

DECAPITATION AMONG THE AZTECS: MYTHOLOGY, AGRICULTURE AND POLITICS, AND HUNTING

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Decapitation in Aztec Mexico was so important that both the written and the archaeological record are full of examples of its practice. Decapitation involves the fields of mythology, politics and economy (agriculture and hunting). All four aspects will be mentioned, but the agricultural one stands out.

The severing of heads or rather the skulls themselves are related to fame and to honouring the deities. Torquemada (1975, p. 221) left the following description: "y parecían que en tener sus templos tan adornados de estas cabezas se mostraban famosos y grandes guerreros, muy valerosos en armas y muy servidores y cultores de sus dioses".

According to Broda (1988, p. 71)

the fundamental concern of Aztec ritual was with rain and fertility. [...]. Another very important element was the extreme conditions of the natural environment of the central Mexican highlands. During the dry season there was a constant lack of water, while during the rainy season the waters could be dangerous by their excess. Thunderstorms and hail, and even frost, could threaten the young crops during the initial months of the rainy season. The obsession for controlling the rains within religion thus had its direct material basis.

Human being, animals (especially quail) were decapitated. The blood of both was used to sprinkle on the images of deities e.g. Huitzilopochtli and Camaxtli. As will be discussed later, decapitation was so valuable an offering that only at the site of Tlatelolco archaeologists unearthed 170 skulls perforated for placing them on poles (González Rul 1963). In many other Mesoamerican sites skulls with traces of decapitation are often found. In the excavations of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan a great number of offering caches contained supposedly

decapitated human skulls,¹ especially in what Matos has called stage IVb. (1981, 1987) e.g. a skull found in offering no. 6 and a skull-mask found in offering no. 11 at the Great Temple.

According to the conquistador Andrés de Tapia, the great Tzompantli or skull rack at Tenochtitlan supported some 136,000 heads of decapitated victims. Similar platforms in Tula and Chichen Itza were large enough to accomodate also an impressive number of skulls.

A famous drawing of the main pyramid of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, attributed to Ixtlilxochitl shows that the upper part of Huitzilopochtli's shrine was decorated with skulls. In some instances, archaeologists have uncovered building with real skulls inserted in the walls (c.g. Gamio 1915: 129).

Matos (1984, p. 146) mentions that during the Templo Mayor excavations they found

a large relief sculpture (fig. 1), decorated with elements of the rain gods (snails, water currents, etc.) and with a representation of a woman with exposed breasts who is represented on top of another figure, both of whom have the facial features of Tlaloc. The female also has small skulls tied as ornaments to her legs and skulls and cross-bones on her skirt. This relief could be a representation of such a decapitation sacrifice.²

More probably the relief represents an unusual double-faced and female Tlaloc figured in the usual "crouching" position of the earth deities a position comparable to that of "diving" deities) and nothing indicates that the deity is decapitated (Note: It is interesting that one of the two heads deliberately imitates a Teotihuacan-style Tlaloc head).

Mythical Origins of Decapitation and Heart Excision

According to the *Histoyre du Mechique* (1905: 30-1), at the beginning of time Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca brought from the heavens a "savage beast" with all her joints filled with eyes and mouths", Tlal-teotl ("Earth Deity") and put her in the primeaval water. Then one

¹ NOTE: To be sure that the victim was decapitated, the three upper cervical vertebrae need to have been found with the skulls -we lack information to know if they too really were found this was the case.

² Stone sculptures figuring skulls with perforated temples were found in Copan (e.g. Robicsek 1972: pl 173) but one should speak rather of "artificial orchards", for the wooden racks with their rotting heads were supposed to be fruit trees with ripe fruit; bones of a body (and especially the skull, e.g. the *Popol Vuh*) were assimilated to the stones of a fruit...

grabbed her from the left hand to the right foot and the other from the right hand to the left foot and they tore the earth; the other half was taken back to heaven. To compensate the victim, the gods decided that all fruit of the earth should be born from Tlateotl, "and the goddess sometimes cried during the night, for she wanted to eat the hearts of men and would not be silenced until she had received some, nor would she bear fruit unless drenched with the blood of men".

How exactly Tlateotl was killed is hard to imagine, but we shall see that in ritual it was reenacted by the beheading of a woman. Moreover, several famous Aztec statues of the earth goddess, in particular the colossal so-called Coatlicue and Yollohtlicue, represent a beheaded woman with eyes and mouth at every joint (Graulich 1983: 567; n.d.).

According to this fundamental myth of the creation of the earth, man has to die in order to nourish the earth. But he must also feed the sun, for when some 25 years after the earth, the Sun was created, he too asked for hearts so that he could continue his daily course (Sahagún 1956: 2:258-62; 1950-69; 7:3-8; *Leyenda* 1938; 340-48; *Histoyre* 1905; 32), Soon after, he created the holy war for men to nourish their mother, the Earth and himself, their father (*Leyenda* 1938; 352-8; *Historia de los mexicanos* 1941; 216-7). Therefore prisoners of war were sacrificed in great numbers. Their hearts were offered to the sun and then they were decapitated for the Earth (Graulich 1988).

Hearts were the seat of heat (supposedly of celestial origin) and movement, and were therefore particularly appropriated for sacrifices to celestial bodies, made of fire and bound to move continuously. Decapitation on the other hand generated streams of blood that drenched the earth so that she "would bear fruit", as promised in the creation myths. As we shall see, it was obviously related with agriculture, fertility and Tlateotl.

As has been mentioned, the prisoners of war and many other victims impersonating gods were sacrificed by heart extraction first and next by decapitation, in honour of heaven (Sun) and Earth. Some victims however were sacrificed first by decapitation and then by cardiectomy, or only by decapitation. We shall now focus on those immolations in order to establish clearly the link with the earth and fertility.

Decapitation had a long-standing religious and mythological foundation in the Mexica case. According to one version of the myth [we shall mention another one further on] in Coatepec lived a devout woman named Coatlicue, who was the mother of 400 sons. One day, she was sweeping in the temple on the Hill: "And once, as she swept feathers, as it were, a ball of feathers descended upon her. Then Coatlicue

snatched it up and placed it in her bosom. And when she had swept, when she came to take the feather ball which she had placed in her bosom, she found nothing. Thereupon Coatlicue conceived." Her 400 sons were not over-joyed by the prospect of a happy event, so miraculously inspired. On the contrary, they adopted an attitude of righteous indignation against their seemingly wanton mother. Her single daughter even advised them to kill her before her shame became known: "And their sister, Coyolxauhqui, said to them: 'My elder brothers, she hath affronted us; we must slay our mother the wicked one who is already with child. Who is the cause of what is in her womb?'"

However, one of the 400 played traitor, and told of their plans to Huitzilopochtli, still in his mother's womb. Thus forewarned, he made it his business to be forearmed. On birth, he emerged equipped with shield and buckler, and brandishing the famous Serpent of Fire (Xiuhtli) symbolic thereafter as the weapon of the god. The 400 brothers also prepared for war: "They were in war array, which was distributed among them; all put in place their paper crowns their nettles (sic), painted paper streamers, and they bound bells to the calves of their legs. The bells were called oyoalli. And their darts had barbed points."

But Huitzilopochtli ignited his Serpent of Fire: "With it he pierced Coyolxauhqui, and then quickly struck off her head. It came to rest there on the slope of Coatepetl (Coatepec). And her body went falling below; it went fell crashing into pieces; in various places her arms, her legs, her body kept falling.

"Huitzilopochtli then completed his task by routing his 400 brothers; only a few escaped" (in Davics, 1977, p. 14-15). In the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City there is a magnificent sculpture of this goddess in decapitated form.

The colossal carving in diorite of Coyolxauhqui (no. 11-3338) shown beheaded, was found in Guatemala Street near the Great Temple of The Aztecs. The sculpture was no doubt a very important one, not only for its size and material (greenstone was the most precious material in Mesoamerica), it is the largest monument carved of diorite (.75 cm in height and .83 cm in width) but because of its location in the sacred precinct. This sculpture and the monolith found at the Great Temple in 1978 are the best illustrations of the myth of the birth of the tribal god of the Aztecs, as she was a victim of Huitzilopochtli. All the symbols in the carving are references to her death e.g. . . . On the hair are representation of balls of down (symbols of Coyolxauhqui's sacrifice) which had caused the pregnancy of Coatlicue, becoming the symbols of sacrificial victims and of the birth of Huitzilopochtli. Coyol-



Fig. 1. *Tláloc-Tlaltecuhтли*. Museo Templo Mayor, México, D. F.

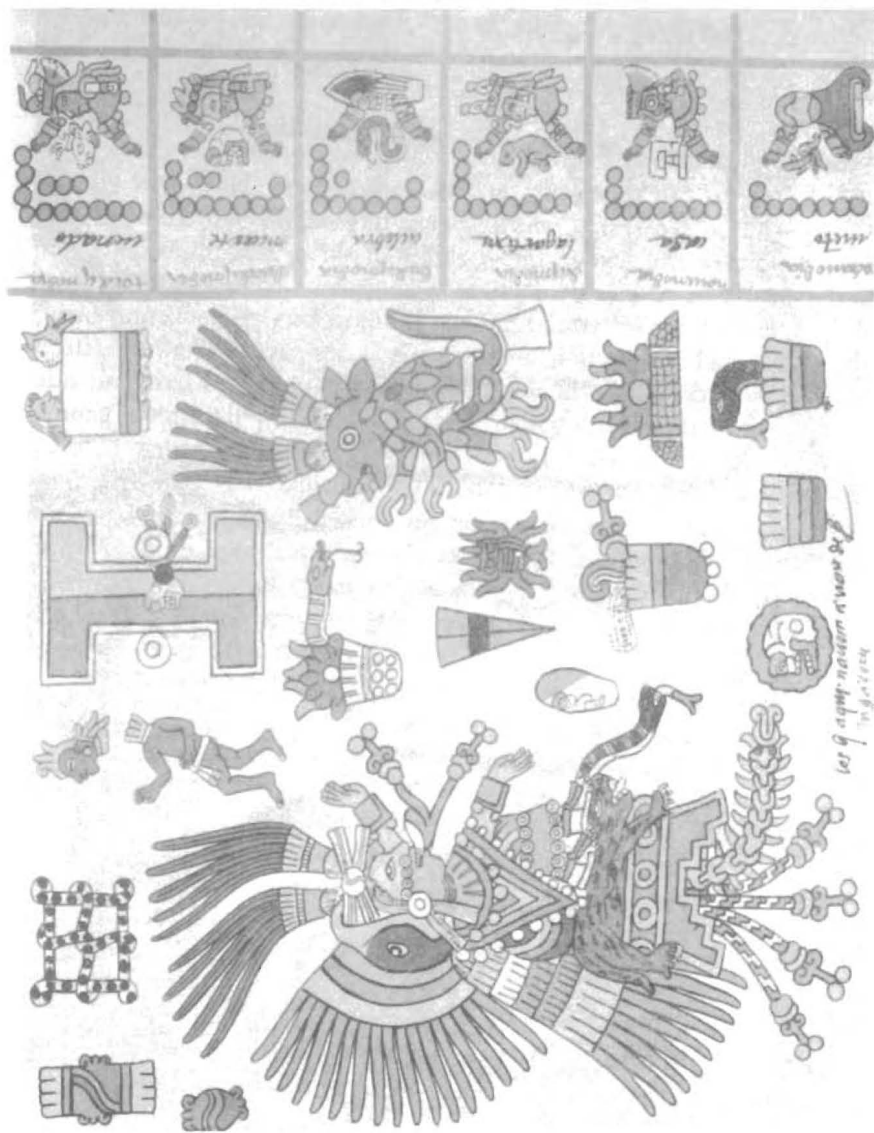


Fig. 2. Codex Borbonicus: 19, Xochiquétzal

xauhqui is represented decapitated; according to Graulich (1988, p. 393) the sacrifices of prisoners of war always involved decapitation and the extraction of the heart. Furthermore, Coyolxauhqui's head has a relief under its base with the symbol for war, atl-tlachinolli, meaning "water-burned fields". This symbol also stands for the alternation of night and day and for the rainy and dry season, this alternation was essential, and human sacrifice its mover.

Another well known sculpture is the famous Coyolxauhqui relief that sparked off the excavations of the Great Temple of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1978. It is a representation of a decapitated and dismembered female nude and carved in relief, according to Matos (1988, p. 136) "Coyolxauhqui images occur in a number of building stages of the Great Temple, suggesting a continuity of this symbolism through time."³

Matos (*ibid*) says that decapitated female skulls were found in offerings associated with the Stage IVb Coyolxauhqui sculpture. Sacrifice by decapitation in the first place was principally carried out in rites involving female victims, but in this case such rituals may have been related to a reenactment of the myth of Huitzilopochtli's victory over Coyolxauhqui."

At the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge Massachusetts, there is a sculpted mask of Coyolxauhqui shown decapitated (no. 28-40-20).

Decapitation and Fertility: The Ballgame Complex

It should be mentioned first that beheading was very ancient and widespread in ancient Mesoamerica and that probably from Preclassic times onwards it was centered around two themes: war (and trophy heads, often shrunken: Motolinía 1970: 39) and fertility. The main evidence for the relationship with agriculture comes from ballgame contexts. Teotihuacan-style ball cylindrical vases found in Escuintla (Guatemala) illustrate decapitated player with serpents sprouting from their necks.

(Hellmuth 1975: 16-9). The serpents are well-known symbols of fertility and here they stand for the streams of blood issuing from the

³ As far as we know, there are:

1. A relief of Coyolxauhqui headless, under the famous stone of IVb.

2. The famous Coyolxauhqui relief.

3. The head just mentioned (the big diorite example).

4. Fragments—in the Museo Templo Mayor— of a huge disk like in stage IVB, figuring the deity pierced by a fire snake.

neck. A beheaded ball player with seven serpents (perhaps referring to a prototypical 7 Snake, the Aztec goddess of germination and maize) sprouting from his neck is represented on the Gulf Coast Aparicio reliefs (Dyckerhoff et Prem 1987: 98-9), instead of a seventh, central serpent there is a magnificent luxuriant plant, clear proof of the association of serpents with vegetation. The Mixtec *Codex Nuttall* (p. 3) shows a decapitated woman with Tlaloc mask standing on a ball-court; she is associated with an opossum (see also *Vindobonesis* p. 22). Among the Aztecs also the ballgame was related to beheading and fertility (Krickeberg 1948). A ballcourt ring exhibited in the Sala Mexica of the Mexican National Museum of Anthropology (MNA 11-3512) is decorated with a relief representing a man holding a severed head. On p. 19 of *Codex Borbonicus* and *Tonalamatl Aubin*, Xochiquetzal, a young and beautiful aspect of the Earth goddess, is depicted in front of a ballcourt and a decapitated man. In the center of the ballcourt is depicted a skull with a flow of water. This seems to be a direct allusion to the Aztec and probably Mesoamerican belief in the ballgame as an instrument to help ensure that the dry and rainy season followed each other. When during their wanderings, the Mexicas arrived at Coatepec, they built as usual a temple for their god and also a ball-court with a hole in the middle in which they put water; thanks to the water issuing from that hole, trees and vegetation, fish and game appeared abundantly. But when Coyolxauhqui and the 400 Huitznahua wished to stay there instead of continuing the journey to the promised land, Huitzilopochtli killed them during the night and he cut Coyolxauhqui's throat and excised her heart right over the ball-court's hole. As a consequence, the following morning the water disappeared and also the vegetation and the animals (Tezozómoc 1878: 228-9). The dry season, equated with the day, was succeeded by the rainy season, and assimilated into the night. In this myth, the association between ballgame and fertility is very clear, but Coyolxauhqui's death, though also linked with agriculture, appears to have had a negative effect on it. The explanation may be that Coyolxauhqui in this myth represents, as demonstrated by Seler (1902-23:3: 328-9) almost a century ago, the old waning moon. In Aztec ritual, her death was reenacted during the month of Tititl when a slave impersonating Ilamatecuhtli, the "Old Lady" was sacrificed and beheaded in order to have the dry season succeed the rainy one; but exactly half a year later in Huey Tecuilhuitl, a "young moon" goddess, Xilonen, was decapitated with the wholly different purpose this time of having the rainy season succeeding the dry one. The old moon and the young

one were opposed to each other like sterility and fecundity (Graulich 1986).

Decapitation and Fertility: The Associated Animals

On the Teotihuacaen ceramics, at Aparicio and at Chichen Itza, snakes sprout from the cut neck. The same theme is found in Late Potsclassic times. In the *Tonalamatl Aubin* (p. 15), two snakes replace a decapitated man's head and the same is true for the already mentioned statues of Coatlicue and Yollotlicue. In the *Codices Nuttall* (p. 3) and *Vindobonensis* (p. 22), the decapitated women wear a head-dress made of intertwined serpents. The telluric and fertility connotations of the serpent in Mesoamerica are well known. Its open mouth could stand for an access to the interior of the earth and it decorated the doorways of shrines dedicated to Ehecatl and to Tepeyollotl ("Heart of the Mountain": see *Codex Borgia*, p. 14, 34; Edificio A at Malinalco; Krickeberg 1950: 320-6). Tlalteotl is usually figured with a snake's head opened at 180°. *The Face of Talolot* —the male aspect of the earth—face is covered with snakes and his mouth has fangs. According to Sahagún's informants (1950-69: 2:121-3, 1956: 1:124-5, 151), the serpent also symbolized the fields and maize, and also the thunderbolt that fertilized the earth (*Codex Borbonicus*, p. 7, 29-30; Broda n.d.: Graulich n.d.b.). Finally the snake was also associated with the penis (*Codex Vaticanus A*: 167 pl. 73) and its moulting with the seasonal rebirth of vegetation. But in the decapitation context the snakes primarily stand for blood, the blood that would drench the Earth and make it bear fruit. The colossal statue of Coatlicue is very interesting in this respect. Not only are there two snakes issuing from the cut throat, but two more appear between the female monster's legs. Obviously these last ones also stand for menstrual blood, for the cut throat and the female sex organ were regarded similarly since they were both sources of life. These bleeding, fertile and symmetrical bodily apertures had a common mythical author, the bat. Several codices figure this animal while decapitating or brandishing trophy heads (*Codex Vaticanus B*: 24; *Fejérváry-Mayer*: 41; *Borgia*: 49) and in the *Popol Vuh* (1950: 150), one of the hero twins is beheaded by a bat. Furthermore, the bat is intimately related to menstruation. According to the *Codex Magliabechiano* (p. 61v), at the beginning of time Quetzalcoatl touched his penis and the semen that issued forth was transformed into a bat which tore off a piece of Xochiquetzal's vulva. From this piece the flowers were born. This myth is evidently a myth on the origins of menstruation —of the

bleeding vulva— since menstrua were compared to flowers (e.g. Ichon 1969: 95). Commenting on similar beliefs in South America, Lévi-Strauss (1966: 329-30) remarks that the bat is generally held responsible for bodily apertures or blood emissions. The relationship between bats and fertility is further confirmed by a Cora (Jalisco) myth. According to which, the earth was initially covered with water and it was impossible to work. A bird tried in vain to prepare the fields for sowing. Finally the bat came and ploughed the earth up with its claws so that the water could flow away and the earth be sowed (Lumholtz 1960: 1:500). To sum up, both the bleeding neck and the bleeding vulva on the opposite side of the body were attributed to the bat and connote fertility.

Another decapitating animal, the opossum (*Codex Fejérváry-Mayer*: 38-42; *Codex Nuttall*: 3), is also significantly associated with fertility. When male, his supposedly forked penis indicates outbursting sexuality; when female, its numerous progeny and the fact that it carries its young in the pouch connote abundant fertility and motherhood. relationship between decapitation and fertility. According to confirms different sources that indicate the precise way of killing (many just say Seler, for "body apertures" (Sahagún 1950-69: 11:11-2; Seler 1902-23: 4:21, 511).

Festivals of the Solar Year

The identity of the deities impersonated by the victims confirm the relationship between decapitation and fertility. According to different sources that indicate the precise way of killing (many just say that "they were put to death"), the following victims were decapitated:

1) In Etzalcualiztli, dedicated to Tlaloc, young children, 7 to 8 years old, were slain in the mountains (Pomar 1964: 168). Usually those children were impersonators of the rain and earth deities the Tlaloque;

2) In Huey Tecuilhuitl, a young virgin impersonating the waxing moon and earth goddess Xilonen (Durán 1967: 1:127).

Sahagún (1950-82, BK, 2, p. 99-100) describes that in this month, called Uei Tecuilhuitl

when they had come to the place where Xilonen was to die, then the fire priest came to receive her. . . And they took her up to the Temple of Cinteotl. First they laid her upon the back of the priest not upon the offering stone, but rather she died upon a priest's back. And

those who died upon a priest's back, they called "those who have backs".

Thereupon she met her fate and (the sacrificing priest) severed her head... And then they all ate, for the first time, tortillas of green maize. Decapitation in this instance is closely related to agriculture, especially maize. Sahagún goes on to say that after Moctezuma's executioners, his slayers struck the backs of the criminals' heads... "These men were not noblemen, but only lesser officials, who were under command, who were chosen and approved for their office because of their strength, vigour and ingenuity"... It is interesting that the backs of the criminal's heads were struck and that these individuals were decapitated. The sacrificers were known for their strength and vigour, so as to reinforce the agricultural aspect of their pleas to the supernaturalists.

3) In Ochpaniztli, dedication to the earth, maize and water goddesses, Toci was decapitated (Sahagún 1950-69; 2:110-7; Durán 1967; 1:135-49) in a particularly interesting context, for she was supposed to get married to the sun (or to the king as the slave impersonating the goddess was called). At midnight they brought her to her temple and put her on a priest's back to go inside, as was done during wedding ceremonies. There she was decapitated (made completely fertile) and a young and strong priest donned her skin and impersonated the goddess henceforth. This new impersonator of Toci then went to the temple of the sun, Huitzilopochtli, spread arms and legs like in copulation and then imitated delivery and gave birth to Cinteotl, "Maize God".

The ritual reenacted the creation of the earth at the beginning of time, when Tlalteotl torn into pieces gave birth to the plants; or, according to variants, when an Earth goddess called Xochiquetzal or Itzpapalotl had intercourse for the first time and gave birth to Cinteotl (Graulich, 1983).

Durán (1971, p. 234) goes on to say that the impersonator of the goddess, all the nobles and knights of the city organized a mock battle. What is interesting is the mixture of agriculture and war in this celebration. The feast ended with those to be sacrificed in honour of the goddess. Durán (*ibid*, p. 234) says

When they reached the spot where the two stood at the summit, those who had ascended with him stood to one side while those on top pushed him. He fell from the poles with a mighty crash and was shattered to bits. They were like fruit falling from a tree—a particularly realistic reenaction the Xocotluetzi, the "fruit falls" ceremony of the previous month.

Once he had fallen, others came to behind him, and his blood was caught in a small bowl. All the victims were sacrificed in the same manner. When the sacrifice had ended, the blood of the victims was carried out in a bowl. This container was covered with red feathers and was set before the Mother of the Gods (Toci)... the wan who impersonated the goddess descended. He wet his finger with that human blood and licked his finger with his mouth... (This was symbolical fecundation. After that, he imitated intercourse with Cinteotl). This rite was called the Nitizapalao, which means the Tasting of Chalk. This ceremony of the "eating of the earth" was very common at solemn rites especially during the Feast of Ochpaniztli (The Feast of Sweeping).

During the same month of Ochpaniztli, Chicomecoatl the most important Aztec maize goddess was honored with a special ceremony which involved decapitation of her impersonator (Durán, 1371, p. 226) or killing her by shooting an by arrow in her throat (oCstumbres 1945: 40).

Durán (*ibid*) stated that

When the people had gathered, the girl was offered incense again, no less solmenly than on the provious day. Then she was cast upon the piles of ears of corn and seed and decapitated. Her blood was gathered in a small bowl, and the wooden goddess was sprinkled with it. All the chamber was sprinkled with it, and so were the offerings of ears of corn, chili and squash, seeds and vegetables, then the priests donned her skin. On it were placed all the garments the girl had worn —her tiara on his head, her ears of corn on his neck and hands. He was presented to the public while the drums sounded and all danced, led by the man dressed in the skin of the young girl and the robes of the goddess. She had been honoured only to be slain to the glory and honour of the deity.

Durán mentions that afterwards all the lords and noblemen entered and that the ruler gave them presents and that the same was done to all the captains and warriors of the armies and forces... The shooters or archers took up their arms and donned the costumes of the gods Tlacahuepan, Huitzilopochtli, Titlacahuan, the Sun, Ixcozauhqui, and the Four Dawns. Then they gathered their bows and arrows. Captives and prisoners of war then appeared who were crucified upon a high scaffolding which stood there for that purpose. Their arms and legs extended, they were all bound to one board or another. Then the archers dressed in the divine garb shot them with great fury. This was the sacrifice of the goddess. (Durán, 1971; p. 227).

In this celebration there is obviously a mixture of agriculture, and war.

4) In Quecholli, dedicated to the hunting, warrior and a star god Mixcoatl, Yoztlamiyahual, an earth goddess whose name may be an epithet of Itzpapalotl or Chimalman-Coatlicue was beheaded; she is associated with Mixcoatl (Durán 1967: 1:76).

Durán (1971, p. 147-148) says that during the feast of Camaxtli (god of hunting), the dignataries and priests of the temple took charge of a man and a woman. The woman was given the name Yoztlamiyahual, and the man was called Mixcoatontli, and both were dressed in the raiment of the gods they represented. . . . These (two) were taken out in public, and the people paid homage to them. Once their public appearance ended. . . . then they took the woman and knocked her head four times against a large rock which stood in the temple. This rock was known as *teocomitl*, which means "divine pot". Halfconscious, before she had died of the blows, her throat was slit as one cuts the throat of a lamb. And her throat flowed upon that rock. Once she was dead, she was decapitated, and the head was carried to Mixcoatontli, who took it by the hair and then went to stand in the midst of his attendants. . . ." It is interesting that on the feast day to the god of hunting the striking off of the head was related to females rather than males. Our belief is that there exists a close association between the female sacrificial victims and hunting, and in particular that of roe-deer. Thus the fertility inherent in the female human is mirrored with the fertility of the animal kingdom as a whole.

5) In Izcalli, dedicated to the fire, "two women" were slain and skinned in a ritual that typically belongs to the "month" Ochpaniztli (Motolinía 1970: 33).

Tearing off the heads of animals and people was a common way to honour the gods e.g. during the feast to Tezcatlipoca. "Since all of them had their shrines in their houses, where they kept the images of this god and of many others, on this day they decorated this image and offered it perfumes, flowers and food, and sacrificed quail before it, tearing off their heads. This not only the lords and leading men did, but all the people to whose attention this festival came: and the same was in the calpulcos and on all the pyramids. All prayed and besought of this god that he grant them favours for [it was thought] that he was almighty. (Sahagún, 1950-1982, Bk., 2, p. 37). The fact that quail was the main oblation to Tezcatlipoca is understandable as he was the god of the night, linked with the earth. The quail (zolin) is a bird associated with the earth and night (Sullivan, 1982, p. 7).

Ceremonies to both Camaxtli and Huitzilopochtli also involved the beheading of quail and the blood used to feed the image of the deity.

Sahagún describes that in (1950-1982, Bk. 2, p. 38)

the sign called *ce tecpatl*, in the first house, they brought forth all the ornaments of Huitzilopochtli, they cleaned them and shook them out; and they put (them) in the sun. They said that this was his sign and that of Camaxtli. This they did at Tlacatecco. Here they set out, on this day, many kinds of food, very well cooked, like that which the lords eat. They presented all of them before his image. After they had remained there a while, the officials of Huitzilopochtli took them up and divided them among themselves, and ate them. And they also incensed the image offered it quail. They struck off their heads before it, so the blood should be shed before the image. And the lord offered all the precious flowers which the lords used, before the image.

(A well known page of *Codex Borgia* illustrates beheading of quails to Tonatiuh), According to Durán (1971, p. 227) the beheading of quail was an offering of poor people while the beheading of human beings was the offering of lords and noblemen.

Many a time have I asked the natives why they were not satisfied with the offerings of quail, turtledoves, and other birds which were sacrificed. They answered sarcastically and indifferently and those were offerings of low and poor men and that the sacrifice of human beings — captives, prisoners, and slaves — was the honoured oblation of the great lords and noblemen.

Whether Durán's informants gave him a quick answer or not we will never know, what is evident is that every offering was charged with symbolism appropriate to the deity they were celebrating. However, human sacrifices were of course the most valuable offering to the deities.

The former is an example of both folk and elite beliefs, and especially of their economic possibilities, asking the god to grant them favours.

In San Pablito in the modern state of Puebla, even up to the present day, people behead chicken and turkeys at the beginning of the rainy season. The blood is poured onto the earth with the intention to fertilize the earth. Phillip Blacklee (personal communication, 1988) has told one of us that in England, farmers put cattle blood in the earth, also with the belief that the blood nourishes the earth. The spilling of blood is believed to act as a fertilizer for the earth. And it seems to be common practice all over the world, as well as the custom

of beheading victims and animals for the gods with agricultural intentions. The ancient Mexicans considered that blood had basically a nourishing affect. These effect lasted for a limited period of time and it had to be repeated throughout the year. As has already been mentioned, the blood that came out from the decapitated victims was used as a symbol of fertility, especially that of women.

To sum up, the victims of sacrifices beginning with decapitation during the festivals of the solar year were typically women or children and impersonators of earth and rain deities: the Tlaloque; earth or earth and moon deities: Toci, Yoztlamiyahual, Xilonen; and maize and germination deities: Chicomecoatl (and perhaps Xilonen). Every one of them was closely related to agriculture and fertility. In the codices, two more goddesses are related to beheading. First there is Xochiquetzal (*Codex Borbonicus*: 19) [fig. 2] again, whom we have seen is related with the ballgame. In myth, she is the one who had illicit sexual intercourse in the paradise of Tamoanchan; the tree symbolizing the union between the original creator couple and the creatures shattered and the creatures were expelled on earth, where Xochiquetzal gave birth to Cinteotl. She was also the first woman who died in childbirth (*Historia de los mexicanos...* 1966: 33-4; *Histoire...* 1905: 33). In some places she is called Itzpapalotl (*Codex Vaticanus A*: pl. 43-4) and in *Tonalámatl Aubin*: 15, this deity is depicted facing a shattered tree and a decapitated man.

Among the animals which were decapitated, there are the quails; beheaded to nourish the sun (e.g. *Codex Borgia*: 71) possibly because their white-dotted gray plumage represented the nocturnal sky that is overcome by the sun every morning. There is also a link with agriculture for quails are a great danger for the recently sown fields, since they eat the grains. They endanger the birth of maize and also of men. According to the *Leyenda* (1945: 121), when Quetzalcoatl went to the underworld to get bones in order to create man again, when he down the bones fell on the ground and were pecked by quails. Now bones and seed are equivalent. In the *Leyenda*, man was made from ground bones, and in Maya-Quiché tradition, from ground maize.

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