

In Space + Spatial Analysis in Archaeology,  
Edited by E.C. Robertson, J.D. Searles, D. Fernandez,  
& M. Zender (2006) Univ. of Calgary Press

## WEAVING SPACE: TEXTILE IMAGERY AND LANDSCAPE IN THE MIXTEC CODICES

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### ABSTRACT

Mixtec pictorial manuscripts from Late Postclassic Oaxaca represent textiles as costume but also in relation to both the natural and built environments. This paper relates these apparently anomalous images to accounts of the mythical weaving of sacred landscapes. Weaving metaphors become important for interpreting emic concepts of the sacred landscape and, based on the engendered quality of costume elements and of spinning and weaving as stereotypically female practice, add a gendered worldview to Mixtec ideology. We suggest that by representing the natural landscape as "woven," the Mixtec brought it into the cultural realm, and therefore claimed control over natural forces.

Pictorial manuscripts from late pre-Conquest and early Colonial Oaxaca, Mexico – known as Mixtec codices after the cultural group that produced them – contain important historical as well as cultural information. Most scholarly interpretations of these manuscripts focus on their genealogical information as a means of constructing culture histories (e.g., Anders et al. 1992; Caso 1979), or the continuity of ideas into modern folk traditions (e.g., Jansen 1990; Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2000; Monaghan 1990). More archaeologically oriented research considers the activities of the codex actors as a window onto past cultural behaviour, and the objects depicted as contextually meaningful material culture (e.g., McCafferty and McCafferty 1994). At the 2000 Chacmool Conference we adopted this latter perspective in a costume analysis of over 3,100 individuals as a step toward inferring such social identities as gender, occupation and ethnicity (McCafferty and McCafferty 2000). That analysis included not only a typology of the clothing items

themselves, but also a detailed catalogue of the design elements used on each clothing category.

In the course of that analysis, we began to notice textiles and textile patterns that were used in non-costume situations, particularly as design elements on the façades of buildings and on elements of the natural environment (e.g., hills). In this spin-off of the initial study, we will characterize the use of textile imagery in these situations, and suggest what this may reveal about the emic conceptualization of the built and natural environments by the Postclassic Mixtec.

"Mixtec" describes a cultural group that speaks an Oto-Manguean language, Mixtec, and occupies the western portion of the modern state of Oaxaca, as well as sections of the adjoining states of Guerrero and Puebla. The Mixtec region extends from Pacific coastal tropics to high mountains with many small, temperate valleys in which, during the Postclassic period (ca. 900–1520 C.E.), numerous autonomous city-states existed (Byland and Pohl 1994; Spores 1967). The few Mixtec codices that survive relate mythological and historical details of the Postclassic period (Jansen 1992; Troike 1978). Archaeological investigations, primarily in the form of settlement pattern surveys (e.g., Byland 1980; Spores 1972), provide additional information. Unfortunately, little excavation of Postclassic architecture has occurred, so archaeological support for the codical patterns is scarce. Michael Lind (1979) did expose architectural decoration associated with elite residential structures in the Nochixtlan Valley. Outside of the Mixteca, the Valley of Oaxaca site of Mitla features standing architecture with possible textile patterns in stone mosaic on the building façades (Hamann 1997; Pohl 1999).

The Mixtec codices provide a wide range of imagery, including marriage scenes, births, military



Figure 1. Hills in the *Codex Vindobonensis* (1992:9–10): (a) hill with star band; (b) hill with jewelled woman; (c) hill of jaguar; (d) hill with dual faces; (e) hill with storm god.



Figure 2. (a) Anthropomorphic hill with pregnant belly and arms (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:82); (b) anthropomorphic hill beating drum (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:73).

campaigns, religious rituals and political machinations, among others. Interspersed among these actions are landscape elements, both natural and artificial, such as hills, plains, rivers, temples and ball courts. Often these feature iconographic elements used as toponyms to name the place of the social action. Standardized symbols, described by Mary Elizabeth Smith (1973), provide identifying traits for the geographic features. Further elements serve to name the sites. For example, in the *Codex Vindobonensis* (1992:9–10) a range of twelve hills are decorated with naming elements, including human and animal heads, a fully clothed mannequin with mask, and a storm god face (Figure 1).

On numerous occasions, places in the natural environment are identified with anthropomorphic traits. For example, in the *Codex Nuttall* (1992:82) there is a hill that features bent arms and legs, and a distended abdomen suggesting pregnancy (Figure 2a). Again in the *Codex Nuttall* (1992:73) a hill with head, hands and

feet sings while beating a drum and holding a rattle (Figure 2b). Anthropomorphic landscapes complement the many zoomorphic elements also found throughout the codices, suggesting a conceptualization of the natural landscape as having lifelike qualities. This is discussed in detail in John Monaghan's ethnographic studies (1995), where the people of Nu'yoo in the Mixteca Alta recognize a range of anthropomorphic earth spirits, known as *ñuhu*.

In addition to the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic elements that appear on landscape elements, other patterns are typically used, including interlocked diamonds and dots, and groupings of perpendicular lines. These are characteristic textile patterns, suggesting that some aspects of the natural landscape were conceptualized metaphorically as woven. Weaving was considered a female task in many pre-Columbian cultures (McCafferty and McCafferty 1991), and was also linked metaphorically to sexual reproduction (Sullivan

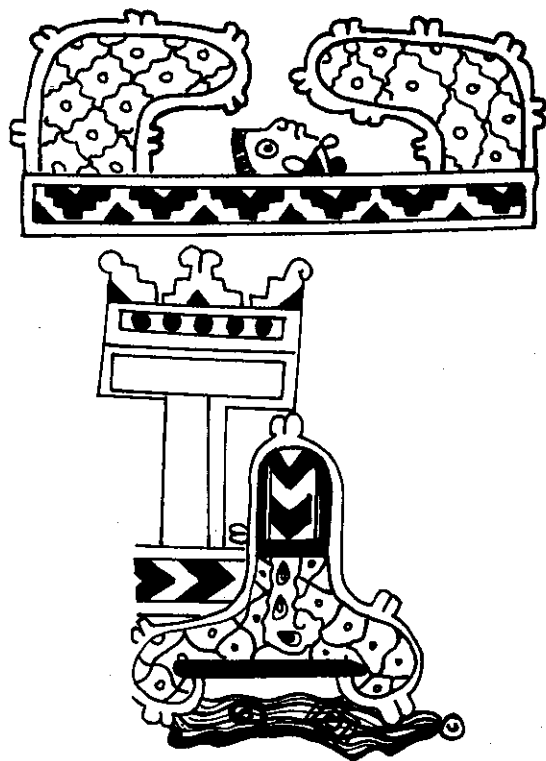


Figure 3. (a) Diamond-and-dot pattern on hill with cave (*Codex Selden* 1964:1); (b) diamond-and-dot pattern on hill with architectural feature (*Codex Egerton/Sanchez Solis* 1994:31).



Figure 4. Woman's skirt with diamond-and-dot pattern (*Codex Egerton/Sanchez Solis* 1994:13).

1982). The process of transforming raw materials such as cotton or maguey into a highly cultured good (i.e., cloth) was an important symbol of "civilization," and distinction between clothed and unclothed was used by the Aztecs to critique their barbarian cousins from the wild north. We suggest that by clothing the landscape, Mixtecs were bringing it into the domain of culture.

The interlocked diamond-and-dot pattern is known to weavers as the "point twill" motif, defined as "a straight twill that reverses direction at intervals" (Strickler 1991:25). In the codices it usually occurs on mountains or plains. For example, in the opening scene of the *Codex Selden* (1964:1) a cavernous mountain (with a head in the cave) is covered by the diamond-and-dot pattern (Figure 3a). This pattern occurs often in the *Codex Egerton/Sanchez Solis* (1994), usually with an architectural element on top of the hill (Figure 3b). It is also the most common decorative motif on wom-

en's skirts in the *Codex Egerton/Sanchez Solis* (Figure 4). In fact, in our costume analysis (McCafferty and McCafferty 2000) this motif only occurs on female costume elements such as skirts and upper body garments such as *huipiles* and *quechquemits*.

Patricia Anawalt (1990, 1998) identifies a blue variant of this motif in relation to Toltec identity, and infers its use by later Aztec nobles as a symbolic claim to Toltec ancestry and, thereby, legitimacy. The pattern occurs on a wide variety of objects, including ceramic vessels in the Nahuatl *Codex Borgia* of the Puebla-Tlaxcala region, where the pattern might better be interpreted as simply implying preciousness (Chadwick and MacNeish 1967), perhaps relating to the jade *chalchihuites*. The restricted use in Mixtec manuscripts suggests that this meaning should not apply to our case.

Panels of interlocking half diamonds (i.e., triangles), often with dots or small squares, are a common motif especially in the *Codex Nuttall* (1992). The motif



Figure 5. Lord 7 Lizard on hill decorated with plaited twill motif (*Codex Selden* 1964:11-3).

occurs alone to indicate a plain, or as a panel on hill glyphs. It is also a common element on architectural façades, to be discussed below. The panel of interlocking triangles is identified by Smith (1973:38-39) by the Mixtec term *ñuu*, meaning "city" in much the same way as the Nahuatl *tollan*. On costumes, the pattern occurs as a decorative border element on men's upper body garments.

The second textile pattern that shows up often on the natural landscape consists of groupings of parallel lines that abut at right angles, or nearly right angles, with others. This pattern is known as a "plaited twill," defined as "a weave in which opposing diagonal lines seem to interlace or braid with each other" (Strickler 1991:100). In the Mixtec codices it appears on mountains, plains, and even in the water and on a flowering tree depicted as part of a supernatural birth. For example, in the *Codex Selden* (1964:11-3) a man named 7 Lizard sits on the lower slope of a hill glyph identified by a long thin textile, probably a male loincloth. The body of the hill is decorated with the plaited twill pattern (Figure 5). The same pattern occurs where two individuals sit in a body of water bounded by a feathered serpent (*Codex Selden* 1964:1-2). Note that parallel scenes appear in the *Codex Nuttall* (1992) and *Codex Vindobonensis* (1992) but without the plaited twill pattern, suggesting that the pattern is not necessary to

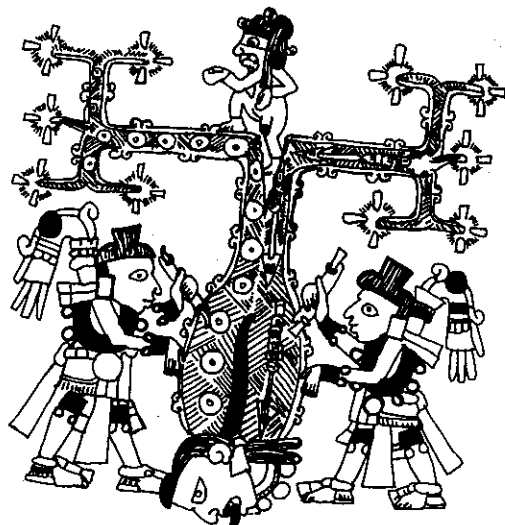


Figure 6. Tree birth scene with plaited twill motif on trunk (*Codex Vindobonensis* 1992:37-2).

the story (the plaited twill does appear in other contexts in these codices).

A famous scene from the *Codex Vindobonensis* (1992:37-2) depicts a split tree, whose base is in the form of a female head (Figure 6). Two individuals are using hafted tools to score the tree trunk, which is split open and a naked man emerges from the split. The tree trunk is decorated with the plaited twill pattern, and further elaborated with arrows on the right side and perforated disks, perhaps spindle whorls, on the left. Elsewhere we have discussed the structural equivalence linking male weapons and female weaving tools (McCafferty and McCafferty 1989).

The use of textile patterns to represent the natural landscape may relate to a Zapotec origin myth in which the landscape was created when supernatural twins stole the weaving tools of the old goddess and threw them down to create mountains in order to obstruct pursuers (Parsons 1936:222-223, 324-328; see also McCafferty et al. 1994). A woven landscape is also an important concept among the Huichol, where Stacy Schaefer has observed loom parts that represent landmarks on the peyote pilgrimage (1990). Weaving tools such as battens, spindles and whorls are often carried by powerful women as symbols of their authority over the female domains of creation and procreation (McCafferty and McCafferty 1989, 1991), as



Figure 7. Lady 13 Flower holding weaving batten and spindle (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:19).

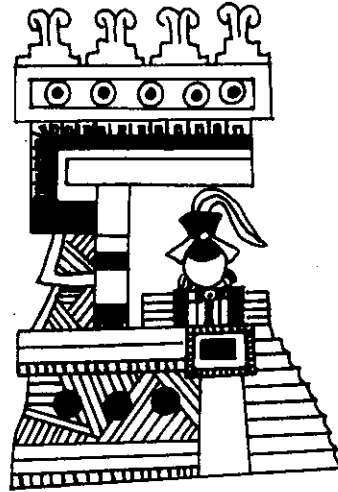


Figure 8. Temple with plaited twill motif on façade (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:78–3).

demonstrated in the representation of Lady 13 Flower in the *Codex Nuttall* (1992:19), where the goddess associated with sexuality and textile production carries a spindle with whorl and spun thread along with a batten (Figure 7). Spinning and weaving tools were also important components of Tomb 7 at Monte Albán and Tomb 1 at Zaachila, where the highly ornamented carved bones served as effigy tools as well as symbols of female power (Hamann 1997; McCafferty and McCafferty 1994).

Textile patterns also occur as decorative elements on the façades of buildings. In some cases they are similar to the motifs already discussed, such as the plaited and point twills. For example, in the *Codex Nuttall* (1992:78–3) a temple with a long staircase features the plaited twill pattern in red and white on the pyramidal base, and also on two levels of the temple wall (Figure 8). The base also has three gold-coloured disks in a horizontal line. Two solid-coloured bands with a third band of alternating black and white appear both at the top and bottom of the base. This border is very typical of woven garments in the codices, with the alternating black-and-white panel representing the fringe at the base of a woven textile where the warp strings are tied off (e.g., *Codex Nuttall* 1992:12–1; *Codex Vindobonensis* 1992:12–1). Another fringe element appears around the roof of the temple. As mentioned previously, the

plaited twill pattern is a consistently female design element, as are the fringe styles.

The diamond-and-dot/point twill motif is less common as an architectural design (e.g., *Codex Nuttall* 1992:19a). On the other hand, the interlocked triangles that represent half diamonds are quite common. In the *Códice Alfonso Caso* (1996:36) a sacrificial victim stands on a small platform with *talud-tablero* construction (Figure 9). The vertical *tablero* features interlocked triangles within a frame of two coloured bands. A staircase in the centre of the platform features a balustrade on either side, painted with red lines on a white background. The red-on-white pattern is often reproduced on costume cloth, for example in the *Codex Vindobonensis* (1992:9), where a woman sits spinning with a skirt of identical pattern.

The *Codex Selden* features two complex place signs that incorporate a motif of a large dot surrounded by smaller dots, a pattern that is also found on priestly upper body garments. In the *Codex Selden* (1964:2–1) a man and woman sit on a woven mat in front of a temple in a walled courtyard (Figure 10). The courtyard is depicted with the dot motif and a red swirl motif that may represent a spring or a well. In the *Codex Selden* (1964:9–3) a temple with a sweatbath rests on a hill with a cave monster. The background, probably representing the floor of the temple compound, uses the



Figure 9. Sacrificial victim on temple platform decorated with interlocked triangles of point twill motif (*Códice Alfonso Caso* 1996:36).

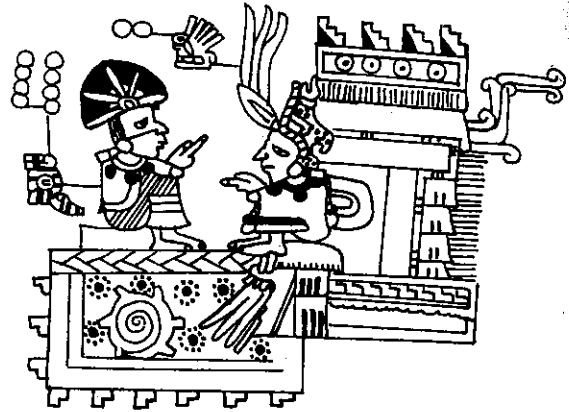


Figure 10. Man and woman in courtyard decorated with concentric dot motif (*Codex Selden* 1964:2-1).



Figure 11. a) Lord 10 Monkey wearing upper body garment with concentric dot motif (*Codex Selden* 1964:14-3); b) mountain impersonator wearing cloth decorated with concentric dot motif (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:15-2).

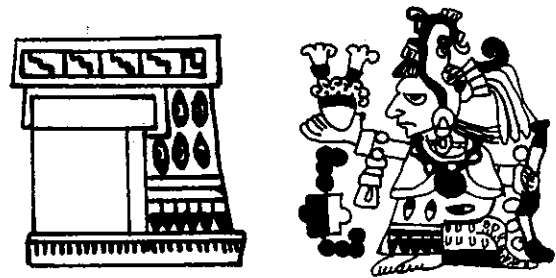


Figure 12. a) Temple with cloth decorated with flint knife motif (*Codex Vindobonensis* 1992:9); b) Lady 8 Movement's skirt with flint knife motif (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:35-2).



Figure 13. a) Stepped fret motif on the Temple of the Ascending Serpent (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:15–2); b) stepped fret motif on priestly cloak (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:25–2); c) male loin-cloth decorated with triangle and hatch marks (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:79–4).

dot pattern. An example of this pattern on costumes includes Lord 10 Monkey, who wears a priestly upper body garment decorated with the dot pattern while incensing a divine bundle at a temple at Jaltepec in the *Codex Selden* (1964:14–3; Figure 11a). Similar priestly garments appear in *Codex Nuttall* 25–1 and 25–2 (1992). The pattern also occurs on a cloth covering for a mountain impersonator in *Codex Nuttall* 15–2 (1992), where Lady 3 Flint Shell Quechquemilt offers incense and holds a weaving pick (Figure 11b).

Other architectural features with costume elements include a temple in the *Codex Vindobonensis* (1992:9) with a “garment” hung from the back wall like a cape (Figure 12a). The garment is decorated with flint knife motifs, coloured bands, and a fringe with more knives. Flint knives appear on both male and female costumes, as on the skirt of Lady 8 Movement in the *Codex Nuttall* (1992:35–2; Figure 12b).

The temple roof in *Codex Nuttall* 26–3 (1992) is decorated with a panel of curved frets. The stepped fret, known as a *xicalcolihqui*, appears as a panel on the lower portion of the Temple of the Ascending Serpent in *Codex Nuttall* 15–2 (1992; Figure 13a). A similar fret pattern appears on a priestly cloak in *Codex Nuttall* 25–2 (1992; Figure 13b). The *xicalcolihqui* motif probably represents the profile of a cut conch shell, and was the symbol of the wind god Ehecatl, an avatar of Quetzalcoatl. This temple also features the half-diamond-and-dot motif and a panel of concentric circles, another pattern which occurs on the borders of female

and male costumes. The balustrade of the staircase has another red-on-white decoration, as discussed above. The *tablero* at the top of the balustrade features a red triangle surrounded by small hatch marks, a pattern found on male loin cloths such as that of 4 Jaguar in *Codex Nuttall* 79–4 (1992; Figure 13c).

## DISCUSSION

Elements of the natural and built environment are decorated with textile patterns and decorative motifs identical to those found on human costumes. Major design elements such as the twill patterns are embellished with specific designs, and contextualized as costume through the addition of border and fringe elements. In *Codex Nuttall* 79–3 (1992) two males kneel on a temple platform that is shown frontally with decoration including borders and fringes and even a neck hole as if the entire structure was arrayed in clothing (Figure 14).

Pyramids were conceptualized as artificial mountains, as at Cholula where the Great Pyramid is known literally as Tlachihualtepetl, “man-made mountain” (McCafferty 2001). Maya pyramids were known as *witz*, again the name used to indicate mountains. In Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, pyramid platforms were known as *cue*, a derivative of the word for skirt, *cueitl*. The slopes of a mountain are known in

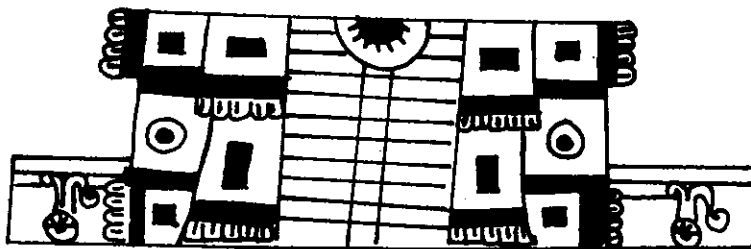


Figure 14. Temple platform with costume-like borders, fringes and neck hole (*Codex Nuttall* 1992:79-3).

Mexican Spanish as the *faldas*, or skirts, and one of the major mountains of the Puebla area, now known as La Malinche, was originally called Matlalcueye, "lady of the blue-green skirt," because of the forested slopes below the tree line. The use of textile patterns to cover the slopes of mountains and pyramids in the Mixtec codices continues this metaphoric description of natural and constructed space.

Recent anthropological studies of the Mesoamerican worldview indicate a belief that the natural environment was alive, and that through dedication rituals the built landscape could also be imbued with symbolic life (Mock 1998). By dressing the landscape, its lifelike characteristics were recognized. Moreover, by clothing it in textiles, it was incorporated into the cultural world, and was therefore subject to control. For Mesoamerican nobility the claim of control over natural and supernatural forces was an important condition of their legitimacy. Specialized knowledge such as calendrical systems to control time and predict weather was among the distinguishing factors that separated nobles from commoners. The construction of artificial mountains was used to establish a centre as an *axis mundi*, a symbolically charged site from which the nobles exerted control. The Mixtecs characterized mountains and temples using textile metaphors that animated them, bringing these elements into the cultural domain under the control of the nobility. Finally, since textiles and their production were culturally perceived as gendered goods, the practice of clothing the built and natural landscape may be seen as engendering space by emphasizing the female practice of bringing order to nature (see Klein 1982; McCafferty and McCafferty 1996).

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