mound for rituals, while the pyramids emulated sacred mythological mountains.

If the landscape and, more importantly, the mountains surrounding the settlement are taken into account, the sites are suddenly not only a formation of mounds and agricultural plots, but an organism made of architectural and natural features. The landscape plays an active role in the archaeological settlement, it complements and supports it as the stage for rituals and events. The settlement is like an organism with rivers, terraces, mountains, architectural features, and caves constituting its form. Monumentality is expressed through all its variables: the agricultural terraces, the drainage system management, the archaeological mounds, and – above all – the landscape.

Coixtlahuaca with an area of at least 30 km², together with Teposcolula with nearly 25 km², and Yanhuitlán in the Nochixtlán Valley, were among the largest settlements during the Postclassic (1000–1520 CE), rivaling the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan that caused much amazement among the first *conquistadores* due to

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13 We have to remember that many of the names of the city-states are related directly to names of mountains, as Terraciano (2001: 107) has pointed out, which seems to reflect the relation between the state and this natural feature of the topography, as mountains may be regarded as pyramids or, even more, are visible symbols of power in the landscape.

its temples and channel systems. However, the critical point is not which site is the biggest or has the most monumental architecture, rather how it is distributed, its relation to the landscape and supported population. The Valley of Oaxaca, for example, had smaller sites and more people living in such sites, as well as a lower urbanization index, so that only 40 per cent of its population lived in settlements of more than 1000 inhabitants, in contrast with 60 per cent from the Central Mixteca Alta (Spores/Balkansky 2013: 92–93; Kowalewski 2009: 321). Nevertheless, the Valley of Oaxaca has several examples of what could be considered monumental architecture and the 'monumentality' of its cultures would never be questioned. Monumental mounds or sites, and architectural features such as pyramids, do not equal urbanization. A highly urbanized society does not necessarily express itself in monumental architectonics when the natural features of the landscape provide such monumentality, just as is the case for the Late Postclassic Mixtec in the Coixtlahuaca area (1200–1520 CE).

Visibility and perception

What can we actually see and perceive in the Valley of Coixtlahuaca? Whether high at the bell tower of the church of Coixtlahuaca or on ground level, one thing is pervasive in the landscape, the completely terraced mountain slopes and the high degree of erosion of the land. On the peak of a mountain next to Cerro del Caracol (Shell Mountain) in Tequixtepec, a small patio and some mounds can be distinguished. The continuity of ceramic sherds indicates an ubiquitous or even occupation of the territory, but there are no high structures. Today, the most impressive feature is the scant population in the almost deserted communities and the highly eroded landscape. It seems as if the history recorded in the Lienzo Seler II speaks not only of another era but of another area. If we only focus our attention on what has been recorded in the *lienzos* and *códices* of the area and the many colonial written documents, the archaeologist and historian would expect to see a landscape full of elements that witness to the development of one of the most important cultures of Postclassic Mesoamerica, bearers of an ancient culture and skilled craftsmen that rivaled the famous Tenochtitlan. But it requires only a shift of perception to recognize that the vast number of 'commoners' in the ancient population were the ones to leave their indelible imprint in the land itself through their work in monumental agricultural terraces and drainage systems, while only a few vestiges of the elite survived in documents, through ceramics, and as exquisite examples of goldsmithery.

In order to reconstruct a more neutral picture of the history of the land and the culture, at least in the first years of the Spanish contact in the 16th century, the archaeological record has to be complemented by the study of ethnohistoric doc-

uments, among them written documents from the Spanish administration and, primarily, the oral traditions and modern ethnographic data. Only then can we achieve a less biased interpretation of what we think it was and really is.

Conclusions

A loose image of what happened in the Late Postclassic (1200–1520 CE) until the first years of the contact period could be proposed considering the story told by the Seler II, the archaeology, and the ethnohistory. A group arrived from outside the Valley on the dawn of the Postclassic (1000 CE),[14] as proposed by Kowalewski et al. (2017: 361) and supported by the paths shown on the right side of the Seler II if we interpret them as the migration of a group who eventually founded the city-state of Coixtlahuaca. This newly arrived population gave the already existing communities that had managed the agro-drainage systems since early times (1500 BCE)[15] an additional identity in the form of a political affiliation to a *ñuu*, *yuhuitayu*, or a noble-ruled city-state. By the Late Postclassic (1200–1520 CE), Coixtlahuaca was a member of a wider urban and elite network (Kowalewski 2017: 5) with affiliations and interactions reaching outside its borders into the Central Valleys of Mexico, taking part in the wider Mesoamerican world, as ethnohistoric documents like the Seler II, the Map of Cuauhtinchan, and the *códices* recount. The Lienzo Seler II registers the political foundation and interaction of this city-state under its noble rulership; indeed it is possibly the inauguration into this type of noble-rulership that is portrayed in the ritual of the Mount of the Intertwined Serpents.

On the other hand, the archaeological record mainly shows the organization and interaction of the wider population with the landscape. While these discourses may seem to juxtapose, they complement the overall image of relations within the settlement, between the wider population and the state, coming forward as a balance between the two forces that moved the *señorío*: the household and their management of the agro-drainage system, and the political elite interaction in- and outside the region in the wider Mesoamerican context. The Seler II attests to multiethnicity in Coixtlahuaca, as it records three native languages in

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14 It cannot be inferred, however, that there were no other groups inhabiting the Valley when the 'newcomers' arrived, there was certainly a population inhabiting the valley from ancient times as the archaeological evidence for the agro-drainage systems goes back centuries. I am, however, inferring that these 'newcomers' who took possession and founded the *ñuu* of Coixtlahuaca brought with them some sort of noble rulership or united a group of *barrios*, smallholder communities, under a noble/lineage type of rule.

15 As Kowalewski et al. (2017: 366, 369) through the archaeological evidence show, investment in long-term material improvements to the land, like terracing and drainage check-dams, began in the Early Formative (1500/1200 BCE).

the glosses around the jaguar-skin frontier. People speaking different languages and with diverse ethnicities not only lived and worked side by side but controlled the area in conjunction. Archaeology can, however, only weakly record such multiethnic interaction, specially of a *nahua*-speaking group (Kowalewski et al. 2010). In contrast, the dispersed settlement pattern seen through the archaeological survey, and the decentralized mound groups scattered through the valley, indicate that no single centralized power ruled throughout the area. This can also be observed in the Seler II as it clearly registers at least two founding lineages for the Valley of the Serpents or Coixtlahuaca. The ethnographic data points to the importance of several landscape features such as caves and mountains as the backdrop of ritual life, signaling the fact that the landscape takes an active role in the settlement itself, which is also clearly identifiable in the Seler II as the biggest and central toponym is a mountain: the Mount of Intertwined Serpents.

Finally, the Seler II depicts at least two lineage houses ruling over the Coixtlahuaca Valley, which supports the decentralized archaeological evidence but also signals shared power. The archaeology reflects that the power of the nobles was rather limited and unstable, as the greater mass of the population controlled not only a large part of the resources but also their landscape.

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