

Vera Tiesler and Andrew K. Scherer, eds. 2018. *Smoke, Flames, and the Human Body in Mesoamerican Ritual Practice*. Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

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This important collection of studies addresses one of the fundamental aspects of Mesoamerica, this being fire, which directly pertains to mythology and creation, ritual practices, and ethereal concepts concerning the body, soul and the afterlife. By its nature, fire is a dramatic phenomenon that responds dynamically to fuel and air. It is also transformative, rendering once pungent flesh into stable ash, offerings into smoke, and clay into durable ceramics. This is also true in the case of metallurgy, which is addressed in a number of chapters. Fire is also life-giving as a source of light and heat, and closely relates to the sun in Mesoamerican thought. It is symbolic of life itself, finite but able to pass on and spread to other hearths and locales, as can be seen in the well-known Aztec new fire celebrations. The contributors are specialists from a wide range of fields, including biological anthropology, ethnohistory, and ethnology, as well as archaeology. In the volume, the range of time periods and cultures is broad, with studies concerning the Classic and Postclassic Maya, Early Classic Teotihuacan, the contact period Aztec, along with the contemporary Lacandon and Tzeltal Maya, as well as new fire rituals today among the Tlapanec of Guerrero.

In the archaeological record, evidence for the ritual use of fire is readily attested through lenses of ash and carbonized material, including even minute floral and faunal remains that can be retrieved through the process of flotation. In this regard, it is noteworthy that despite many years of excavation and research, the evidence of fire rituals and symbolism is poorly documented for the early Olmec, and the so-called “torch” elements carried by Olmec figures are more likely bundled maize ear fetishes. One of the earliest documentations of extensive fire rituals appears in the Late Preclassic Maya murals at San Bartolo, Guatemala. Dating to roughly the first century



B.C., the North Wall mural portrays a series of animal offerings burned before directional world trees. In addition, fire rituals and symbolism are major themes in Classic Maya writing and art, as well being abundantly documented in archaeological excavations. In their chapter concerning the role of fire in Classic Maya religious practice, Stephen Houston and Andrew Scherer combine research concerning Maya epigraphy and iconography with field excavations and forensic analysis at the site of El Zotz in the Guatemalan Peten. In Classic Maya writing, a pair of asymmetric scrolls—one tightly curled and the other open and undulating—serves as the logographic sign for *k'ahk'* meaning “fire.” However, the authors note that this sign also denotes stench, such as rotting corpses and the foul breath of peccaries. In fact, they are quite unlike the short, symmetrical scrolls denoting the aroma of flowers or breath exhaled from the corners of the mouth by gods and humans. By its very form, the scroll fire sign might allude to acrid, biting aroma. Houston and Scherer note other Classic Maya terms for fire and burning, with *til* referring to fire offerings and *pulyi* to the destructive conflagration of communities or unfortunate gods and humans, quite possibly in the context of torture. Gods and supernaturals were ritually “fed” through fire offerings, including incense, and similarly Pedro Pitarch in his chapter notes that fire “cooks” offerings for the spirits, who also “smell” songs as a form of food. Houston and Scherer note that a Classic Maya term for a type of fire priest was *ch'ajom*, *ch'aaj* being a Mayan term for incense. However, Classic Maya scenes reveal that these individuals offered other things as well, including human infants, and in this context Houston and Scherer discuss the partially burned remains of children placed in shallow bowls as offerings for a royal burial at El Zotz, the first such discovery in a Classic Maya tomb.

Given its dramatic and potentially violent qualities, as is reflected in the Mayan term *pulyi*, it is not surprising that fire related to war and sacrifice in ancient Mesoamerica. Thus, one aspect of the bellicose Maya sun deity, the Jaguar God of the Underworld, was also the god of fire and is commonly emblazoned on shields in Classic Maya art, as John Chuchiak mentions in his chapter concerning the role of fire in ancient Maya warfare based on ethnohistoric documents and pre-Hispanic Maya writing and art. Chuchiak notes that warriors were often painted black, as can be widely observed on Classic Maya vessel scenes, with the most common pigment probably being soot. Such body paint was not only for battle but also in celebratory war dances, where warriors wore trophies of the vanquished.

The close relation of fire with warfare surely in part pertains to conquest and the systematic burning of communities and temples. In their chapter concerning fire rituals and symbolism among the Late Postclassic Maya, Gabrielle Vail and William Duncan describe a mass grave at Zacpeten, Guatemala, where some forty bodies were placed in a burned pit, probably the aftermath of a successful battle by the Kowoj.

Along with light, warmth, and providing heat for cooking, fire serves another important function in many parts of Mesoamerica, this being the burning of the fields in preparation for planting. In his chapter, Joel Palka notes that for the Lacandon, the smoke rising from burned plots is believed to create rain clouds. Vail and Duncan discuss the Burner passages in the Dresden and Madrid Codices pertaining to the preparation of the fields. In the Madrid passage, the maize god appears with a mammal with burning torches and in one case a burning tail, and it is quite possible that this is the opossum—a creature widely identified with the origin of fire and who in Mesoamerican myths carried fire in its tail, causing it to become bald. In the Dresden, the rain god Chahk holds axes and burning torches surely alluding to create lightning, a natural source of celestial fire. The Classic period Chahk commonly wields the burning serpent axe of K'awiil, the personification of lightning. Vail and Duncan note that these codical passages break the 260-day calendrical cycle into four periods of 65-days. Although this does not correlate to the solar year and agricultural seasons, it does have important significance in breaking the sacred calendar into four directional quarters. For Late Postclassic Central Mexico, pages 27 of the Codex Borgia and 69 of the Vaticanus B also feature the quartering of the 260-day calendar, in this case with each portion presided over by the rain god Tlaloc, who also wields lightning weapons, including serpents and axes while standing in four fields of corn.

Aside from the Maya region, this volume also concerns the ritual use of fire in highland Mexico, including the chapter by Gregory Pereira concerning the Postclassic Tarascans, or Purepecha, of Michoacán where it was a central component of state religion. The tutelary god of Tarascan kings, or Cazonci, was Curicaueri, the deity of fire and war who was also closely related to the sun. Continuous fires were kept on low round platforms by temples, recalling the large circular altars used in divinatory fire rituals among the K'iche' and other contemporary Maya of highland Guatemala. Pereira describes and illustrates a ceramic effigy excavated at Malpaís Prieto in the form of a seated male with a round brazier on his head. Ac-

cording to Pereira, the vertical black lines on its body suggest that this figure may portray Curicaueri, who appears with similar body marking in the *Relación de Michoacán*. It is also noteworthy that the seated figure has his knees flexed against his chest, a pose found with stone Huehuetotl censers from both Western Mexico and Puebla, figures that of course also support braziers. Although Curicaueri does not appear to have been an aged being, the old fire god is alive and well in Western Mexico today among the Huichol in the form of Tatewarí, or Grandfather Fire, whose hearth is a central ritual component in the Huichol community *tuki* temple.

A number of chapters in this volume concern fire rituals and symbolism in Central Mexico, with the study by Nielsen and Helmke focusing on the great Early Classic city of Teotihuacan, a place where according to the Aztec the sun and moon first arose from a sacrificial pyre. In both the art and archaeological record, the evidence of fire is widespread at Teotihuacan, including numerous portrayals of burning torches, frequently in the context of war. However, they note that fire does not simply reflect the destructive result of conquest but also concerns acts of foundation and statements of territorial possession, such as would occur with new fire rituals. Following previous studies, Nielsen and Helmke discuss new fire ceremonies in relation to the completion of the 52-year cycle combining the 260-day and 365-day calendars, as is well known for the Late Postclassic Aztec. Other volume authors also mention new fire ceremonies, including Marcus Eberl, who notes that they were fraught with uncertainty and risk: "Fire is vulnerable. It is born and it can die like a living being." Along with discussing the Aztec new fire ceremony, Danièle Dehouve describes new fire ceremonies among the contemporary Tlapanec of Guerrero, where they occur at certain events, some calendrically timed as in the installation of office holders on January 1 as well for marriage ceremonies. Dehouve notes that an important component for both the Aztec and Tlapanec new fire rites is penance, clearly related to the ritual risk and uncertainty of successfully creating the flame. The ritual drilling of new fire is of great antiquity in Mesoamerica, and a number of Early Classic Maya scenes, including a stela from El Peru, explicitly depict this occurring atop a zoomorphic mountain, or Witz. Although similar new fire ceremonies were surely performed at Teotihuacan, we still have little documentation of the 365-day calendar with its 18 20-day months, a basic component of the 52-year cycle. We are on more solid footing with Late Classic Xochicalco, where there is a clear set of four days

(the year-bearers) naming the 365-day years as well as an explicit portrayal of the drilling of new fire atop a stepped hill or platform.

Not surprisingly, one of the major themes discussed in this volume is funerary cremation, but as Vera Tiesler and others note, it is fairly restricted in Mesoamerica and is notably rare among the Classic Maya, where elite were symbolically “planted” in the watery underworld within humanly constructed fertile mountains. A noteworthy exception discussed by Oswaldo Chinchilla and others in the volume is an Early Classic cremation pit at Tikal containing the remains of two individuals. Its placement on the central axis of an E-Group is noteworthy, as such architectural complexes are widely considered as *loci* for solar observance concerning the eastern dawning of the sun. Chinchilla argues that this burial relates the mythic birth of the sun and moon at Teotihuacan, and Nielsen and Helmke also suggest that a version of this mythic episode was present at Teotihuacan as well. Unlike the Classic Maya, among other cultures cremation was fairly widespread, including at Teotihuacan, for the Tarascans of Michoacán, the Aztec as well as Late Postclassic highland Chiapas and Guatemala. Ximena Chávez Balderas discusses cremation vessel burials in the Templo Mayor, including inside the temple shrine of Huitzilopochtli, surely one of the most sacrosanct places for Aztec. Joel Palka in his chapter notes that the Lacandon Maya were performing cremation in the nearby Usumacinta region of lowland Chiapas until the early twentieth century. Palka also discusses in some detail Late Postclassic Maya cremation urns and notes that some examples have pecked holes for the eyes and mouth, quite probably denoting the new body of the dead.

Crematory ash, or the “cremains,” can be regarded as the precious and permanent distillation of the body, much like the potent seed and material essence of the deceased. The central focus of Guilhem Olivier’s chapter, ashes are the direct result of the transformational process of fire and are also used in the daily creation of *nixtamal* with the maize grain and water in an *olla*, quite like the cremation urns. Pereira describes the horror of the Tarascans when the brutal conquistador Diego de Guzmán ordered that the cremated remains of the last Cazonci be cast into a river, as this was the utter “liquidation” of the king’s sacred remains. This recalls the *Popol Vuh* episode where the crafty and utterly unpleasant lords of Xibalba threw the ashes of the hero twins into a river, quite possibly as a vain attempt to assure that they would never return, which of course they did. This and other chapters mention that a precious stone was placed in the cremation,

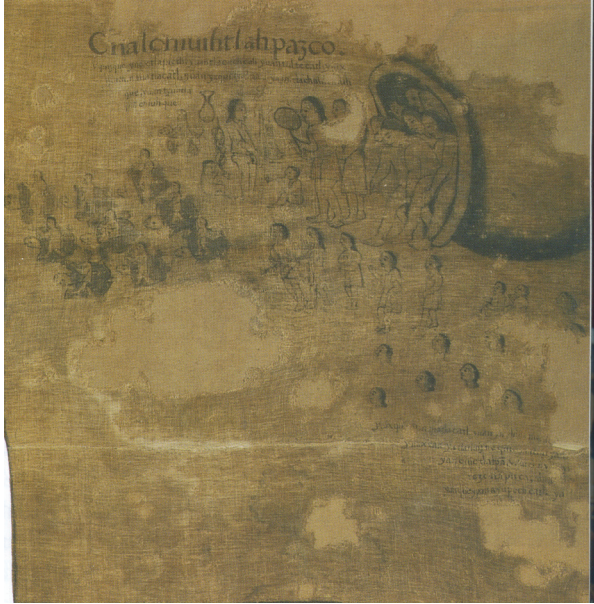


Figure 1. *Lienzo de Jucutácato* (detalle).

Source: Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística de la Ciudad de México

frequently symbolizing the soul essence of the deceased. The urns, ashes and jewel stones recall Mesoamerican creation myths where the bones and ash were ground and mixed with penitential blood in a precious vessel to make the present race of people. In other words, the cremation urns are much like the ancestral vessel from which all humans were created. It is noteworthy that versions of this creation myth are also known for the contact period K'iche' and Cakchiquel of highland Guatemala where cremation urns are also documented. Rather than bones, ground maize was mixed with water or the blood of the gods to create people. The early colonial Nahuatl *Lienzo de Jucutácato* from Michoacán begins with their Toltec ancestors emerging from the cave-like mouth of an overturned urn labeled as the *Chalchiuhtlahpazco* (figure 1), or “jade vessel,” recalling the precious vessel in which people were created in Aztec myths as well as cremation urns containing jade jewels. Fire constitutes a dynamic array of contradictions, as it is both highly destructive but also life-giving and creative. In cremation rituals, burning the corpse releases aspects of the soul and transforms the physical remains into a form of stable immortality, with this material also pertaining to mythic concepts of creation and regeneration.