

## AN EXPLORATION OF THE NAHUA NETHERWORLD

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The most concise exposition of the Nahua beliefs concerning the afterlife is found in the first three chapters of the appendix to Book III of the *Florentine Codex* of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. There we read that there are three possible abodes for the soul and that the manner of death determined its ultimate destination. Those who drowned, were struck by lightning or died of a disease associated with the rain god, Tlaloc, went to his paradise where there was eternal springtime and absence of suffering. Those warriors who died in battle or were taken captive and subsequently sacrificed went to the home of the sun, a desert-like, but not barren place. For four years the souls of the warriors accompany the sun on its daily journey from the east. At the end of this time they are transformed into hummingbirds and butterflies. As such, they sip honey from the flowers there in the sun's heaven and on earth. The vast majority of people, nobles and commoners alike, went to *Mictlan*. Here, after enduring eight trials on a journey lasting four years, the soul encounters Mictlantecuhtli, Lord of the Dead, and oblivion.

As we shall see, the level of detail in the information offered in Book III is uneven. To achieve a well-rounded image of the Aztec conception of the afterlife one must consider descriptions in other indigenous sources, attitudes characterized in their oral traditions and the evidence to be gleaned from an examination of the celebration of the pertinent feasts.

Other portions of Sahagún's work, both in the *Florentine Codex* and the Spanish version, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, go far in completing the image. Although compiled and polished by the Spanish friar, his works are considered indigenous because the accounts were taken from selected "native elders who lived fully within the world preceding the conquest" (Edmonson,

119). The *Vatican A Codex* is particularly valuable for the pictorial representations of the native understanding of the structure of the universe. However, since the commentaries provided by Fray Pedro de los Rios and Kingsborough are frequently faulty, they must be carefully sifted and constantly compared with other materials.

With this as a basis we shall "flesh out" as complete a picture as possible of the Nahua netherworld.

At first glance, our understanding of Tlalocan is perhaps most complete. The selection process is straight-forward. Those who die under the influence of Tlaloc go to his paradise. The deceased are buried rather than cremated, the usual practice. The *Florentine Codex* has this enigmatic statement among the preparations of the body for burial: "Mountain images they placed before them (the dead)." One might well wonder why. But we know that Tlaloc was worshipped on and closely associated with mountains. The exact reason for this association is made clear by Torquemada. He records that,

Tenían también creído que todos los montes eminentes y sierras altas participaban de esta condición y parte de divinidad, por lo cual fingieron haber en cada lugar de estos un dios menor que Tlaloc y sujeto a él, por cuyo mandato hacía engendrar nubes, y que se deshiciesen en agua por aquellas provincias que aquel lugar y sierra aguardaban (Torquemada, Book vi, Chapter 23).

Mountains, then, were the sacred vehicles for Tlaloc's rain-making powers and so the images are fitting attributes for his dead.

Comprehending the nature of Tlaloc's paradise is easy for us even today. Anyone would enjoy a heaven where "there was great wealth, great riches. Never did anyone suffer. Never did the (crops) fail . . . It is continually springtime" (*Florentine Codex*, Book III, Appendix, Chapter 2).

A surprising note is added, however, by the hymn to Tlaloc collected by Sahagún and analysed by Garibay (Garibay, 51-64). It consists of an exchange between Tlaloc, his priest and a sacrificed child. Children of six or seven (Durán, 157) were sacrificed at several times during the year, principally during the first through fourth months, to bring rain (*Florentine Codex*, Book II, Chapter 1). The operative passage in this poem is lines 37-44 where the child speaks:

Ay, a los cuatro años entre nosotros es el levantamiento:

Sin que sepa, gente sin número en el lugar de los descarnados:

Casa de pluma de quetzal, se hace la transformación:

Es cosa propia del Acrecentador de Hombres.

Here we are given to understand that reincarnation takes place after four years! Garibay sums up the meaning of these lines by paraphrasing them thus:

Al cabo de cuatro años entre nosotros habrá una elevación a las alturas. Sin nadie darse cuenta innumerables allá en la Región del Misterio donde habitan los descarnados, casa de preciosa verdura, el Tlalocan, ha de haber metamorfosis con que hace resurgir a los hombres, del criador de los niños. '...Los niños que morían en las fiestas de Tlaloc eran felices: un día regresarían a la tierra, tras cuatro años de vivir en el Tlalocan bello y feliz.

Oddly enough, the *Vatican A Codex* includes no depiction of Tlalocan as a place to which some souls go. Only two oblique references to Tlalocan are made by Kingsborough. The first is to be found in his commentary on Plate II. He describes Tlalocan in four sentences in the context of mentioning those possible destinations of the soul omitted by the original author of the codex. The second is to be found in his lengthy explication of the codex which follows the plates. Here he would translate the name of the twelfth heaven, *Ylhuicatl Tlalocaypanmezitli*, as the Heaven of Tlaloc above the Moon. This is a seductive and even morphologically supportable assertion.

|           |                               |
|-----------|-------------------------------|
| Tlaloca   | = Tlalocan, Tlaloc's Paradise |
| ypan      | = above it                    |
| me(t)ztli | = moon                        |

It is, however, a juxtaposition unique in the literature. Neither does the illustration imply a superimposition of the two elements (see Fig. 5). I would rather read it as follows:

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Tlal      | = Tlalli, earth   |
| oca       | = from <i>oca</i> , to rub, or, <i>ocachi</i> , a little more |
| ypan      | = above it  |
| me(t)ztli | = moon  |

"The moon, sliding over the earth, or, the moon a little above the earth." This makes more sense in light of the fact that this heaven is the one directly adjacent to earth.

The *Vatican A Codex* does, however, in Plate iv, graphically depict a paradise for babies almost completely omitted by Sahagún. This is the place of the Chichihuaquauitl, or, of the Tree of Breasts, the place to which go the souls of babies who die before attaining the use of reason (see Fig. 1). Kingsborough tells us that it was these souls who returned to repopulate the earth after its periodic destructions.

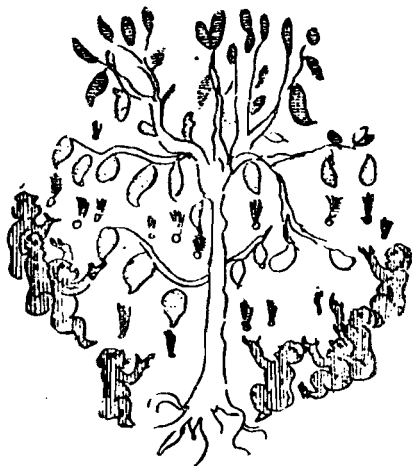
The only allusion to this paradise in the *Florentine Codex* is a veiled reference found among the *Huehuetlatolli* in Book iv. There, in Chapter 21 we read:

It is said that the children who die become as precious stones, as precious turquoises, as precious bracelets. When they die they go not where it is fearful, the place of sharp winds, the region of the dead. They go to the home of Tonacatecuhtli; they live in the garden of Tonacatecuhtli; live by the tree of Tonacatecuhtli; by it they suck (the flowers).

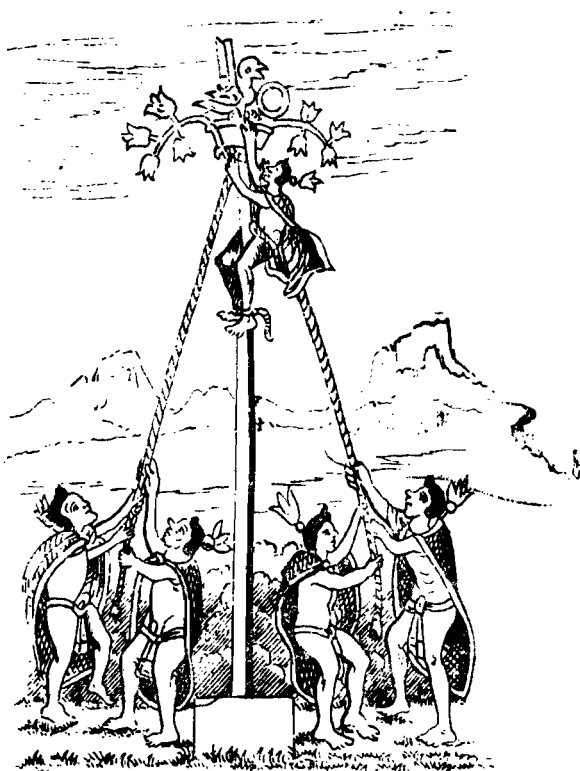
My own translation differs from the previously quoted. I found it more in keeping with the visual testimony of the *Vatican A Codex*. My translation reads: "They go to the home of Tonacatecuhtli (The Lord of Our Flesh), they live there among the trees of our flesh, they suck the flowers of our flesh, with the tree of our flesh they live, with it they live."

Curiously, Sahagún must have been aware of the existence of this belief since it is included in his earliest work from Tepepulco, the *Primeros Memoriales* (Edmonson, 128). It does not appear in his later works, however. Edmonson tells us that the Tlatelolcan associates, in revising the earlier texts from Tepepulco, winnowed out those things considered by them to be repetitious or unimportant (Edmonson, 123). Perhaps it was under such conditions that the myth met its fate.

The short chapter in the appendix to Book III of the *Florentine Codex*, devoted to the home of the sun and the souls who go there, comes nowhere near adequately expressing the conception of it that the Aztecs had. Recall that all we are told here is that the souls of warriors who die in battle or sacrifice spend four years in the company of the sun after which time they are transformed into



1



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Fig. 1. The Chichihuaquahuitl, *Codex Vaticanus A.*

Fig. 2. The Tenth Mont Feast, Durán, *The Book of the Gods and Rites.*

hummingbirds and butterflies in which guise they travel between heaven and earth to sip nectar from flowers.

There is no indication of the esteem in which this fate was held. More importantly, there is no mention of a whole genre of souls who also live with the sun. These are the souls of the women who die in first childbirth. Such women were thought of as warriors and their struggle as a battle. Thus, when a woman "warrior" died in "battle" with a child "captive" in her womb she shared the fate of her male counterparts (Sullivan, 1966, 87). The record of the special fate of these women and the reverence accorded them is found in Chapter 29 of Book iv of the *Florentine Codex*. Here, among the rituals surrounding pregnancy and childbirth, are mentioned those who do not survive the experience.

There is a long passage describing the activities of both the men and women who accompany the sun. The men, in full battle dress, escort the sun from its rising in the east to the zenith, rejoicing and making a din to amuse him. At the zenith, they transfer the sun to the hands of the women who, also clamoring and rejoicing, carry it on a quetzal feather mat to its setting in the west. They deliver it to the people of *Mictlan*, where it becomes day while it is night on earth. When their daily duty was done, the warriors scattered to suck flowers and the women descended to earth to seek out weaving implements and other womanly equipment.

Then follows a beautiful prayer in poetic form addressed by the midwife to the deceased woman which encapsulates all these ideas. It reads in part:

You took up, you raised aloft, you wielded the shield, the  
[buckler . .

Oh, my little one, my daughter, beloved mistress,  
You have wearied yourself, manfully have you fought.  
By your labors you have won Our Lord's noble death,  
glorious death, truly now, you have toiled for it,  
well you merited it;  
the good, the fine, the precious death was your recompense,  
[your reward.

By chance have you died in vain?  
By chance have you died?

Who is granted what you have merited?  
Eternally you shall live and know gladness  
next to, beside our mistresses, the divine women.

Farewell my daughter, little one!  
 Go to them, join them:  
 Let them take you, let them receive you.  
 Be with them amusing, shouting the praises of our mother  
 and father, the sun,  
 accompany them wherever they go in their rejoicing . . .

For you have gone to be happy;  
 in the good place, the fine place you now dwell,  
 and beside, next to Our Lord, you now live.  
 You behold him now with human eyes,  
 you invoke him with human voice.  
 May you pray to him for us, may you invoke him for us!  
 With all this we commend ourselves to you.

(Sullivan, 1966, 93 and 95).

From this we can deduce that women could be intermediaries between the people and the sun. Such was the power of these women that, aside from this respectable role, certain parts of their bodies were coveted by warriors and thieves who believed that these certain parts (hair, forearm or fingers) had the power to charm others into inactivity. Moreover, this power was feared by all. It was believed that when these women descended to earth they appeared to mortals, sickened children and entered human bodies. They especially haunted crossroads, so it was there that they erected shrines to them with their images inside (*Historia General*, Book I, Chapter 19). Worship of these goddesses was observed on the third, eighth and twelfth feasts of the *tonalpohualli*, dates *ce mazatl* (one deer), *ce quiahuatl* (one rain), and *ce ozomatli* (one monkey), respectively. The goddesses were believed to descend on these days and so offerings were made at the shrines, the images were decorated and children were kept indoors (*Historia General*, Book I, Chapter 19).

We must shift our perspective somewhat when we consider attitudes concerning the fate of the warriors. The Aztecs' belief in their responsibility to maintain the present age by sustaining the sun with blood (mostly of captives taken in war) pervaded most aspects of their culture. A permanent home in the place of the sun was, therefore, the logical reward for those who died in pursuit of his sustenance. Thus we find in a poem celebrating the confederacy of the Triple Alliance cities:

No one fears the good death, oh princes!  
 Thus the god calls you.  
 It is thus in your good hands:  
 What diligent one will weary his shield for them,  
 the mat and the arrow seat?

(My translation of a poem from Garibay, 1965, 17).

With women the aim, obviously, was to survive the "battle". But if she didn't, well, she had her reward. They passively accepted their fate. The men, on the other hand, actively sought it out. A poem from *Cantares Mexicanos* eloquently embodies this feeling. The pertinent lines read:

No te acobardes, corazón mío:  
 allí en medio de la llanura deseo la muerte a filo de obsidiana:  
 Sólo quieren nuestros corazones muerte en guerra.  
 De modo que allí junto a la guerra estoy deseando la muerte a  
 filo de obsidiana:  
 Esto quiere mi corazón:  
 Muerte de obsidiana.

(Garibay, 1965, 95).

Evidence that this is the common thought and not just the personal feelings of a particularly ardent soldier is found in a prayer to Tezcatlipoca in time of war. Here we find:

And may they in peace, in repose arrive among the valiant warriors, the ocelot warriors who are in the heavens where they gladden the sun, the turquoise prince, the one who died in war—they cry out to him there.

And there, forever, perpetually, time without end, they rejoice, they live drunk (with joy and happiness), not knowing, no longer remembering, the affairs of the night and no longer giving heed to one year, to two years. Eternal is their abundance, their joy. The different flowers they suck, the choice ones, the flowers of joy, the flowers of happiness: to this end the noblemen go to death—go longing for, go desiring (death) (*Florentine Codex*, Book VI, Chapter 3).

The warriors, like the divine women, also had a feast in their honor. It fell within the *xiuhpohualli*, or solar year calendar rather than the *tonalpohualli*, or astrological calendar as did the women's feast. It is the feast of *Xocotlhuetzli*, the Falling of Fruit, celebrated



in the tenth month. The nature of the feast is not apparent by reading Sahagún (*Florentine Codex*, Book II, Chapter 29).

The celebration consists of setting a dough figure and tamales atop a very tall pole erected in the plaza. After some particularly grisly sacrifices the men and women dance around the pole. Then the youths engage in a contest to climb the pole and be the first to reach the dough figure on top. The winner throws down the figure and tamales to the crowd below and the pole itself is pulled down.

The meaning of the *Xocotl* festival is discerned from an examination of the feasts of the ninth and tenth months as recorded in the *Vatican A* and *Telleriano-Remensis Codices*. Here, the monthly feasts are named *Miccailuitl*, the Feast of the Dead and *Huey Miccailuitl*, The Great Feast of the Dead, and they are illustrated with mummy bundles! At both these feasts, offerings of food and drink are made to the dead. At the second, the people go to their roofs at night, face the north and call loudly, "Come quickly, we await you!"

Durán (Book II, Chapter 12) records the festival, giving it both the names used by Sahagún and in the codices. He says the *Xocotl* pole was cut in the ninth month on the Feast of *Micailhuitontli*, "The Little Feast of the Dead Ones". He says the pole was climbed on the Great Feast of the Dead in the tenth month and that it was so named because of great number of men sacrificed.

Torquemada, too, records the feasts using first the names found in Sahagún, *Tlaxochimaco* (The Giving of Flowers) and *Xocotlhuetzli*, but adds that the Tlaxcaltecs called them *Miccailhuitzintli* (The Little Commemoration of the Dead) and *Hueymiccailhuitl* (The Major Feast of the Dead). He adds, however, that the latter ceremony was for kings and warriors who had died in battle or in the hands of the enemy (Torquemada, Book X, Chapter 35).

It was Eduard Seler who finally recognized the connection between the symbolism of the *Xocotl* pole and the dead warriors and thereby discerned the true meaning of the feast (Seler, 1939, vol. 3, pt. 2, 39-48). He notes that it was strange for the people to want the dead to return. Usually, they were all too anxious to have them gone. Then, Durán illustrates the tenth monthly feast with the *Xocotl* pole topped by a bird figure, the very form the warriors assume (Fig. 2). He further notes that the dead warriors were identified with the never-setting stars that revolve around the North Star from whence they go at dawn to the east to greet the rising sun.

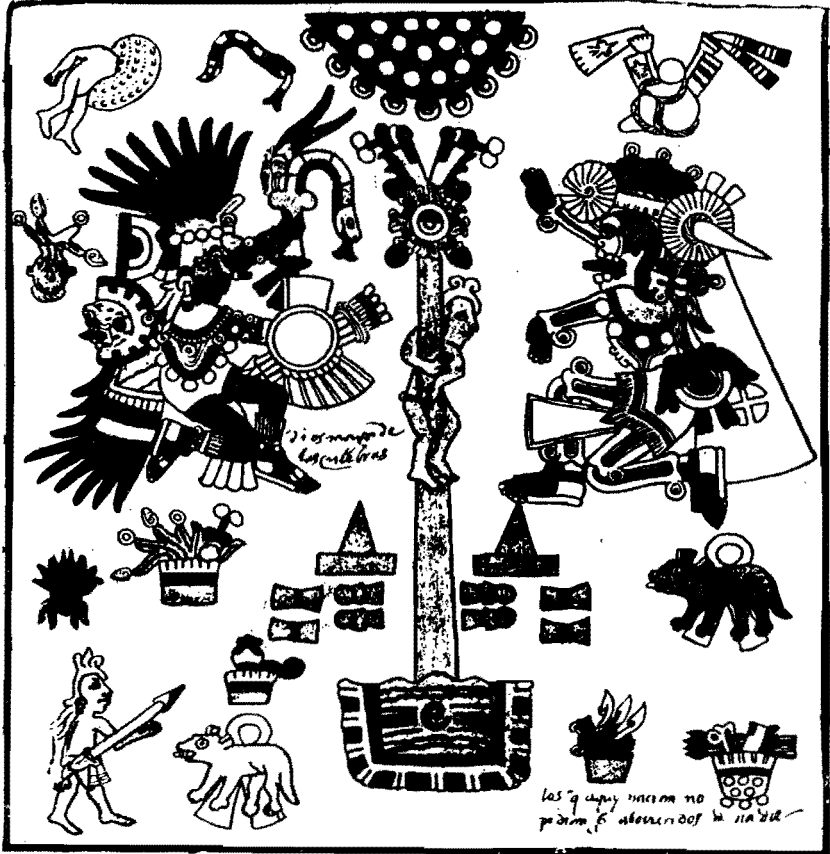


Fig. 3. Xocoti huetzi (Codex Borbonicus).

This, he says, explains why the people face the north at night and call to the dead to return. They await the return of the warrior as precious birds and butterflies. Finally, Seler asserts that the pulling down of the *Xocotl* pole is symbolic of the fate of dead warriors and was intended to inspire the young warriors to emulate those who had died.

The *Codex Borbonicus* summarizes these ideas visually. In the first section (Fig. 3), it shows the *Xocotl* pole with stars above it, flanked by Tonatiuh, the sun god, with a death's head back pendant in the guise of Tlalhuitzcalpantecuhtli, the Lord of the Dawn, and Mictlantecuhtli. In the second section it depicts the *Xocotl* pole with a mummy bundle in place of the dough figure (Fig. 4). Here, then, is visual proof of the correctness of Seler's assertions.

Having seen the transformations those who die under extraordinary circumstances undergo, we finally turn our attention to the vast majority of mortals who succumb to natural causes. On this topic, Sahagún included the most extensive material, much of it speeches that were part of the funerary ceremonies.

The basic premise is that all, commoners and nobles alike, go to *Mictlan*, the Place of the Dead, "the place of the unflashed, the place where there is arriving, the place with no smokehole..." These are very telling epithets. They emphasize the distinction between *Mictlan* and the paradises, namely, that there is no escape, no leaving. While souls can, and do, return from the other abodes to earth, those who go to *Mictlan* are gone forever.

*Mictlan* was believed to be located in the interior of the earth. This is borne out by the images in Plate II of the *Vatican A Codex* (Fig. 5). Here we see the lowest two heavens, earth, and below it, the pictures representing the obstacles through which the soul must pass on its journey to obscurity. These obstacles are also listed in the funeral rites given by Sahagún and Torquemada. But since Torquemada's account is virtually identical to Sahagún's as found in the *Historia General*, one can only assume that this was his source. Hence, I shall refer only to Sahagún's account as found in the *Florentine Codex*, Book III, Appendix, Chapter 1.

Here, mention of the obstacles in the netherworld is made in the speech to the corpse as it is being prepared for cremation. It is dressed in "paper vestments". As each paper accouterment is added the deceased is told, "Here is wherewith thou wilt pass (one of the obstacles)." The table below compares the two lists.

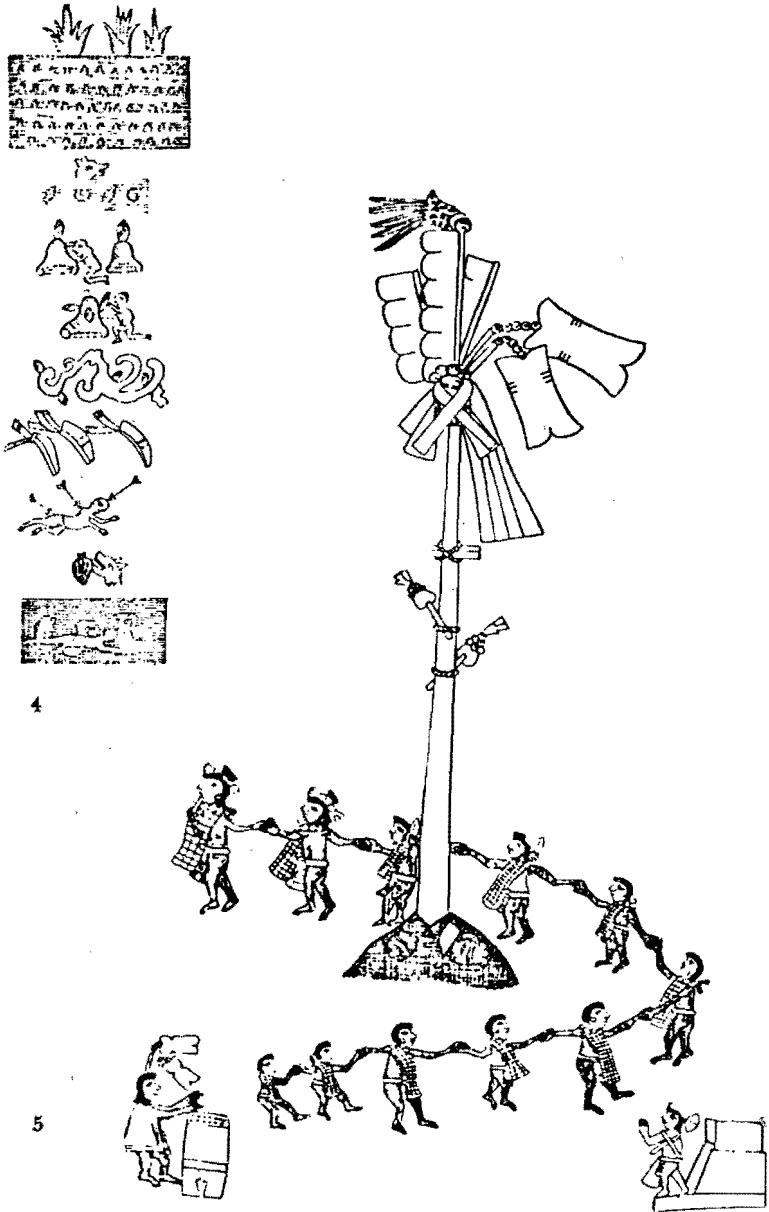


Fig. 4. The Mictlan located in the interior of the earth. *Codex Vaticanus A*.

Fig. 5. Xocotl huetzi-Hueymicailhuitl. *Codex Borbonicus 28*.

*Sahagún**Vatican A Codex*

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Mountains that come together               | River to be crossed with the help of a dog<br>( <i>Apanohuaya</i> , the Passage of Water)  |
| Road with serpent guardian                 | Clashing mountains<br>( <i>Tepetil Monanamycia</i> , Mountains which join together)  |
| Blue lizard                                | Mountain of razors or obsidian<br>( <i>Yztepetl</i> )  |
| Eight deserts                              | Place of winds<br>( <i>Yeehecayan</i> )  |
| Eight hills                                | Place of human banners<br>( <i>Panoecoe Tlacaya-Cuecuepa Tlacaya?</i> , Place where men are turned upside down again and again)  |
| Obsidian-bladed winds                      | Place of arrows<br>( <i>Temiminaloya</i> , Place where one is shot with arrows)  |
| River to be crossed with the help of a dog | Place of the heart-eating beast<br>( <i>Teocoylqualoya</i> -Where the divine heart? is taken to be eaten)<br>Black place without a smokehole<br>( <i>Izmictlan Apochealoca</i> , Full, or black place of the dead without a smokehole) |

A high dissimilarity is obvious. The most striking difference is that the river across which the dog takes one is the first obstacle in the *Vatican A* list, and the last in Sahagún's list. The paragraph in the *Florentine Codex* wherein the river is mentioned is the

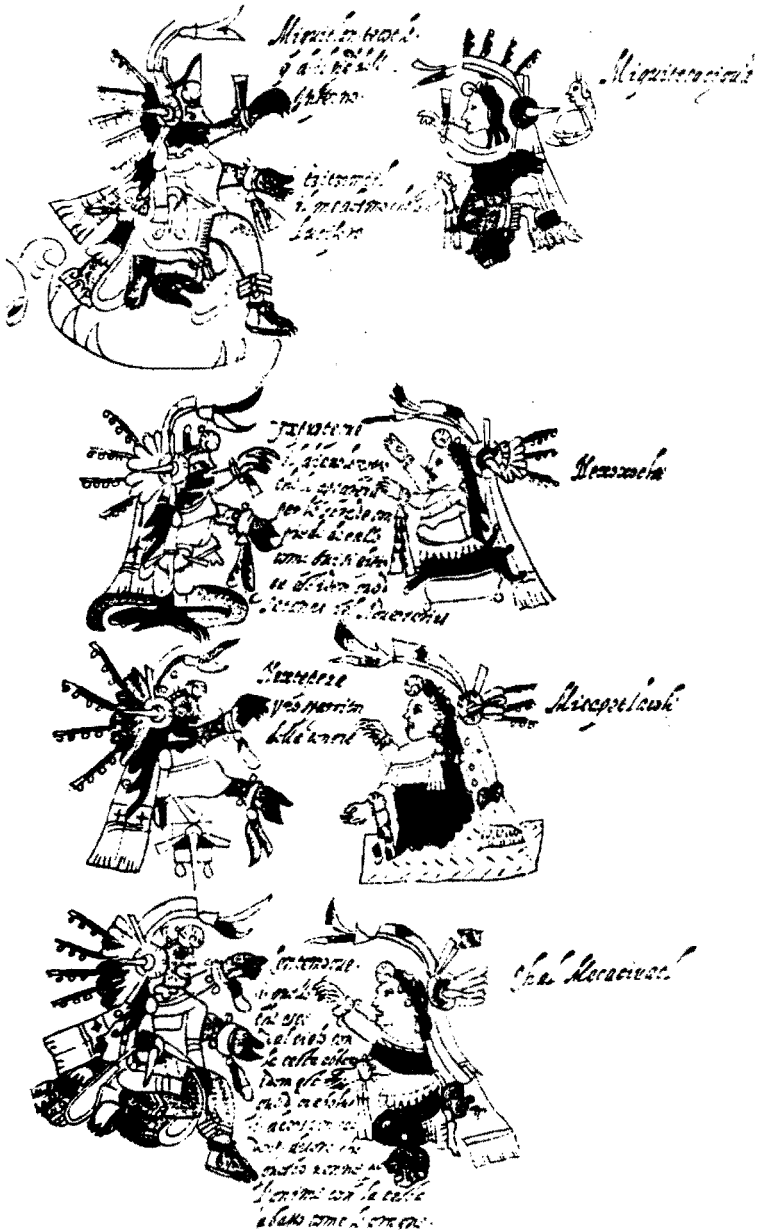


Fig. 6. The Deities who rule in Mictlan (Vatican A. Codex).

most important in the whole chapter because it is here that we are locked into a time frame. It says, "And when the four years had ended, thereupon (the dead one) went to the nine places of the dead (where) lay a broad river. There dogs carried one across." These sentences lead us to believe that the four-year journey through the obstacles is preliminary to arrival in *Mictlan* and not that each obstacle represents a level of *Mictlan* as the arrangement of images in the *Vatican A Codex* implies. But if we accept the heaven images as layers we must also assume the same of the netherworld images.

This time frame of Sahagún's also appears to be contradictory to the other funeral observances that he lists, namely, that the possessions of the deceased were burned eighty days after the death and on the first, second, third and fourth anniversaries. We are told that these things were needed for protection against the rigors of the journey and to give to Mictlantecuhtli upon arrival in *Mictlan*.

In this instance, when Sahagún tells us that the river is the last to be encountered at the end of four years, I believe that his understanding is in error and that the fuller and more imaginative list depicted in the *Vatican A Codex* comes closer to presenting a true picture of the concept. The logic is as follows.

In the first place, Sahagún's informants were most likely not priests (Edmonson, 125). So while they had a rudimentary knowledge of those rites to which the relatives of the deceased would have been privy, it seems the details and underlying theological principles escape them. We are told the corpse was given paper vestments. While they may have included some of the deceased's possessions in the mummy bundle, they could not have included most of them or there would be nothing left to burn later. They *did* burn the dog with the corpse, however. This leads one to believe that the dog was needed immediately while the other things were not needed until later.

Then, the *Vatican A Codex*, in Plates III and IV, depicts the nine beings who rule in *Mictlan*, the ninth being Mictlantecuhtli as the Black Tezcatlipoca (Fig. 6). Furthermore, the *Vatican A Codex* shows a place where ferocious beasts eat one's heart. This would explain why green stones were placed in the mouth of the dead and "became their hearts" as surrogates as Sahagún tells us was done.

So while there is no way to retranslate the problematic passage in Sahagún, because his informants seem to be consistently confused

about the time at which things are done (first saying that the possessions are burned with the corpse and then saying they are burned later), I think we can ignore the sentence and go on to assemble a general, hypothetical reconstruction of the beliefs by combining the verbal and pictorial images in these two sources.

I suggest that the dead were given things with which to pay a "toll" to each of the lords or ladies who preside over each level of *Mictlan* where one or another of the "trials" are encountered. These things are represented by the paper ornaments given the corpse. The real objects are sent on later when the soul will need them. In this way, the gods receive their due and the souls benefit from the use of their burned possessions.

I would further suggest that an even clearer picture could be achieved by comparing the imagery in these two sources with the symbolism of the *tonalpohualli* signs. As we saw, it is stated in the chapter on deified women that the sun spent the earth's nighttime hours in *Mictlan*. If it is the count of suns by which one's fate is cast on earth, should not the same be true in *Mictlan*?

The appearance of the Blue Lizard as the appositive of *Xochitonal*, or Flowery Fate, in Sahagún provided the inspiration for the thought whereupon several superficial coincidences revealed themselves. The blue lizard, dog, water and wind are all *tonalpohualli* signs. Even the clashing mountains may be explained in this way if they are taken to represent the sign, olin. The visual image of the mountains together resembles the two-lobed form of the sign and the action of their clashing, the sign's meaning: movement or earthquake. Such tantalizing coincidences could be the basis for a future indepth study, untenable here, from which could ultimately emerge a somehow deeper understanding of the character of the Nahua netherworld.



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