

## IMAGES OF THE COMMON MAN IN THE CODEX BORBONICUS

N. C. CHRISTOPHER COUCH

The *Codex Borbonicus* is one of the great masterpieces of Aztec art, the largest and most beautiful manuscript in the Aztec style that is still extant. Each of its 36 pages contains complex and colorful paintings dealing exclusively with calendrical material. In its two major sections, the manuscript presents the *tonalamatl*, the 260-day divinatory calendar, and the festivals of the eighteen divisions of the solar year.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most striking feature of the *Codex Borbonicus* is the fact that the information in the manuscript is presented solely through pictorial means, in the native manner. The few notes made on it in Spanish appear to have been added later, and are frequently in error (Paso y Troncoso: 2-22).

The study of Aztec art has usually focussed on major works, created for the political ends or other uses of the upper classes. Previous studies of the *Codex Borbonicus* have treated the manuscript in a similar way. However, Aztec art includes a whole spectrum of types of objects, ranging from unique and impressive monuments like the Calendar Stone, made for the political and religious uses of the elite classes, down to quite humble objects like figurines, made in the thousands for the everyday religious uses of the ordinary people.

<sup>1</sup> The *Codex Borbonicus*, painted on native paper in a screenfold format, originally consisted of forty pages; the first two and last pages are missing, but their contents can be reconstructed. Each page is between 39 and 40 centimeters square; the next-largest Aztec manuscript, the Aubin Tonalamatl, has pages measuring 24 by 27 centimeters (Glass and Robertson). The *Borbonicus* includes four distinct sections. The two major ones are the *tonalamatl*, p. 1-20 (the first two pages can be reconstructed from the very similar Aubin Tonalamatl), and the festival section, p. 26-33. The two smaller sections are a correlation of the fifty-two year cycle with the nine Lords of the Night, p. 21 and 22, and a list of the year dates for the fifty-two year period, p. 37-40.

No preconquest Aztec manuscript survives. Apart from the *Borbonicus*, our knowledge of manuscripts derives from a small group of early colonial works with pictures painted in native styles, showing varying degrees of European influence, and written explanations in Spanish. From references in the written sources, we know that manuscripts were used for a number of different purposes. They were used for the recording of history, keeping track of tribute exacted from the provinces of the empire, and even for sending messages. The information in preconquest manuscripts was recorded not in writing, but in a complex system of symbols or glyphs. Thus manuscripts would usually have been read and used only by persons who had been educated in the priestly schools, a kind of education normally available only to the children of the upper classes.

Although the knowledge of reading manuscripts was limited to the educated members of the upper classes, calendrical manuscripts like the *Codex Borbonicus* played a role in the lives of everyone. *Tonalamatls*, like the one in the first part of the codex, recorded the 260-day divinatory calendar. Each day in this cycle had a name and a number, and fell under the influence of certain deities. Each person, from noblest lord to humblest commoner, took the name of his birth day as part of his own name. The good or bad fortunes told by the days of this cycle were used for advice on the best times for marriages, for the sowing of crops, and other important matters. The omens and pronostications contained in the *tonalamatl* were available to every member of Aztec society. Each district of the larger cities, each small community had not only the priests attached to local temples, but also a special class of diviners called *tonalpouhqui*, to interpret the omens of the days.

The 260-day divinatory calendar was uniform throughout the Aztec empire; therefore interpretation of this part of the calendar as presented in the *Codex Borbonicus* is relatively straightforward. However, the eighteen festivals carried out at twenty-day intervals in the 365-day solar year varied widely in different localities (Broda 1969). Also, different social groups participated in the festivals in different ways. The lack of a text to explain the images of this section, and the lack of a provenance for the manuscript have made its interpretation difficult. Past writers have assumed that the festivals depicted in the *Codex Borbonicus* show, through symbols and complex drawings, the ceremonials as they would have been carried out in the main temple precinct of a large community, such as Mexico-Tenochtitlan.

Other early colonial pictorial and literary sources, such as Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* and Durán's writings, have been used to interpret the festival section of the codex. These other sources frequently incorporate information gathered over a period of years in a variety of localities, and thus provide a synthetic view of the ceremonies. Such sources, particularly the very full account in the *Florentine Codex*, describe lengthy and complex ceremonies for each festival, usually with most of the ritual activity taking place in the main temple precinct. The focus is on the activities of the highest levels of the religious, political and military classes. The sources usually state that the ceremonies described took place in Tenochtitlan. The pictures that accompany most of the accounts usually serve merely as illustrations, adding no information beyond that given in the texts. Each source presents its illustrations in a standardized format with a limited number of figures illustrating each festival, often a patron deity and one or two attendants. The major exception is Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales*, a preliminary version of the encyclopedic *Florentine Codex*, prepared in the single community of Tepepulco, Hidalgo. Its illustrations feature a large number of figures, retain a relatively large number of native pictorial conventions, and present information not given in the accompanying Nahuatl text.

The images of the *Codex Borbonicus* differ in significant ways from other early colonial accounts of the festival cycle. Although Robertson (1959) has demonstrated that it is a postconquest work, it is certainly the earliest source we have on these festivals. The style of painting is remarkably free from European influence, and the information about the festivals is given entirely through the pictures. These characteristics suggest that it is also the account that is closest to preconquest traditions of recording information. It may also be free of the synthesizing tendencies that characterize the other accounts which were compiled by friars educated in a European tradition. It is possible that it represents the festival cycle as it was carried out in a single community. The *Borbonicus* festival illustrations vary greatly in format and complexity. They range from complex images involving many figures performing different activities, to simple images with few figures that appear to represent one activity or to function as signs. Many different types of participants are depicted, from deity impersonators and priests to barefoot commoners.

Rather than focussing on the unique characteristics of the manuscript and the actual contents of the illustrations, previous studies of

the festival depictions in the *Codex Borbonicus* have treated the images as though they were illustrations for a text, which commentators have tried to supply from written sources.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for doing so seem clear, and indeed somewhat compelling. The size and beauty of the manuscript, together with the role played by the Aztec patron deity Huitzilopochtli in the festivals depicted and the appearance of the New Fire Ceremony, led most writers to associate it with the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (Paso y Troncoso: 14; Caso: 44).<sup>3</sup> The availability of the relatively complete and systematic account contained in Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, which describes the ceremonies as taking place in the Templo Mayor precinct, was the most natural source to turn to for explanations of the images.<sup>4</sup>

The unique characteristics of the codex, however, suggest that a different method of analysis is called for. In my study of the *Codex Borbonicus*, I took the images as the primary source, attempting to read them as pictorial statements. This analysis gives a very different picture of the festivals shown in the *Borbonicus*. The significant features that emerged from this analysis included the major role played by commoners in the festivals, the variety of locations in which festival activities take place, and the focus on a group of deities, most of whom are directly related to agricultural activities. These characteristics suggest that the *Borbonicus* festival section offers a unique perspective on Aztec religion, enabling us to see it from the viewpoint of the commoners, in whose lives and agricultural activities religion played a central role, and from the viewpoint of those priests whose religious activities most closely reflected the concerns of the commoners.

In examining the images of the *Codex Borbonicus*, I first focussed on the differences between the Tlacaxipehualiztli illustration (fig. 1)

<sup>2</sup> Previous studies of the *Codex Borbonicus* which closely follow the descriptions in the *Florentine Codex* include those by Paso y Troncoso (1898), Hamy (1899), and Novotny (1976). Although his commentary has yet to be published, it is clear from Caso's (1967) published studies which use the *Borbonicus* that his view of the manuscript generally agrees with that of Paso y Troncoso. Brown (1977) and Nicholson (n.d. and 1974) take different views of the manuscript, but their studies are limited.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholson (n.d. and 1974) presents a thorough discussion of the possibility that the manuscript may have originated in the area of Culhuacan.

<sup>4</sup> Paso y Troncoso's study (1898) is the most extensive and eloquent work on the *Borbonicus*, and makes the most thorough use of the *Florentine Codex* accounts. However, his careful use of all sources available to him, linguistic knowledge, and clear presentation of many issues make his work the indispensable starting point for further studies.

and the other pictorial and written accounts of the feast. Tlacaxipehualiztli was the major occasion for honoring the military hierarchy of the empire. At this time, warriors who had taken captives offered them for sacrifice, and were honored for their prowess (Broda 1970: 219-20). Illustrations of this feast usually depict ceremonies involving warriors. Two examples, from the *Codex Magliabechiano* (fig. 2) and Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* (fig. 3), both show the gladiatorial sacrifice of captives. Each shows a captive, armed only with a feather-decorated club and tied to a round sacrificial stone, facing a costumed warrior who carries an obsidian-bladed club. The appearance of the sacrificial stone and, in the *Primeros Memoriales* illustration, of the skull-rack and sacrifices on temple steps indicate that the rites depicted took place in the temple precinct, with warriors and nobles present.

The Borbonicus illustration gives a very different image of the festival. No warriors appear; rather, three commoners are shown engaged in a single rite. The figure on the right is an impersonator of Xipe Totec. He is one of a group of poor mendicants, called the Xipeme, who were chosen by the successful warriors, and allowed to wear the costume of Xipe as they went through the streets, dancing and begging, during the festival. This costume included the skin of a sacrificed captive.

The other figure appears to be a commoner because he is barefoot and wears a plain white maguey paper mantle. He carries a child in his arms, and make offerings of foods associated with the festival—*ocholli*, the double maize ears, and a special bread.

The common people believed that the blessings of the Xipeme were very beneficial. They would go up to the beggars in the streets to ask them to hold their children in their arms, and to come into and bless their homes. In return for these benedictions, the people would give the Xipeme offerings of food and of the first fruits and flowers of the season (Durán: 182-83; Sahagún 1950-78, 9: 70).

Thus the image representing the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli in the *Codex Borbonicus* depicts a rite that took place in a residential street, a rite concerned with the home and with human and agricultural fertility.<sup>5</sup> There could hardly be a greater contrast with the war-

<sup>5</sup> Paso y Troncoso identifies the offerings being given, and interprets the image as representing "the begginig of alms, by dancing, and frightening and blessing the children, which was done for the people by those called Xipeme or Tototektin" (109).

like rites in the central square described and illustrated in most other sources.

The importance of the agricultural cycle in the festivals depicted in the *Codex Borbonicus* can also be seen in the number of depictions of Tlaloc, the god of rain, the most ancient and important agricultural deity. In this manuscript, Tlaloc is shown as the major deity of five of the eighteen festivals. Three of these appear early in the annual cycle, at the beginning of the growing season, when petitions for rain were particularly important.

The depiction of the festival called Hueto-zoztil, "great vigil" (fig. 4), two months after Tlacaxipehualiztli, is remarkable for the detail with which it shows the rites for Tlaloc and activities of commoners. Tlaloc appears in a temple atop a hill, indicated by a conventionalized sign. Four figures approach the temple. The two upper figures are carrying out an important ritual for rain that was repeated in the several months before the rainy season, the sacrifice of children to Tlaloc. One carries a paper banner, and the other carries a staff decorated with rubber-spattered paper, sacred to rain deities. The latter figure carries a child on his back in a shawl. The infant wears a quetzal feather headdress, showing that he is to be sacrificed to Tlaloc (Sahagún 1950-78, 2: 43). The two lower figures are commoners, barefoot and wearing plain white garments. They are bearing two of the most characteristic offerings made by commoners to their local temples. The male figure carries a bundle of torches, and the female carries a basket of some type of bread. On her back, she carries her own child. In contrast to the infant above, which wears the sacrificial feather and a paper headdress associated with rain deities, this child is unadorned. This depiction of a mother and child may relate to a rite of this month described by Durán (422-24), in which all children born in the preceding year were brought to a temple for purification.

The only other depiction of child sacrifices for rain appears in Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* (fig. 5), illustrating the first festival of the year. It shows a similar procession, with one figure carrying a child sacrifice in rain deity garb, and other celebrants carrying a rattle staff, a sacrificial knife and banners. It is interesting to note that, rather than showing a single priestly procession, the *Borbonicus* illustration shows two ceremonies, one involving religious practitioners and one involving commoners, with equal emphasis.

The next festival shown in the *Codex Borbonicus* also presents

ceremonies involving priests and commoners in parallel ways (fig. 6). This festival is usually called Toxcatl, but an alternate name, Tepopochuiliztli or "incensing", seems more appropriate to the image. In one ceremony, a figure incenses four magnificently costumed deity impersonators. Above, a smaller figure incenses five seated commoners, who are barefoot and wear plain white maguey garments. Durán says of the incensing ceremony:

priests from the wards went from home to home with incense burners in their hands, and even though the master of the house was most humble, [the priest] would incense the entire house (427)

The group of commoners includes figures representing both sexes, three men and two women. The parallel presentation suggests nearly equal importance was attached to the ceremony for the community of commoners and to the honoring of the deity impersonators.

The depiction of the feast Huetecuilhuitl, "great feast of the lords" (fig. 7), features a similar group of commoners. An impersonator representing a deity who personified the tender maize ears that were growing in the fields was sacrificed at this time, usually identified as Xilonen. This was also the time of year when the stores of maize from the last harvest were very low, "when dried maize was costly, then there was much want, it was hard to gain a livelihood; many then were our dead" (Sahagún 1950-78, 2: 93). For this festival, the nobles and rulers would make a certain quantity of maize available to "the poor of Mexico" (*ibid.*: 91), "to the *macehuales*" (Motolinía: 52), usually distributed in the form of a gruel or porridge.

Other pictorial sources on the festivals generally show one of two images for this festival: either a depiction of Xilonen, or of a noble holding a jade disk. The *Borbonicus* shows an image of the corn god Centeotl, seated on a litter decorated with maize ears and a maize stalk with new ears, *xilotes*, at the top. Below the dais is a group of four commoners, wearing plain maguey garments and holding out bowls to receive their ration of porridge. This group of four figures, two male and two female, probably symbolizes the whole community of commoners; the figure above the deity probably represents a priest or noble directing the feasting.

The only other image in the accounts of the festivals that is at all comparable to the *Borbonicus* illustration appears in the *Florentine*

*Codex* (fig. 8), but it seems to show well-dressed figures eating before a decorated house, while a group of commoners indicates hunger by pointing to their mouths.

The importance of the agricultural cycle in the *Borbonicus* festival section is seen in the depiction of the harvest festival which extends over four pages — all the other festivals occupy either a single page or a half-page. Although no commoners appear in the *Borbonicus* depiction of Ochpaniztli, a number of aspects set it off from the written and other pictorial accounts of the feasts. Other sources emphasize the sacrifice of an earth goddess, Toci or Teteoinnan, while the central focus in the *Borbonicus* is on the sacrifice and flaying of an impersonator of a maize goddess. In the third scene of the sequence (fig. 9), the climax of the festival, a priest wearing the skin and costume of the maize deity impersonator stands on a low platform, flanked by four priests in similar paper costumes with Tlaloc masks in their headdresses. A group of phallic dancers, impersonating members of the Huastec tribe, go around the platform. A relatively small and static image of Toci appears below, holding a broom in one hand. In the next image, the skin of the maize goddess impersonator is placed on a dais covered with rubber-spattered papers, surrounded by celebrants wearing Tlaloc masks.

There is no hint of the participation of warriors, nobles or any other group besides priests in the rituals depicted. Broda (1970) has suggested that there were clear martial overtones in the sacrifice of the Toci impersonator as described in the sources. The single image of Toci in the *Borbonicus* depiction lacks the martial accoutrements, spears and shields and spears, which appear in the other pictorial sources. The ceremonies depicted in the *Borbonicus*, with their public celebration of phallic figures connected with the fertile lands of the Gulf Coast, their emphasis on the sacrifice of a maize goddess, and their demonstration of the intimate relationship of rain gods and maize, can almost certainly be interpreted as being concerned exclusively with themes of fertility and agricultural abundance.

Another important festival which took place in autumn was Quecholli, the feast in honor of the god of hunting, Mixcoatl. This is the only festival with two named divisions (Durán: 147); in the *Borbonicus*, a thin gray line divides the page (fig. 10). The primary event of the feast, as described in written accounts, was a ritualized hunt in the countryside carried out by groups of nobles dressed in the



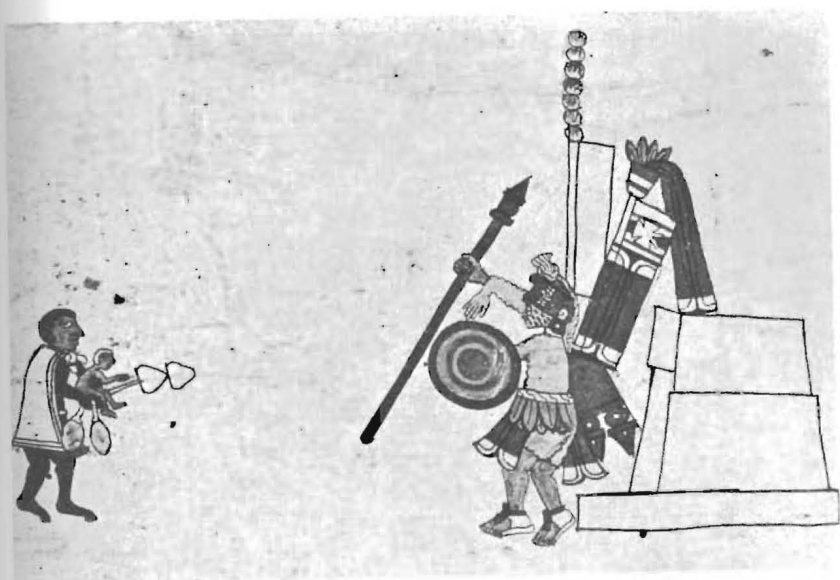


Fig. 1 *Codex Borbonicus*, 23 left, *Tlacaxipehualiztli* (from *Codex Borbonicus*, 1976)



Fig. 2 *Codex Magliabechiano*, fol. 30 r. *Tlacaxipeualiztli*  
 from *Codex Magliabechiano*, 1970)



Fig. 3 *Primeros Memoriales*, cap. 1, fol. 250 r. *Tlucaxipeualiztli*  
(from Sahagún, 1974, lám. 2)

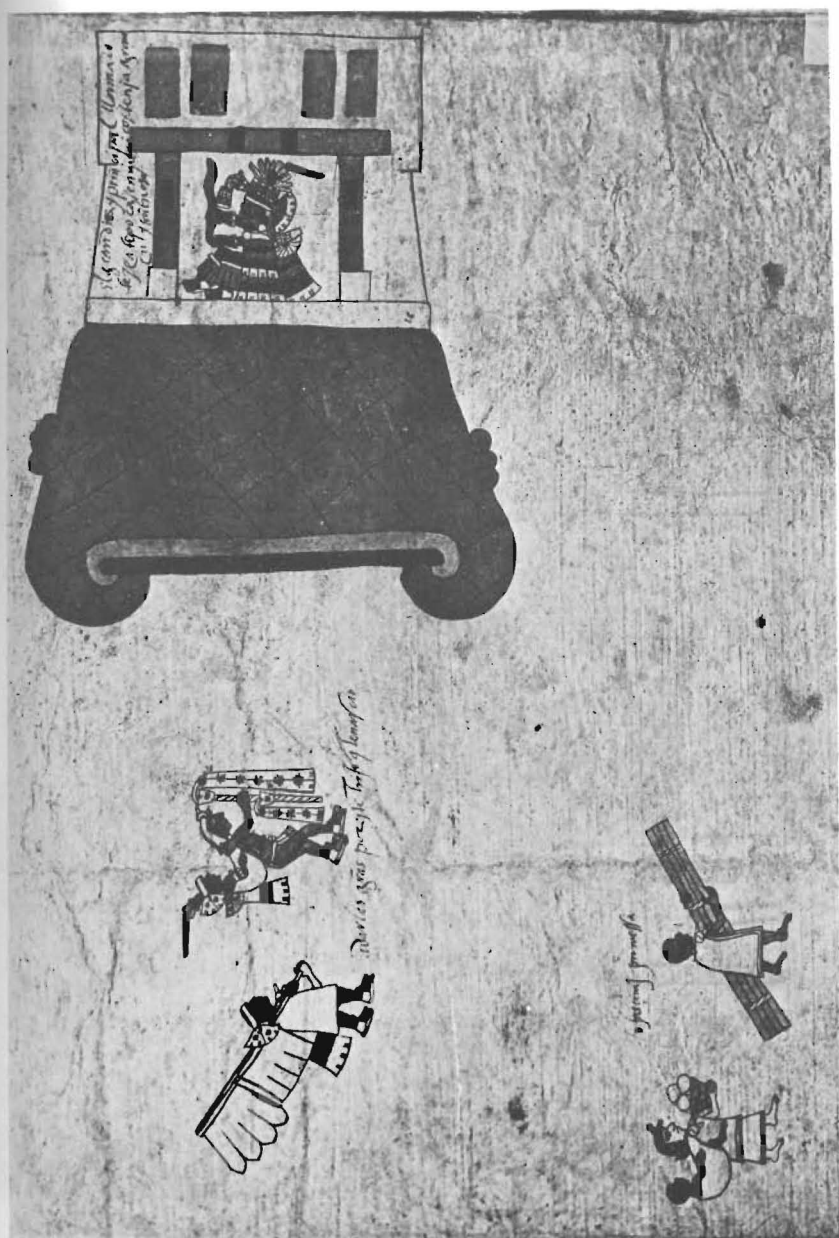


Fig. 4 Codex Borbonicus, 25, Hueitlozotli (from Codex Borbonicus, 1976)



Fig. 5 *Primeros Memoriales*, cap. 1, fol. 250 r., *Quauitlehua*  
(from Sahagún, 1974, lám. 1)



Fig. 6 Codex Borbonicus, 26 left,  
Tepopochuilziti or Toxcall (from  
Codex Borbonicus, 1976)



Fig. 7 Codex Borbonicus, 27 right,  
Hueitecuilhuitl (from Codex Bor-  
bonicus, 1976)



Fig. 8 *Florentine Codex*, Book 2, Chapter 27, *Ueitecuilhuil* (from Sahagún, 1950-78, illustrations following p. 102, no. 27)



Fig. 9 *Codex Borbonicus*, 30, *Ochpaniztli* (from *Codex Borbonicus*, 1976)

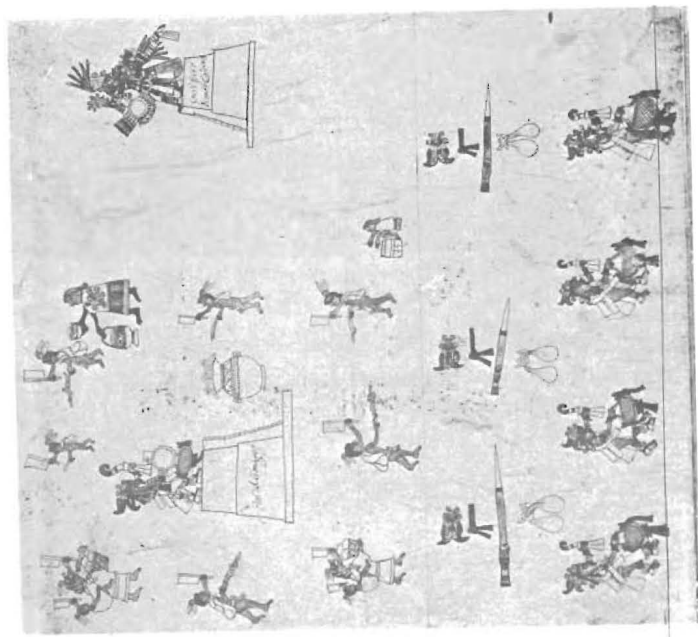


Fig. 10 *Codex Borbonicus*, 33, Quecholli (from *Codex Borbonicus*, 1976)

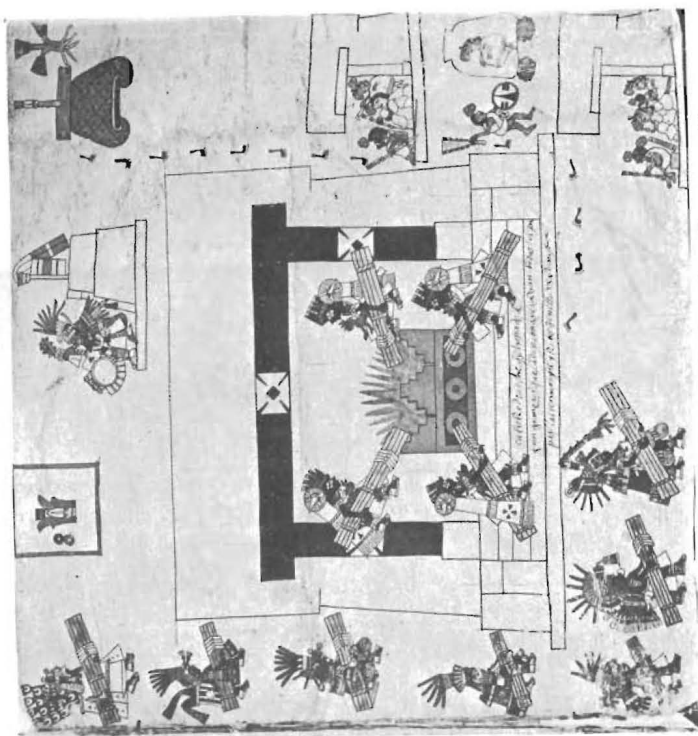


Fig. 11 *Codex Borbonicus*, 34, New Fire Ceremony (from *Codex Borbonicus*, 1976)



garb of Mixcóatl. Successful hunters were rewarded with Mixcóatl's characteristics accoutrements (Motolinía: 69). The four figures below the dividing line may represent the nobles, while the three groups of isolated objects above them may be the rewards given to those who took game — Mixcóatl's headdress, spear, and a special bag apparently associated with this feast (Kubler and Gibson: 32).

In contrast to the written sources, the *Borbonicus* image emphasizes the second half of the feast, which took place in the town. The painting shows a ring of dancers who are barefoot commoners, wearing plain maguery capes. They wear the black paint around the eyes and feather headdress of the hunting god Mixcóatl. But in contrast to the nobles below, they wear plain white feathers, not eagle feathers, and they offer spitted rabbits to an idol or impersonator of the deity. These humble rabbits contrast with the deer which the nobles hunted and offered to the idols. The two women make offerings of bread, and carry their children on their backs. The *Codex Borbonicus* image indicates that commoners participated in the feast, making offerings to Mixcóatl probably to ask his aid in their hunting.

Although it appears in the festival section of the *Codex Borbonicus*, the New Fire Ceremony (fig. 11) is not one of the eighteen monthly feasts. The kindling of the new fire took place when the simultaneous running of the two counts of the days, the divinatory and the solar, had gone through one complete cycle — that is, every 52 years. This was a time of cosmic danger when the world might end, as it had four times in the past, and the rituals carried out involved the entire Valley of Mexico. All of the fires in the valley were doused; the houses were swept; old idols and pottery were discarded. At nightfall, a procession of priests garbed as major deities went out from Tenochtitlan to the Hill of the Star, which lay to the south near the city of Culhuacan. In the middle of the night, after it was clear that the end of the world had not come, the new fire was made by a priest using a fire drill, and was carried to all the temples in the valley, and thence to the homes of all the people (Sahagún 1950-78, 7: 25-32; Motolinía: 49).

The central image on this page shows four fire priests placing four bundles of torches into a fire in a large brazier. These are usually called year bundles; each contains thirteen brands, and together the four of them equal the fifty-two years of the cycle.

It is striking that, in addition to the magnificent god impersonators and the fire priests in the temple, the *Borbonicus* shows us in a detailed and anecdotal way the activities of the people at this critical

time. Three different scenes appear at the lower right. Above and below, we see families huddled together in front of their houses, waiting and watching to see the new fire spring up — or for their world to end. The men are armed with spears, and all the figures wear maguey leaf masks. It was believed that if the world ended, many people would turn into fierce beasts, and the masks were worn to keep this from happening. In the lower house, a child sits on a woman's lap; small children were kept awake to keep them from turning into mice. Pregnant women were believed to be the most dangerous, for if the world ended, they would turn into female monsters called *tzitzimime*. They were placed inside granaries, and in the *Borbonicus* we see a pregnant woman, shown inside a ceramic granary in a unique x-ray view, guarded by a warrior carrying a shield and an obsidian-bladed war club.

Although it contains many elaborate depictions of ceremonies, involving numerous priests and deity impersonators, it is clear that the agricultural cycle, and the importance of religion in the lives of the common people and agriculturalists are the central concerns of the festival cycle depicted in the *Codex Borbonicus*. This is demonstrated in the emphasis placed on ceremonies concerned with rainfall, as shown in the numerous depictions of Tláloc, and in the extended depiction of the harvest festival, the climax of the agricultural year. Commoners, both male and female and thus possibly representing the whole community, are depicted engaging in religious activities in a number of cases: they appear making offerings at a Tlaloc temple in Huetozoxtli; being incensed by a priest in Toxcatl; receiving desperately needed provisions in Huetecuilhuitl; and honoring Mixcóatl, god of the hunt, in Quecholli. Even the depiction of the New Fire Ceremony includes the associated activities of the people.

Preconquest Central Mexican religion was clearly a complex system, with numerous important political, military and economic functions. For the community whose festivals are depicted in the *Borbonicus*, however, it was a system intimately related to the agricultural and natural cycles, a means of assuring the abundance of rainfall and the success of agricultural endeavors. Its political and military functions were of only secondary concern — so secondary in fact, that to illustrate the major celebration of military success, Tlacaxipehualiztli, the image chosen is one related to the blessing of children, a celebration of human fertility, which took place in the streets and homes of the community.

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