

Forging a trail

In 1803, when Alexander von Humboldt traveled to New Spain to study its inhabitants, he was one of the first to speculate that nature and humans are interrelated, that human populations form an integral and organic part of their environment. He was especially intrigued by a hieroglyphic record of early Aztec migration, which seemed to corroborate his observations.

When entire societies pick themselves up and move to new lands, as the Aztecs did, they alter the cultural and physical landscape in their wake. Their customs and traditions make the journey with them, and they forge a trail for others to follow. Migration, which could be for political or religious or economic reasons, can now turn into travel, which could be simply for personal reasons. As people begin traveling along these paths, their accounts of their journeys become guidance and instruction for future travelers.

“To give an accurate idea of the indigenous inhabitants of New Spain. . . we must go back to a remote period when, governed by its own laws, the nation could display its proper energy; and we must consult the hieroglyphic paintings, buildings of hewn stone, and works of sculpture still in preservation.”

Alexander von Humboldt,
in his Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain, 1811.

Cuadro Histórico-Geográfico de la Peregrinación de las Tribus Aztecas que Poblaron el Valle de Mexico.

Antonio García y Cubas and José Fernando Ramírez, 1858. Mexico.

Although only three hundred copies of García y Cubas’s *Atlas Geográfico, Estadístico e Histórico de la República Mexicana* were ever made, it remains significant as the first national atlas to be published and printed in Mexico, by a Mexican. It contains maps of each province, as well as this reproduction of a sixteenth century drawing tracing the pilgrimage of the ancient Aztecs from their traditional home in Aztlan to Tenochtitlán in the Valley of Mexico.

The migration is thought to have begun at the end of the ninth century and lasted for several hundred years. More a timeline than a conventional map, this rendering distorts distance and direction to show the route and significant events of the Aztec journey. The blue square in the upper right represents their starting point at Aztlan. Each occurrence of the plant-like symbols along the footstep-marked route, like the one to the right of Aztlan, represents the passage of an Aztec cycle, approximately fifty-two years. Groupings of small dots show passages of time less than a full cycle, with each dot recording a single year.

In 1325, the Aztec people finally settled in Tenochtitlán, now Mexico City, represented by the blue cross in the lower left of the illustration, between the two blue lines. They enjoyed two hundred years of relative peace and prosperity here before the deadly battles of the Spanish Conquest.

