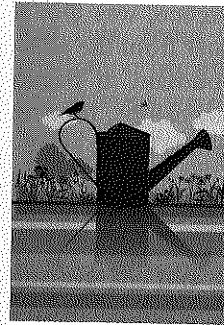


CHAPTER 15

THE GARDEN OF THE AZTEC
PHILOSOPHER-KING



*Not forever here, but only briefly.
Even jade shatters,
gold breaks,
precious feathers are destroyed.
Not forever here, but only a moment.*
Cantares Mexicanos, fol. 17r¹

The Aztecs of ancient Mexico present a challenge to cross-cultural sympathy because they are best known for their bloody sacrificial rites.

In retrospect, these seem not to have been significantly bloodier than the worst excesses of the contemporaneous blood sacrifices ongoing in Europe, also in the name of religious piety. However, “Aztec heart sacrifice” obstructs our view of other, more sympathetic features of this great culture. For example, modern gardens worldwide abound with marigolds, dahlias, cosmos, and many other horticultural wonders native to the Americas and nurtured by the Aztecs. We may not realize it, but when we visit or study botanical gardens, we are appreciating a landscape design format that the Aztecs pioneered.

The botanical gardens laid out by Aztec kings and landscape designers were, like their successors in sixteenth-century Europe, compendia of plants that were meant to represent exhaustively a particular region. Each was, in a sense, a “green encyclopedia,”² and a few decades after

Spaniards saw and coveted remarkable Aztec examples of this gardening genre, botanical gardens began to appear in Europe. The intellectual climate of Europe at this time was rife with impulses toward studying and categorizing the natural world and the idea of a botanical garden may have independently arisen in Europe – or possibly been inspired or ripened by the conquistadors' fulsome praise of the Aztec examples.

Today's botanical gardens echo Aztec prototypes in profound homage, but they cannot deliver the spiritual impact of sixteenth-century Mexican examples such as that of Texcotzingo near modern Mexico City. Texcotzingo was the great achievement in the brilliant career in landscape architecture of one of the Aztec empire's most powerful kings, Nezahualcoyotl. Texcotzingo was not just a botanical garden, but it was the family dynasty's own sacred and recreational retreat, their columbarium for ancestral remains and living map of their domain. This imposing hill overlooking the city and imperial capital, Texcoco, was also a triumph of hydrological engineering which brought water from the adjacent lower slopes of Mount Tlaloc, "the holiest mountain of pagan Mexico,"³ via a massive aqueduct and then sent it downslope, flowing through channels and pools, cascading in waterfalls over the king's extensive gardens and highlighting the sculptures gracing them. Finally, the water fed the terraced farm fields that bordered the lower edge of the royal pleasure park.

We find this to be an admirable display of aesthetic and engineering prowess, one we can appreciate on many levels. But to Nezahualcoyotl – to any Aztec, in fact – it was much more, representing the political realm as defined by its living and topographic components, bathed in water, a most sacred essence in ancient Mesoamerica. The Aztecs were animists, believing there to be no separation between the organic and inorganic worlds – the Aztec cosmos was pulsing with vitality. A mountain was also a mountain deity, and a pyramid, and so on. All of these cognitively connected concepts and representations were thought to be alive and to possess the same vital spirit – and each could share different wavelengths of spiritual power with yet other representations and concepts related to other sacred principles. A mountain bathed in water shared the spiritual energy of the sacred substance. To understand how the garden of Texcotzingo, now in ruins, would have throbbed with life and nuanced meaning in the time of its creator, we must first consider Nezahualcoyotl and the Aztec culture he so splendidly represented.

The Aztecs and Their Kings

The history of ancient Mexico saw the rise of several great civilizations. The first, about two thousand years ago, had its peak at the urban site of Teotihuacan which would have a population of over 100,000. About 30 miles northeast of modern Mexico City, Teotihuacan's monumental Pyramid of the Sun and Pyramid of the Moon are so culturally dominant that in Mexico today the site is often referred to as "the pyramids." In a country with so many impressive ancient structures, this is praise indeed.

But all civilizations must fall, and Teotihuacan's fall took place at around 500 CE, a few hundred years before the collapse of Maya civilization in the southern Yucatán peninsula. New cities were already filling the void left by Teotihuacan's decline, and among the most important, by about 1,000 CE, were Chichén Itzá in the northern Yucatán peninsula, and Tula, about 40 miles north of modern Mexico City. Tula's Toltec civilization became legendary for its richness and elegance. Thereafter, fine artisans were known as "tolteca" and the fable arose that Tula was where the streets were paved with gold, where crops like cotton and chocolate not only flourished in this chilly and arid high-altitude environment, but also where cotton grew in colors.

This was a paradise of a kind that contrasts sharply with that of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Unlike the Garden of Eden's fruitful wilderness, the Aztecs' Tollán was a fruitful garden-city, urbanized but highly landscaped to luxuriant productivity. Its denizens were not blank slates like Adam and Eve, but rather were wise people who knew how to enjoy the good things in life; they were master artisans, practicing highly skilled crafts with precious materials, readily supplied by a fertile environment. But while Eden survived human occupation, Tollán became a desert wasteland, its gardens of cacao trees turned to mesquite, a paradise inevitably lost when Tula, like other civilizations before it, fell.

During Tula's period of greatness, however, it was home to many people, some of them migrant workers. Ancient Mexico had always been busy with migrations, as we know from linguistic, stylistic, and DNA studies, but the period around 1,000 CE was particularly active, possibly because of changing climate conditions on the northern boundary of the larger culture area, Mesoamerica. Groups of families related along blood lines and sharing an ethnic identity and spoken language moved across the landscape, stopped for years and sometimes decades where work was



available, and then moved on. Among these groups who apparently drifted from northwestern Mexico to the area around modern Mexico City (the Basin of Mexico) around 1,000 years ago were those who hearkened back to a spell of residence at Aztlán (the “place of whiteness” or “place of the white heron”), an island town.

These Aztlán emigrants are known to us today as Aztecs, and the term is loosely applied to many groups known to themselves and each other by more specific terms. The most famous Aztecs were the Mexica, who founded the city of Tenochtitlan, which underlies modern Mexico City, and who gave their name to that city and to the modern nation of Mexico. They vainly tried to defeat a Spanish expeditionary force (and its hundreds of thousands of indigenous allies, who loathed the Mexica for their brutal rapaciousness) and were defeated in 1521.

The Aztec empire, of which the Mexica were the most important rulers, lasted only about ninety years. In about 1430 the Mexica had defeated their local overlords and taken over a small confederation of tribute-paying city states, and then in the mid-fifteenth century had expanded this tribute-gathering operation beyond the Basin of Mexico and eventually, by the early 1500s, it reached from Pacific to Atlantic (the coast of the Gulf of Mexico) and down to the coast of Chiapas, and pulled in revenues from at least five million subjects.

The Mexica Aztecs had not been alone in these efforts. Their staunchest allies were the rulers of Texcoco, across the lake from Tenochtitlan (figure 15.1). And the most important of the Texcocan rulers was Nezahualcoyotl, who shared in shaping the empire and managed to keep his own domain intact in spite of his long and close relationship with the Mexica.

Nezahualcoyotl: Renaissance Man of Aztec Culture

Born in 1401 or 1402 to the son of Texcoco’s ruler, Nezahualcoyotl saw his father assume rulership in about 1409 and be assassinated in 1418. His domain having fallen into the hands of his dynasty’s enemies, Nezahualcoyotl fled to a friendly city outside the Basin of Mexico. When he returned a few years later, it was to house arrest. The billet wasn’t onerous, however – it was the palace of his Mexica cousins in Tenochtitlan.

Among the projects Nezahualcoyotl is reported to have taken on to pass his time was that of designing a royal pleasure park for the Tenochtitlan

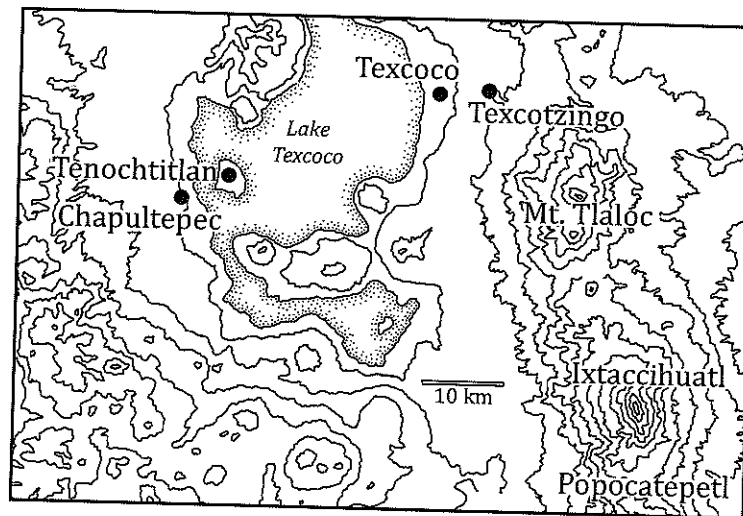


FIGURE 15.1 Location of Texcotzingo.

dynasty. The location was Chapultepec, which had been a refuge for the Mexica in the hardships of their migration, and which was just three miles from the center of Tenochtitlan. Chapultepec was also the source of freshwater springs that the Mexica needed to supply their city. It was perhaps unfortunate that Chapultepec was the property of the Mexica’s overlords – or perhaps the conflict over control of Chapultepec was fortunate, because it provided the opportunity for the Mexica to take the reins of their overlords’ confederation, control it, and build it into something huge.

Nezahualcoyotl’s role during this period of reorganization was complicated. His Mexica cousins were giving him sanctuary, but they had also helped his enemies to vanquish his capital, Texcoco, and received it as a tribute from their overlords. Nezahualcoyotl needed to be very careful to show proper respect while planning on the restoration of his kingdom.

In planning the pleasure park at Chapultepec, Nezahualcoyotl must have been keenly aware of the symmetry between that park and Tenochtitlan, and Texcoco and Texcotzingo (figure 15.2). Duality was one of the great cognitive principles underlying Mesoamerican cosmology, and the balance between the two dynastic capitals and their dynastic retreats is obvious. Nezahualcoyotl’s establishment of the Chapultepec park for his cousins would have given them a visual reminder of the bond



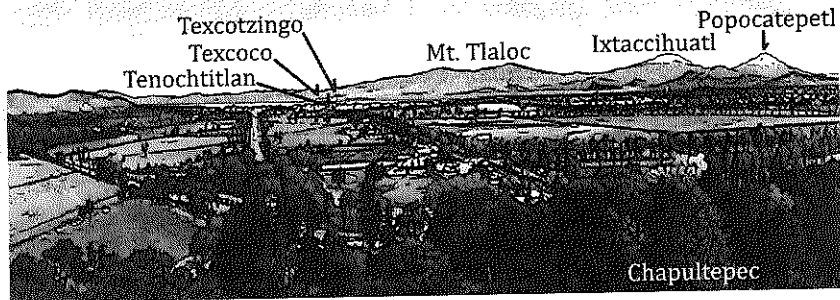


FIGURE 15.2 Mt. Tlaloc and the surrounding province.

between the two capitals and the monumental parks of their dynasties. In a world where features of the landscape were thought to embody active spiritual power, this project of the young exiled prince reveals the philosophical and pragmatic sides of his nature.

Nezahualcoyotl's career as a landscape designer is said by several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chroniclers to have begun with Chapultepec. Summarizing from these sources, we understand that Nezahualcoyotl while in his twenties "directed the building of major structures there (including a palace and the *bosque* of Chapultepec) in the late 1420s and early 1430s, as well as important engineering projects (an aqueduct, a causeway, and a dike) then and later."⁴ While there is no direct evidence that Nezahualcoyotl in fact designed these works and supervised their construction, it is a plausible assertion, given his status as a prince, which would have entailed education in a range of subjects and access to the most skilled and creative members of Aztec society. Aztec civil engineering made clever use of basic forces of gravity and leverage, using wood, stone, and fired clay as materials. Mastering the basic principles and most effective deployment of labor and materials was certainly within the capability of a reasonably intelligent person, and Nezahualcoyotl's later life indicates that his interest in large-scale civic engineering problems was a serious one.

Most discussions of valued qualities in Aztec royals emphasize two things: success in battle and facility with rhetoric. What other pursuits absorbed royal time? Aztec nobles under Spanish colonial rule in the sixteenth century recalled that the pleasures of courtly life involved

singing and exchange of proverbs, playing a board game (*patolli*, similar to parcheesi) or a ball game (*tlachtli*, which presaged modern handball and soccer), and gambling on the outcome of such games; royals enjoyed hunting and they established game parks for this purpose, and they also enjoyed the design and establishment of gardens.

Other sources suggest that princes had strong interests in architecture and landscape design. For example, one Aztec king rewarded his brother with a palace that was a copy of a palace in a conquered province, and the king sent an architect, mason, and artist to look at the original in order to plan a copy. We learn several things from a small historical note like this one. First, skilled trained artisans in these fields were part of an Aztec king's retinue. This further suggests that if so inclined, the king could take an active role in these pursuits, learning from his retainers and even formulating his own designs. Furthermore, it would seem that the royal built environment was regarded by kings as an important form of display and source of personal satisfaction, and that status rivalries were played out in this arena.

The Uses of Nezahualcoyotl: Bridging Spanish and Aztec Cultures

Throughout his lifetime Nezahualcoyotl would prove to be adept at the development of his own palace complex in Texcoco, his royal retreat at Texcotzingo, a number of horticultural gardens, and a game reserve. His reputation as a man of many talents was enhanced by the attribution to him of some famous poems, legal judgments, and religious concepts, though these may be retroactive assignments of accomplishment. In the Early Colonial period of Spanish occupation of Mexico, proselytizing Catholic clergy and one of Nezahualcoyotl's descendants, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, seem to have enhanced the image of the fifteenth-century king for their own ends.

Alva Ixtlilxóchitl was born about a century after the death of Nezahualcoyotl, and the glories of his family's past were the subject matter of his books of history. His books are important and valuable works, but must be read using a strong hyperbole filter, given conflicting information from other documentary sources and archeological evidence. Many of his accounts of "conquests" of "cities" and formation of "empires" seem actually to reflect raids on modest towns, and their



aggregation into small confederations of tribute-payers. Thus the reader may be predisposed to regard his other claims, such as those touting the achievements of Nezahualcoyotl, with some skepticism.

Scholars stirred by the melancholy tone of poems such as “Even Jades Are Shattered” feel a kinship with Nezahualcoyotl the man, but the Aztec kings commonly employed poets and songwriters to enhance the reputation of their courts. Poems or songs about Nezahualcoyotl’s exploits, even those using the locution “I, Nezahualcoyotl . . .” may have been written for court entertainments by such courtly poets. Of course, this plausible interpretation cannot be falsified by the available sources; nowhere do we have an eyewitness account of Nezahualcoyotl’s undisputed authorship, and nowhere do we know for certain that he never composed verses.

Nezahualcoyotl also developed a strong reputation for able political leadership, and this was used by Catholic clergy with an agenda for the conversion of the Aztecs to Christianity. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl claimed that Nezahualcoyotl developed a new and just code of laws, but other chroniclers find little to distinguish the Texcocan system of proscriptions and punishments from those of other capitals.

Nezahualcoyotl’s reputation as a sensitive intellectual also made him a suitable subject for bridging the gap between Aztec paganism and Spanish Christianity. Nezahualcoyotl was touted as having initiated monotheism and peaceful rituals (that is, eschewing blood sacrifices), but little solid evidence can be found to support this claim; he seems to have tolerated a wide range of religious practices and piously supported all the deities important to the Aztec rulers. However, Nezahualcoyotl was a widely respected cultural hero and a convenient foil for posthumous use: he could be cast by the Spanish friars as a man before his time, anticipating the enlightenment toward a belief in one god that conquest by Spain would bring.

Nezahualcoyotl’s Place, and the Place of Gardens, in Aztec Political History

The modern scholarly deconstruction of Nezahualcoyotl’s reputation as skilled poet, innovative lawgiver, and religious reformer would seem to have stripped the hero of his powers. But many of his most significant achievements persist, attested to by the broad sweep of history and the solid evidence of archeology.

It is irrefutable that Nezahualcoyotl served as ruler of Texcoco from the early 1430s to his death in 1472, and in that time regained, consolidated, and expanded his domain while he shared in the empire-building enterprises of his Mexica cousins. He saw the deaths of four Mexica rulers, and – most impressive – during all the upheavals of his times he maintained his rulership without having his kingdom absorbed by the Mexica. Given the overwhelming evidence of Mexica meddling in other politics and their overturning of other dynasties, this alone is powerful testimony to Nezahualcoyotl’s skill as a political leader.

Furthermore, he is known to have established horticultural pleasure gardens and nurseries in his realm. The nurseries served diverse purposes. The Aztecs were adept at identifying plants with effective healing properties, and some evidence suggests that rulers kept the rights to the cultivation of some plants for themselves. Flowers and greens were both used to decorate palaces and temples, and royal nurseries could supply these needs, as well as the immature specimens of trees and shrubs that were planted out in gardens and parks.

The establishment of these gardens, with their combined practical and recreational functions, bespeaks a ruler who was both sensible and responsive to beauty. However, the great achievement substantiating Nezahualcoyotl’s multiple talents as political manipulator, sensitive intellectual, civil engineer, and designer of monumental gardens is Texcotzingo, offering evidence as solid as the rock into which his pools and reception rooms were built.

Texcotzingo

As the plan of Texcotzingo (figure 15.3) indicates, the hill was the backdrop upon which Nezahualcoyotl the artist expressed his vision. Nezahualcoyotl the civil engineer and landscape architect designed the flow of sacred, life-giving water so that it blessed various shrines, created micro-environments for the cultivation of rare plants, and then irrigated farming terraces that extended down to his capital, Texcoco.

The eastern side of the hill was dominated by two major features: the aqueduct terminus and its receiving pond, and, 130 feet (40 meters) upslope, a set of plazas overlooking the aqueduct and facing Mt. Tlaloc and the rising sun. Mt. Tlaloc’s summit, about 13,500 feet (4,000 meters) in elevation, was about 8 miles (14 kilometers) southwest of Texcotzingo,



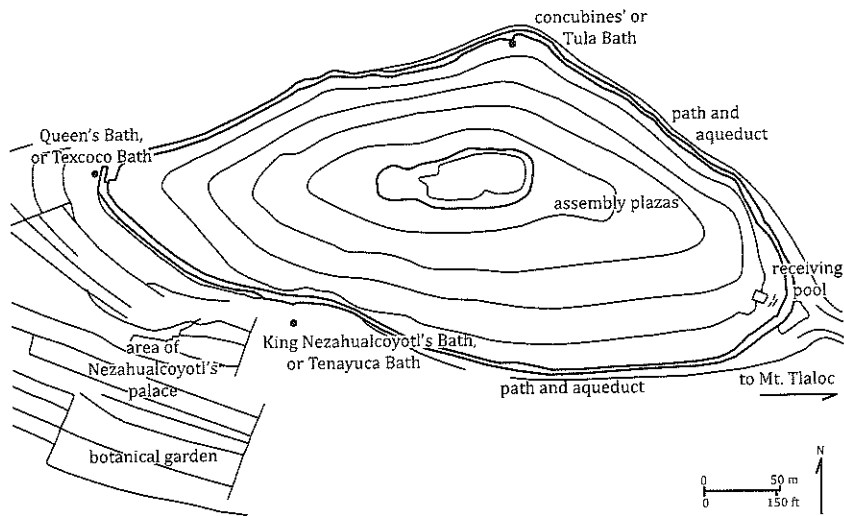


FIGURE 15.3 Plan of Texcotzingo.

and was thought to be the abode of Tlaloc, powerful god of storms and rainwater. It and adjacent mountains were the source of rainfall, runoff, and the regeneration of springs in the eastern Basin of Mexico, Nezahualcoyotl's domain. There was a substantial shrine atop Mt. Tlaloc where Aztec kings made a pilgrimage each year in mid-spring, just before the onset of the rainy season.

The Mt. Tlaloc shrine, with walls about 10 feet (3 meters) high, would have been clearly visible from the east side of Texcotzingo, and the plazas leveled into that side would have been the site of rituals and dances honoring the great storm god. The plazas also would have been excellent for stargazing, one of the responsibilities of Aztec kings. Early chroniclers indicate that there was also a tower near the summit of the hill, but of this no trace remains.

The plazas would have overlooked the feature that made Texcotzingo the wonder of its time: the aqueduct system. The aqueduct brought water from the Tlaloc range and delivered it to Texcotzingo at an elevation of about 180 feet (55 meters) below the summit of the hill. Figure 15.4 shows the western end of the aqueduct, and the small receiving pool from which the waters were redirected to circle the hill. Visiting the site in the mid-nineteenth century, Edward Tylor described:

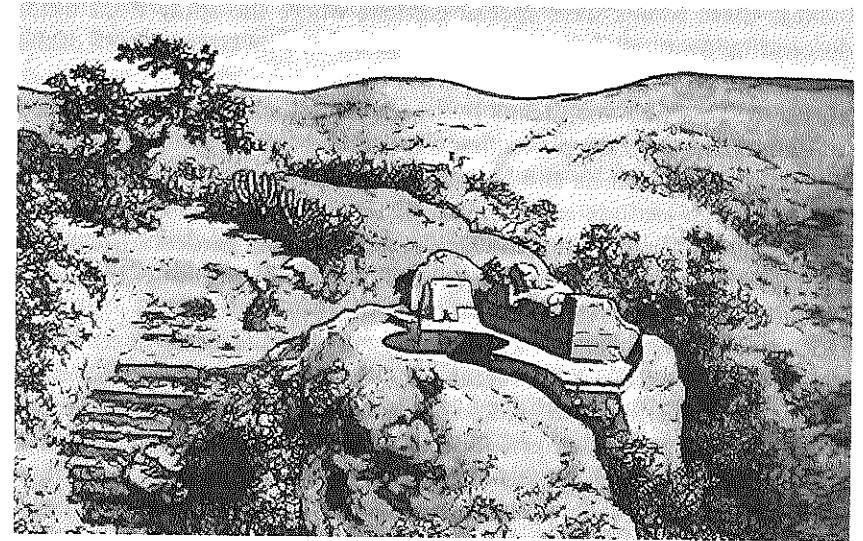


FIGURE 15.4 Tenayuca pool.

an aqueduct of immense size.... The mountains in this part are made of porphyry, and the channel of the aqueduct was made principally of blocks of the same material, on which the smooth stucco that had once covered the whole, inside and out, still remained very perfect. The channel was carried, not on arches, but on a solid embankment, a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet high, and wide enough for a carriage-road.⁵

The western end of the aqueduct has been reconstructed as a set of ascending rectangular platforms built into that end of the hill, the highest being a room fronted with columns looking toward the water as it approached the hill. It is said to have contained an inscribed history of the Acolhua people.

At the same level as the aqueduct, a canal and footpath circled Texcotzingo, and the hill's important monuments are arrayed more or less symmetrically along this feature. There were three main circular rock-cut baths. On the north side is a now-destroyed pool named for Tula; at the west end is one named for Texcoco (also known as the Queen's Bath); and on the southwestern side is the Tenayuca pool (also known as the King's Bath; figure 15.4). Below this southwestern pool lay a series of rectangular and circular rooms that were Nezahualcoyotl's palace.



Near these rooms were special gardens where the spray from water descending from the Tenayuca pool, plus the southwestern aspect of the hill, combined to create a micro-environment where tropical plants were nurtured. This was one means by which Nezahualcoyotl memorialized his domain: he grew the plants that were native to the various areas under his control, and what he and his gardeners could not coax into surviving the chilly high-altitude environment of Texcotzingo, he commemorated with depictions in art. Thus the idea of the botanical garden arose out of a royal imperative to control symbolically the life forms under his political control.

So much of Texcotzingo's complex design has been lost to us. However, we can see clearly that Nezahualcoyotl's great landscape statement not only demonstrated his own technical abilities (or his ability to recognize and use genius in others, another sign of superior intelligence), but also it expressed philosophical statements of several kinds.

First, it was a personal statement of Nezahualcoyotl's own place in the Aztec world: he was a ruler of paramount importance, publicly deferential to the king of Tenochtitlan, but privately taking second place to no one. This is demonstrated by the construction of Texcotzingo, dedicated in 1457, as a statement of conspicuous consumption and elite status rivalry. Having designed Chapultepec Park for his cousins, the Tenochtitlan rulers, he went on to a project that dwarfed that venerable park. While Nezahualcoyotl was completely within his rights to enhance his family's ancient retreat, when Texcotzingo was finished, the Tenochca ruler, Motecuzoma I (r. 1440–69) felt compelled to acquire an extensive property in the tropical climate of the Morelos Valley, just south of Mexico City. There, at Huaxtepec, Motecuzoma had a fabulous garden constructed. For both dynasties, tribute requirements included labor to maintain the gardens and plant material to enhance them, but Huaxtepec was the last great monumental garden to be developed. Nezahualcoyotl died in 1472 and his son, while an able ruler, lacked his interest in expressing a worldview through transforming the landscape.

Second, Texcotzingo expressed Texcoco's place in its own dynastic history. Nezahualcoyotl's ancestors included the kings of Tula, and before Texcoco became their family capital, they had ruled from Tenayuca, across the lake and a little north of Tenochtitlan. King Quinatzin had moved the capital to Texcoco, and was buried at Texcotzingo. Thus the three rock-cut pools represent, respectively, the two ancestral capitals and the present one. The political alliance engineered by Nezahualcoyotl and his Tenochtitlan cousins that was the foundation of the Aztec empire

is represented by a set of sculptures set on the edge of the Texcoco pool: three frogs represent Texcoco, Tenochtitlan, and their somewhat less important ally, Tlacopan.

At the cosmic level, Texcotzingo honored the sacred spirits of water and mountains, and here Nezahualcoyotl made his waterfall mountain into a living embodiment of the most important Mesoamerican political principle, that of the *altépetl*, a word which combines the Nahuatl (Aztec) words for "water" and "hill" into an essential notion of the city state, the most basic unit of political life, conveying the ideas of water and land that provided security to the community. Thus Texcotzingo was another example of a representation linked, metaphorically, to other objects and concepts. In the case of Texcotzingo, the monumental garden is related to a philosophical concept (the *altépetl*) based on geographical reality but standing for a political entity. Nezahualcoyotl had begun his career of landform philosophizing at Chapultepec, another mountain-and-water-source that was essential to the definition of an ambitious community, in this case Tenochtitlan. From the heights of Chapultepec, the young prince in exile could look northeast (see figure 15.2), over Tenochtitlan, over the lake, and discern his capital, then in enemy hands, and beyond it, the hill that was his family's sacred retreat. With huge effort, he would regain his kingdom. And then he would make a water-hill of Texcotzingo that would truly actualize Texcoco as his own vital *altépetl*. Seldom, in human history, has one individual so completely realized in solid form the ideals of his culture as did Nezahualcoyotl at Texcotzingo.

NOTES

- 1 Translated for this publication by Susan Toby Evans. © 2010 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- 2 S. T. Evans, "Green Evolution: Landscape Design and Culture Change in Ancient Mesoamerica," *Anales de Antropología* 39 (2005): 99–110.
- 3 F. Diego, *Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar*, trans. and ed. F. Horcasitas and D. Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), pp. 3–47.
- 4 E. Umberger, "Appendix 3: Material Remains in the Central Provinces," in F. F. Berdan, R. E. Blanton et al., *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), p. 251.
- 5 E. B. Tylor, *Anahuac: Mexico and the Mexicans* (New York: Bergman, 1970).

