

Lacustrine battles carried out by the Mexica people: Use of war canoes in Tenochtitlan

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Abstract

There have been multiple studies in relation to the political, military and ritualistic confrontations between ancient societies, which have been carried out to address the problem of war in pre-Hispanic times. In particular, we are interested here in approaching the problem of the existence of an armed navy which participated in the confrontations that took place in the lake that surrounded the Mexica capital, before and during the process of conquest, in order to propose some guidelines which may help us to understand the complexity that hardly looms, in relation to these lake battles. By turning our attention to the spatio-temporal context that interests us, the Mexica in the Late Post Classic period on the island of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, we have found evidence regarding the fact that the canoes, in this sense, seem to have worked as a specialized mechanism within this context, providing huge advantages to its users for defense and offense during the fighting tactics involving both land and water confrontations.

Keywords: Mexica, canoe, navigation, war, lake, Mexico, Spain, nautical, archaeology

Introduction

It is possible to identify in the case of Mesoamerica, some examples of scenes where we can recognize boats driven by what could be described as armed commandos; such is the case of sheets 75 and 80 of the *Nutall Codex*, where Lord 8 Deer, with his half older brother, Lord 12 Movement, join the Lord 4 Jaguar in his expedition to conquer the Gulf Coast, by navigating in what appears to be war canoes (Jansen, 1997). There are many interesting scenes represented in Maya vases photographed by Justin Kerre where we can observe diverse deities fighting against marine monsters in their canoes (Grofe, 2007). Another example is the mural paintings found in several Chichén Itzá buildings; in the interior walls at the Warriors Temple were discovered two murals which were reconstructed by Earl Morris in 1930: *Attack on a town and captive holding* and *Coastal town* (Staines, 2004). Many of the Mexica examples will be described in the

next lines. As we can see, the use of canoes in different kind of water battles in Mesoamerica is unquestionable, nevertheless, in the case of the Mexica, there has been a constant discussion regarding the existence or inexistence of what could be described as an armed navy (Bravo, 2005; Hassig, 1992). Starting from this point and with the evidence presented in the next lines, we propose that there was no such thing as a specific Mexica navy, but one armed body capable of using both land and water with the purpose of fighting. And yet so, those canoes used in war activities, were also part of the complex military system in which they functioned as attack and defense mechanisms, and not only functioned as a mean of transportation. Such seems to have been the relevance of the boats in the pre-Hispanic context that in the 04v sheet of *the Mendocino Codex* there is a scene where some Mexica warriors were murdered by Chalco people, who also took the trouble to destroy their canoes. From the matter exposed above, we make the next questions to the available information: which was the logistic in the Mexica fleet? How were their boats? Is it possible to characterize a naval Mexica tradition that confronted the Spanish maritime tradition? We will try to develop some answers to this and also formulate some others that we can't answer yet.

What has been said about the Mexica lake battles?

Let us now consider the space and time context, which interest us: the Mexica society during the Late Post classic period in the Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco Island. We have already mentioned that any attack to the population within the lake probably demanded a considerable military effort, war material and specialized resources both by them and by their enemies (Goñi, 2008). The written sources made by the witnesses soldiers of the battles, or by some of the chroniclers such as Fray Diego Durán or Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, give us a vast amount of information about the functioning of what has been described as the Mexica fleet. Fray Juan de Torquemada, for example, tells us about this the following:

[...] the Mexica ns, not only did they exercised in making boats, to run along the lagoon, leading far ahead in the fisheries and hunts within it, contracting with all the people, filling with supply their city, but also they garnished their boats and canoes, exercising themselves in the things of war, by water, understanding that from now on it would be necessary to be right and provided in the military art,

since they always needed to free their city, by the force of weapons (Torquemada, 1975-1983: 151).

The chronicles written by Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Hernán Cortés, have been studied before by historian Isabel Bravo Bueno, who took their stories as primary sources so she could describe the war activities in which canoes were the protagonists (Bravo, 2005). In relation to this subject, author Ross Hassig has established that tactical use of the boats could have resolved logistics problems, by minimizing transport costs and time, this for the towns in the lakeshore and also for the people living in the island, which were also rapidly reachable (Hassig, 1990). In our case, in order to approach the subject, we will expose other examples of lacustrine battles which are described in colonial sources; this will allow advancing some initial guidelines in our conclusions.

Battles carried out by Mexica before and with the arrival of the Spaniards: recognizing some tactics in the lacustrine warfare

The first fight against Culhuacan

Regarding the confrontation that Mexica had with the Culhuacan people before Tenochtitlan was established, when the leader of the second ones, Achitometl, recognized his daughter flayed in a ritual organized by the Mexica, Fernando de Alvarado Tezozómoc described in his *Mexica n Chronicle*, a specific moment when these found themselves cornered in the lake (Tezozómoc, 1980). In order to save themselves it was necessary that they ran away navigating in some cane rafts built in that precise moment. This passage has been drawn in the *Aubin Codex*; where there are four characters sailing in the above mentioned rafts. What is interesting about these is that in the *Mexica yotl Chronicle*, Tezozomoc tells another version of the same facts, where the Mexica s crossed the lake by sailing in their own shields:

Culhuacans then pursued the Mexica ns, by throwing them to water, and when they were thrown here they conquered a place called Acatzintitlan, when Culhuacans got angry, then perhaps they hid in the water. Then when they were pursued by the Culhuacans, they crossed in here sitting on their shields (Tezozómoc, 1998: 58).

There is a painting in the 11 sheet of the *Azcatitlan Codex* where this scene is represented, and where we can observe the Mexica sailing their *chimallis*¹. Both versions present different perspectives about the matter of our concern due to the fact that the ability to construct rafts in the first version lets us know that this people already carried with them some kind of knowledge about the use they could give to canoes and how to appropriate the lake. On the other hand, Pablo Escalante Gonzalbo has developed the possibility that the second version involving the shields may be related with some European stories that may have arrive to the hands of both the authors of the written and the painted versions. We must remember that indigenous identity in the XVI century was not isolated from the European Renaissance humanist culture. In the version where the escape is carried out with the use of the defensive weapons (the *chimallis* or shields), seems to be related to a crucial episode in the history of Rome in which the people had to defend themselves from the Etruscans. Escalante refers to author Andrea Alciato and his oeuvre *Emblemata*, a popular text from the time of Renaissance humanism that was studied in rhetoric classes at universities in the colonial Mexico (Escalante, 2008). Here we will emphasize the following: based on the story told by Tezozómocin respect to the fighting between Mexica and Culhuacan before the foundation of Tenochtitlan, and those images in the codices referred to above, we may at least say that in the memory of the mestizo author and those *tlacuilos* (painters) who created the pictorial documents it is possible to infer the need to transmit an episode in the early colonial discourse, where before the establishment of the Mexica capital a basic handling of some form of water transport is recognized at a time of military confrontation.

The Tenochcas fight against Cuitlahuac

It is important to also mention the military campaign which Mexica ruler, Itzcóatl, made against the people of Cuitlahuac, an island between Xochimilco and Chalco. Fray Diego Durán actually describes how by the times of Itzcoatl, the Mexica already had many enemies since they were so tenacious thanks to their control of the lake (Durán, 1967). The reason why the Mexica confronted Cuitlahuac is that Xochitl Olinqui, Cuitlahuac's *tlahtoani* (governor), felt offended after the Mexica invited Cuitlahuac's women to dance in honor to Huitzilopochtli. And so a war started, and Mexica soldiers

had to fight in the lake and won the battle. There were other successful conquests by Itzcoatl in Tenayuca, Tepanohuayan, Toltitan, Cuauhtitlan and Xaltocan, and Isabel Bravo Bueno has attributed this success to the use of the canoes which benefited the logistics and tactics of the war (Bravo, 2005).

The clues to identify who were those that fought in the canoes

One of the arguments that makes it harder to recognize the organization of an armed group exclusively created to fight in the lakes, is the fact that there are some historical passages that describes how the abilities of the average people were used during lacustrine battles. It seems that in some cases, the warriors who fought in land were transported in the canoes by skilled rowers during the fight, and also that the same fishermen and bird hunters took part when it was necessary, maybe to make up for the lack of a group specifically trained to combat in the lake. During Axayacatl's rule in Tenochtitlan, a bloody battle occurred between Tenochcas and Tlatelolcas, when these last ones found one of their dikes completely destroyed, preventing the transit of canoes. Tlatelolco's ruler, Moquihuixtli, tried to convince the Huejotzingas and Tlaxcaltecas that all together should fight the Tenochcas, though the first ones denied participating in such war, the ruler decided to continue with the affront. Before the fight, the king Moquihuixtli summoned more than a thousand young fisherman and bird hunters from Tlatelolco, in order to create an effective army against the Tenochcas. Previous to the battle, the governor tested them by faking a great bird hunt in the lake. This seems to surprisingly reveal some kind of training in the operation of the canoes and the practice of attacks (Durán, 1967:254-255).

This story was written by Fray Diego Durán, and in it we could glimpse the possibility that in effect, young fishermen were trained or at least selected by how they managed their weapons and canoes. By following this reasoning we dare to question: Perhaps this story alludes to the eternal condition of the Mexica as hunters and lake fishermen? We must remember they were such even before arriving to the Mexico Lake, according to their own history. We need to consider that relation between men and lacustrine environment had already been developed before Mexica people arrived to the Basin of Mexico. It seems to be, that through all their history, the need to be constantly identified with a society that could dominate the water bodies (since that group that started its

journey from the mythical city of Aztlan was formed by skilled fishermen) would justify their settlement choice in the Tenochtitlan Island. Their way of life was clearly impregnated by a lacustrine identity, and so they created for themselves a history according to that essentially aquatic universe (Espinosa, 1996).

The last battle in the lake: Mexica people against Spaniards and their indigenous allies

The main information about the lacustrine battles that took place around the Island of Tenochtitlan is available directly in the Spanish Chronicles. Nevertheless we must remember that not all of them were eye witnesses of the events, and those who were had a tendency to exaggerate some of their data in order to fulfill a specific purpose. One thing is sure, and this is that the Spanish soldiers rapidly realized they were in major trouble since the most effective mean of movement in the lake were the canoes (Goñi, 2008). Among the first mentions regarding this way of transport, we found one where Hernán Cortés lets us know that they were used to immediately escape from Tenochtitlan the minute the Spaniards arrived.

[...] certain Spaniards got into some high rooftop, where they could subjugate the entire city, and saw how all natural disarmed her and ones, with their properties, they entered the lake with their canoes, they call acales and others went up to the mountains (Cortés, 2002: 137).

From this passage we also obtained the information related to the canoe name in Nahuatl, according to the Vocabulary of Fray Alonso de Molina they were named *acalli* (Molina, 2008). About those canoes utilized in the battles, there seems to have existed at least two types. One of them with no difference between the flat fore and aft as it is possible to observe in the 45 sheet of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. The other type is a reinforced canoe, with wood boards integrated in such a way they worked as shields to protect the soldiers from fire and attacks as Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Isabel Bravo Bueno lets us know (Bravo, 2005):

[...] and since the musketeers and the crossbowmen shoot those who went in canoes, they had them well armed with wood boards, and behind these boards, they were kept well (Díaz del Castillo, 2007: 299-300).

And so, they were two ways of protection used by the warriors: their own shields integrated into the canoes as it is observed in the sheet 45 previously named, or well, the wood boards as observed in the 154 sheet of *Florentine Codex*. Regarding the attack tactics, the same kind of tricks developed in land were used in the lakes. Sometimes sunken traps were used to plunge enemy boats and other times by faking runaways and then returning to attack (Bravo, 2005). There is also an interesting description by Sahagún where an attack tactic consists in the coordinated action of two pairs of warriors, each one with an eagle warrior and a jaguar warrior. Together in a canoe they travel fast against the enemy; then the other couple does the same, not without first hiding the insignias which are described to be carved in the boats. This may lead us to think that the warrior's boats had an easily recognizable distinctive:

When the Mexica warriors saw what they were doing and plotting, then they started to think what they would have to do. And after they thought it, right away there comes a boat; very slightly they went rowing and put it on the wayside. There was not any badge to be seen, since they were well covered. Right away comes another canoe. Also with careful and excuses they were rowing. And then again two boats come: and thus they were four (Sahagún, 1975: 785).

The only pictorial example related to the passage above mentioned is in the 41 sheet of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, where it can be observed a scene where Hernán Cortés arrives to Texcoco. On the upper left sector of the image there is a canoe with the bow carved in the shape of the head of what could be an eagle. It is important to reinforce the idea that the battles that took place around the Island implied that land and lacustrine attacks became a unity. From the combination of both armed bodies it has been deduced that army included with no doubt, naval war. Even author Ross Hassig uses the term in Nahuatl, *chimalacalli* in order to refer to this armed body, even though the Molina's Vocabulary does not register it. Actually, this word appears constantly in the twelfth book of Sahagún's oeuvre, referring to the ships that had an integrated defense dispositive, those war canoes previously described. In that case it would make sense that Hassig used this word to describe a "naval militia" inside the Mexica army, although this one may not have really existed.

In order to conclude

We must indicate that we agree with historian Isabel Bravo Bueno about the fact that for now it is possible to say that those who lived in the lake surroundings, this means, fishermen, bird hunters, rowers and those who had the abilities to navigate the canoes, were also capable to form part of this “Mexican navy” that troubled so much the Spaniards in their attempt to conquer Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco (Bravo, 2005; Favila; 2011). And so, we have tried to delineate some of the ways and tactics that took place during the lacustrine battles. Regarding the existence or not, of a military body specifically created to attack by water, with the historical sources analysis and the pictographic evidences, it is not possible to reach a conclusive answer yet. But we do believe that some clearance is reached if we take into account that the naval militia that Ross Hassig referred to, may actually indicate the existence of those war canoes, or maybe, the author was using the term *chimalacalli*² in its plural condition (sometimes a word in Nahuatl does not need a grammatical mark for plural) and for this reason he assumed the existence of the armed navy. We must not forget also, that according to written sources, those who navigated the war canoes were actually rowers dedicated to this (Sahagún, 1975), and not properly the warriors. Finally, we believe there is still much to say about the canoes with badges, since there is still much to rescue from the many references to lacustrine battles in the old texts. In general, it seems to be that canoes may have played a role as one of the symbols of the Mexica control around the lake region, since they carried the capacity to dominate and rule the lacustrine basin, giving shape to a particular way of life which allowed the success of a society that managed to appropriate the lake.

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Endnotes

¹Accordingly with the *Vocabulario...* of Fray Alonso de Molina, *chimalli* refers to some kind of shield (Molina, 2008).

²Perhaps this word is also related to those versions mentioned above where the Mexicas fought the Culhuacans, and because of that they had to navigate in their shields.

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Biography

Mariana Favila Vázquez is an archaeologist who graduated from the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH), and is currently studying her master's degree in Mesoamerican Studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), with specialization in Mesoamerican Archaeology. She has developed some studies regarding the Pre-Hispanic navigation in Mesoamerica and coordinated some seminars concerning this subject in order to expand the interest between degree students.