

THE DEVIL AND THE SKIRT  
AN ICONOGRAPHIC INQUIRY INTO THE PREHISPANIC  
NATURE OF THE TZITZIMIME

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INTRODUCTION

On folio 76r of the colonial Central Mexican painted manuscript *Codex Magliabechiano*, a large, round-eyed figure with disheveled black hair and skeletal head and limbs stares menacingly at the viewer (Fig. 1a).<sup>1</sup> Turned to face us, the image appears ready to burst from the cramped confines of its pictorial space, as if to reach out and grasp us with its sharp talons. Stunned by its gaping mouth and its protruding tongue in the form of an ancient Aztec sacrificial knife, viewers today may recoil from the implication that the creature wants to eat them. This impression is confirmed by the cognate image on folio 46r of *Codex Tudela* (Fig. 1b). In the less artful Tudela version, it is blood rather than a stone knife that issues from the frightening figure's mouth. The blood pours onto the ground in front of the figure's outspread legs, where a snake dangles in the Magliabecchiano image. Whereas the Magliabechiano figure wears human hands in its ears, the ears of the Tudela figure have been adorned with bloody cloths. In both manuscripts, long assumed to present us with a window to the prehispanic past, a crest of paper banners embedded in the creatures' unruly hair, together with a

<sup>1</sup> This paper, which is dedicated to my friend and colleague Doris Heyden, evolved out of a talk presented at the 1993 symposium on "Goddesses of the Western Hemisphere: Women and Power" which was held at the M.H. DeYoung Memorial Museum in San Francisco. Further research was supported by a 1994-95 UCLA Academic Senate Research Grant. I wish here to express my gratitude to both institutions, as well as to Esther Pasztory, who organized the De Young symposium, and to Carmen Aguilera, Patricia Anawalt, and Jeanette Peterson, all of whom kindly answered my many questions. Comments by Louise Burkhart and Susan Milbrath, as well as two anonymous reviewers, have been most helpful. Special thanks go to John Pohl and Elizabeth Boone, who critically read preliminary drafts of this paper, as well as to Eulogio Guzman for his invaluable help with the illustrations and general good counsel.

necklace of human hearts, hands, and a liver, identifies them with the preconquest practice of human sacrifice.

Who were these frightening beings? The anonymous Spanish commentary to the *Codex Magliabechiano* image identifies the figure on folio 76r as a *Zizimitl* [Tzitzimitl], one of a group of supernaturals collectively known to the Aztec inhabitants of Central Mexico as the Tzitzimime. In the decades following the 1521 Spanish conquest of Mexico, the Tzitzimime were almost always described as fearsome creatures of darkness who might descend to earth at certain critical moments to eat people. A solar eclipse, when it was believed that the moon was eating the sun, was one such occasion; scholars generally agree that the Tzitzimime were the stars that become visible at such times (Sahagún 1950-82, 8: 2; 1997: 153; Thompson 1934: 231; Seler 1963, 1: 139; Milbrath 1996: 489).<sup>2</sup> The time for drilling “New Fire” upon the midnight passage of the Pleiades through the meridian at the end of a 52-year cycle, or “century”, was another occasion for dread. The Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún (1950-82, 7: 27) wrote that the Aztecs greatly feared that if New Fire could not be drilled, the sun would be destroyed forever and “there would evermore be night... Night would prevail forever and the Tzitzimime would descend, to eat men”.<sup>3</sup> The hostile, destructive nature of the Tzitzimime described by colonial chroniclers therefore would seem to confirm the negative impression we receive from their portrayals in codices *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela*.

There are, however, some important discrepancies between sixteenth century textual references to the Tzitzimime and the way that artists represented them in manuscript paintings. These discrepancies must be taken very seriously because the texts, including the glosses and commentaries in painted manuscripts, were usually penned by European authors, whereas the paintings are generally thought to have been made by native artists. Although these artists were almost certainly Christian converts schooled, at least to some extent, in European artistic techniques and conventions and often working for Spanish patrons, there is no reason to doubt that their personal knowledge of Aztec traditions and religious beliefs influenced the images they cre-

<sup>2</sup> See also Don Francisco Chimalpahin's (1965: 210-211) report of a solar eclipse that took place during a year 10 Rabbit (1478) in the reign of Axayacatl when “all the stars could be seen. Also at this time phantoms, omens, and demons of the kind brought by the wind, bad airs that descend from the woods”.

<sup>3</sup> The English translation from which this is drawn, as throughout the series, substitutes “demons of darkness” for Tzitzimime. Since the literal meaning of the words *tzitzimitl* and *tzitzimime* are unknown, I prefer to leave them untranslated.

ated. The challenge before us is to tease out those aspects of these native artists' depictions that speak less to their status as partially acculturated subjects of European colonizers and more to their familial memories and understandings of the way things had been before the Spaniards arrived.

### *Gender, Reputation, and the Devil*

An important example of the slippage between texts and images occurs in *Codex Magliabechiano*. On folio 75v, the commentator says of the Tzitzimitl depicted on folio 76r that "they painted it like a dead man already fleshless with only the bones remaining and full of hearts and hands around its neck and head" (Boone 1983: 214). The implication is that the Tzitzimime were either exclusively or typically male. Both the Magliabechiano and Tudela figures, however, wear a distinctive skirt bordered on the bottom by a row of shells. Shells likewise border the red panel, or back apron, seen hanging behind the Tudela figure's legs. Not only were skirts quintessential female garments in Aztec Mexico, but the red, shell-bordered back panel almost always appears in Aztec imagery on female figures (Klein 1975: 70; 1976: 55-56).<sup>4</sup> While it could be argued that the absence of breasts on these figures supports the commentator's claim that the figures are male, the fact is that even female skeletons lack breasts. In contrast to the commentator's identification of the Tzitzimitl depicted in *Codex Magliabechiano*, then, the native artists of both manuscripts apparently perceived the Tzitzimime as female.

Another reason for taking the *Codex Magliabechiano* artist seriously is the relatively early dating of the manuscript. According to Elizabeth Boone (1983: 33-36), both Magliabechiano and Tudela had been loosely copied from a now lost prototype that, like them, was painted by native artists. Both copies were executed within thirty-five years following the conquest, making them two of our earliest colonial pictorial sources. This suggests that they may be more reliable than most, if not all, of the later pictorial sources, a suggestion reinforced by their largely preconquest

<sup>4</sup> Skirts and, in some cases, back aprons with shells in their borders can be seen in: *Codex Borbonicus*, Plates 3-6, on the goddesses Citlalinicue; *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, folios 3r, 6r, 18v, 20r, 21v, on the goddesses Toci, Illamatecutli, Itzpapalotl, Tlaltecuhli, and Chantico; and elsewhere in *Codex Magliabechiano* (fol. 45r) on the goddess Cihuacoatl. In *Codex Tudela* they decorate the skirts of Toci and Cihuacoatl (fol's. 21r, 27r). The only male to wear the back apron is the death god Mictlantecuhli and then only in colonial images (e.g., *Codex Vaticanus* 3738, Pl. 2)

painting style (Boone 1983: 34).<sup>5</sup>

The Spanish authors of the two earliest colonial prose manuscripts to mention the Tzitzimime likewise identify these beings as female. The anonymous *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 256), based on native testimony collected in the 1530s, states that “In the second (heaven) they [the Aztecs] say there are certain women who have no flesh whatever, but are all bones, named Tezauhzigua, and otherwise called Zizimine; and...these are placed there so that when the world comes to [an] end, their duty will be to eat up all the men”. As we will see, the slightly later (c. 1543) *Histoyre du Mechiqye* identifies the Tzitzimime as “goddesses”, confirming this female gender attribution (Jonghe 1905: 27-28).<sup>6</sup>

These identifications of the Tzitzimime as females contrast, however, with later prose sources, which tend to either eschew the question of gender entirely or identify the Tzitzimime as largely, if not exclusively, male. Sometime between 1550 and the early '60s, for example, a Spanish commentator of *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* wrote on folio 4v of the Aztec month called Quecholli that:

Properly, it [Quecholli] should be called the fall of the demons, who they say were stars in the sky that they call (by the) names they had, which are the following: Yacatecuhtli, Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, Ce Acatl Quetzalcoatl, Achitumetl, Xacopancalqui, Mixcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, Zontemoc like gods. They called them this name before they fell from heaven (and...), and now they call them Tzitzimime, which means monstrous or frightening thing” (Quiñones Keber 1995: 129, 255).

All of the deities mentioned in this passage are known to be male. On folio 18v of the same manuscript, all but one of the names given for the Tzitzimime are names of male supernaturals (Quiñones Keber 1995: 182, 265).<sup>7</sup> The only female listed is the goddess Itzpapalotl, patroness of the

<sup>5</sup> The earliest colonial Central Mexico painted manuscripts are thought to be *Codex Borbonicus* and the *Aubin Tonalámatl*, both possibly executed within ten years of the conquest (Glass and Robertson 1975: 14). The prose manuscript *Historia Toltteca-Chichimeca* was illustrated in Puebla sometime between 1544 and 1563 (Leibsohn n.d.: 12). *Codex Magliabechiano* is thought to have painted around 1550 and *Codex Tudela* can be specifically dated to 1553-1554 (Boone 1983: 54). Roughly contemporary with Codices *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela*, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* was probably painted between 1553 and 1554 or 1555, with its annotations added slightly later. Its cognate, *Codex Vaticanus* 3738, which was copied from it, was finished by 1570 (Quiñones Keber 1995: 129-130).

<sup>6</sup> Gibson and Glass (1975: 345, 340) offer a date of c. 1535 for the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* and c. 1543 for the *Histoyre du Mechiqye*. Nicholson (1992: 8) argues for a *terminus post quem* of 1547 for the latter.

*trecena* (period of thirteen days) represented on that page.

During this *trecena*, a commentator tells us, the Aztecs celebrated “the feast of the descent of the Miquitlantecotli and of the Zontemoque and the others” (Quiñones Keber 1995: 182, 165). The former refers to followers or variants of the male Aztec death deity Mictlantecuhtli (Mictlan Lord), who ruled over the Aztec underworld, called Mictlan, and the latter to one of his avatars, Zontemoc (Descends Headfirst). At the top of folio 3 of the cognate *Codex Vaticanus 3738 (Ríos)*, which depicts four male gods of the underworld, including Zontemoc, and their consorts, Mictlantecuhtli is glossed as “the lord of the underworld, Tzitzimitl, the same as Lucifer” (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> Although Mictlantecuhtli’s consort, glossed here as *Miquitecacigua* (Mictacacihuatl, “Woman Mictlan”), wears the red shell tipped back apron and, like him, the bannered headdress seen on the Tzitzimime in codices *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela*, she is not labeled a Tzitzimitl. Thus, although the native artist who painted this page dressed both Mictacacihuatl and Mictlantecuhtli as Tzitzimime, the Spaniard who later glossed the image identified only the male member of the pair as a *Tzitzimitl*.

The *Codex Vaticanus 3738* commentator’s association of Mictlantecuhtli with Lucifer may explain the shift in the Tzitzimime’s gender over time.<sup>9</sup> As Louise Burkhart (1989: 55) has pointed out, Spanish missionaries working to convert the native inhabitants of New Spain to Roman Catholicism associated the Tzitzimime with the Devil and his minions.<sup>10</sup> Burkhart (1989: 173) notes that Sahagún, in a 1540s sermon delivered to his flock of converts, refers to Satan as “the Tzitzimitl”.<sup>11</sup> As

<sup>7</sup> Two of these, Quetzalcoatl and Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, were also listed on folio 4v, although Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli’s name, along with the remaining male names, was later crossed out. The first of these is given as *Ochuluvuchete*, which most scholars interpret as Huitzilopochtli (Seler 1902-1903: 89-90; 1963, 2: 105; Quiñones Keber 1995: 182). The remaining male names are: Tezcatlipoca, Tonacatecuhtli, and Yohualtecuhli. Thompson (1934: 228ff) did not translate *Ochuluvuchete* and did not discuss its implications, nor did he include Huitzilopochtli among the deities he regarded as members of the Tzitzimime.

<sup>8</sup> The commentator explains on the back of the page that “in this region of hell [Mictlan] they supposed that there existed four gods or principal demons, one of whom was superior, whom they called Zitzimitl, who is the same as Mictlantecuhtli, the great god of hell”. The *Histoire du Mexique* names the lord of the underworld *Symiltateutl*, which Jonghe (1905 25, n. 2) identifies as a misspelling of Mictlantecuhtli. It is possible, however, that the author of this text had in mind the name Tzitzimitl.

<sup>9</sup> Sahagún (1950-82, 1: 68) identified the god Tezcatlipoca as Lucifer but located him “in the midst of heaven” rather than, like Mictlantecuhtli, in the underworld.

<sup>10</sup> By the end of the 16th century, Torquemada (1975, 2: 74) was writing that none of the indigenous supernaturals were true gods, but rather “Tzitzimime, Coleleti, and Tlatlacatecolo; that is to say, Demons, and infernal spirits” (translation mine). Sahagún (1563, fol. 59v) preached that the prehispanic Aztec land of the dead, a place named Mictlan, teemed with Tzitzimime. Since the Aztecs located Mictlan in the bowels of the earth, rather than the sky, it

the Tzitzimime became progressively demonized at the hands of the Christians, they apparently took on Satan's gender, as well.

The conflation of the Tzitzimime with the Roman Catholic Devil may also have affected their reputation. There are further discrepancies between colonial texts and images dating from both the colonial and preconquest periods, as well as colonial texts that contradict each other, which suggest that the Tzitzimime were not conceived of as unilaterally harmful in prehispanic times. Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc (1975: 451), for example, at the turn of the sixteenth century described the Tzitzimime as "angels" and "gods" of the air who hold up the sky and who "brought the rains and water, the thunder and lightning". John Pohl (1998: 201-202) argues that prehispanic Tlaxcalans conceived of the Tzitzimime as the spirits or ghosts of deceased gods and royal ancestors, who are today believed to watch over the crops and the people, as well as provide adequate rainfall. Pohl suggests that the Tzitzimime in preconquest times were a blend of positive and negative qualities, capable of causing illness and therefore, of curing it, as well.

In what follows, I will explore the possibility that the Tzitzimime originally possessed an ability to help as well as harm people, which was obscured by Spanish attempts to convert the Aztecs to Christianity. I will present evidence that this ambivalence was seen to ultimately derive from the creative powers of several female deities who played key roles in the formation of the Aztec cosmos and the birth of its first inhabitants. These goddesses' identity as Tzitzimime was ignored or rejected by most Spanish authors, but signs of their feminine powers survive today in prehispanic sculptures and postconquest paintings. It is the imagery produced by native artists, rather than the writings of the European colonists, that will afford us our most important insights into the

appears that Sahagún downplayed the indigenous locus of the Tzitzimime high in the heavens--a space which Christians reserve for themselves, God, and the angels--relocating them instead to the dark underworld occupied in Christian thought by the Devil.

<sup>11</sup> See Sahagún (1950-82, 1: 76). In the same sermon, Sahagún describes the devilish Tzitzimime as having "gaping mouths", warning that "everywhere they eat people...they bite people, everywhere they gulp people down". This appetite for devouring sinners is inscribed on these demons' bodies, for they "have mouths on all their joints like monsters with which they chew". As I (Klein 1995: 255) have shown elsewhere, medieval European manuscript illustrations depict Lucifer with faces at his joints and groin, as well as hands and feet that are clawed (Didron 1965, 1: Fig. 135). In his dictionary of sixteenth century Nahuatl, Molina (1970: fol. 45r) includes the Tzitzimime in his gloss for Diabolo (Devil). Some prehispanic Aztec supernaturals, however, bear similar graphic signs of extraordinary powers. The monstrous faces at the joints of the Tzitzimime in Codices *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela*, like their clawed hands and feet, therefore appear to reflect a convergence of prehispanic Aztec and European pictorial signs that facilitated the fusion of the once feminine Tzitzimime with the male European Devil

preconquest nature of the Tzitzimime.

I will also offer iconographic and literary evidence that as the Aztec state consolidated its control over ideology, the Tzitzimime's generative powers were extended to the male national patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, "Hummingbird-Left". Huitzilopochtli, in other words, had been added to the roster of the Tzitzimime before the conquest by the Aztecs themselves, who retroactively inserted him into their mythohistorical accounts of the creation. The evidence indicates that, just as the female Tzitzimime took center place among the Aztecs during pregnancy and childbirth, Huitzilopochtli assumed a prominent place in curing rituals for sick children. These rituals, as we will see, apparently took place at carved and painted stone platforms symbolizing the garments of the Tzitzimime—a skirt in the case of female Tzitzimitl and a cape in the case of Huitzilopochtli. It was because these magical garments with their distinctive decorations embodied the powers of these supernaturals that they were materialized in the form of ritual furniture and used to petition for protection from danger and illness. So closely linked were the Tzitzimime with their distinctive clothing, I will argue, that at least one female Tzitzimitl, the goddess Coatlicue, was represented in both mythohistory and a famous stone statue as a colossal, personified skirt.

#### THE PLATFORM

An important clue to the original meaning of the Tzitzimime appears on folio 50r of *Codex Tudela* where a woman with outstretched arms who kneels upon a mat is identified by a Spanish gloss as a *vieja hechicera*, "old sorceress" (Fig. 3 a, b). The gloss might be taken to imply that the woman practiced some form of black magic were it not known that the Spaniards identified curers and midwives as witches (Burkhart 1989: 28). At the time of the conquest, throughout Mesoamerica as in Europe, midwifery and curing were common occupations of elderly women (García Icazbalceta 1891: 230; Brinton 1894: 18). In Europe, however, according to official church doctrine, witches stole from their beds at night to rendezvous and copulate with Satan and his minions (Russell 1984: 293-300).<sup>12</sup> The *Malleus Maleficarum* (1970: 66), a highly influential late 15th century report on European witchcraft prepared for the Inquisition in

<sup>12</sup> Today witches are associated with the Devil throughout Mexico; see e.g., Lipp (1991: 161) and Sandstrom (1991: 253).

Rome, stated categorically that “no one does more harm to the Catholic Faith than midwives”.<sup>13</sup>

It is therefore quite possible that the old woman in the *Codex Tudela* painting is specifically a midwife or curer. The likelihood of this is supported by the fact that in colonial manuscripts Aztec curers and midwives are often depicted, like the woman in this image, kneeling on a mat (Fig. 4). The Spanish text that begins below the scene and continues onto folio 50v also links the woman to the curing profession. There the commentator states that natives offered their blood to certain “demons and devils” *in the hope of healing the sick and dying* (Tudela de la Orden 1980: 279; italics mine). The Tudela scene with the “sorceress” accordingly includes two male priests who are bleeding themselves with sharpened animal bones.

The implications of this image for our understanding of the Tzitzimime derive from its association of healing rites with the black and white, rectangular skulls and crossbones panel serving as a dramatic backdrop to the woman. Although there is no mention of this object in the accompanying commentary, I suggest that it represents a stone platform. On *Codex Tudela*, folio 76r, a bloodied skeletal figure stands on a similar rectangular panel that, like the panel behind the “sorceress” on *Codex Tudela*, folio 50r, is decorated with white skulls and crossbones on a black background (Fig. 5a). Here the panel unequivocally reads as a platform. The commentator states that the blood being poured over the figure’s head in this scene represents concern for “the living or dead or the sick”. On this page, therefore, the skull and crossbones panel again appears in the context of ritual blood offerings intended to ensure the well being of the people.

Small stone platforms decorated with carved and/or painted skulls and crossbones have been recovered by archaeologists at a number of Aztec sites in Central Mexico. At least two of these were found within the main precinct of the capital (see, e.g., Matos Moctezuma 1988: illus’s on p. 64-65). Several of these have the same rope border seen on the decorated rectangular panel behind the *Codex Tudela* “sorceress”. Alfonso Caso (1993: 43, Pl. 2) compared the decorations on these platforms to

<sup>13</sup> Sahagún (1950-82, 1: 69) wrote to his flock, “Behold another confusion of your forefathers. They worshipped a devil in the guise of a woman, named Cihuacoatl”. Mendieta (1971: 91) suggested that Cihuacoatl, when she appeared to her people, represented God’s “license to the demon to transform himself”. For more on the association of midwives with witches and the Devil, see Klein 1995. In that study, I show how Cihuacoatl came, over the course of the sixteenth century, to be transformed into a male demon in European texts and book illustrations. An early stage of that process is manifest in Codices *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela*, where the model for the demonic figures of male Tzitzimime appears to have been Cihuacoatl.



the rows of skulls and other body parts on a painted platforms known as Altars A and B at Tizatlán, Tlaxcala, as well as to a stone carved version at Cholula, Puebla. In particular, Caso noted the presence of distinctive upper and lower borders on all of these skull and crossbones platforms.<sup>14</sup> These borders appear to represent a single band of cloth that has been cut or otherwise divided at the bottom to create a kind of fringe. This fringed border also appears near the top and at the bottom of the skull-and-crossbones panel behind the “sorceress” on Tudela 50r, reinforcing my identification of that panel as a stone platform (Fig. 3 a, b).

These platforms can be directly linked to the Tzitzimime. The paintings decorating the sides of the painted platforms at Tizatlán depict skulls that alternate with human hearts and hands. On Altar A, these hearts and hands are interspersed with shields (Pohl 1998: 191-192; Caso 1935).<sup>15</sup> The front of Altar A sports two painted panels, one depicting Tezcatlipoca and the other, the skull-headed Tlahuizcalpanteuctli, both of whom are named in *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, folio 18v, as members of the Tzitzimime (Quiñones Keber 1995: 182, 265).

The front of Altar B, in contrast, depicts a woman apparently swimming in a body of water and, to the right, a similar body of water marked with an unidentifiable place sign. Both bodies of water are flanked by male deities and, in the case of Altar A, an eagle and a jaguar, as well. Pohl (1998: 193) relates these scenes to the purification rituals for newborn children and the subsequent baptism and naming ceremonies that are described by Motolinía (1950: 59-60) and Sahagún (1950-1982, 2: 39, 6: 175-182). In Tlaxcala, we know, these rites took place at a spring (Muñoz Camargo 1984: 55). Pohl suggests that the bodies of water depicted on the front of Altar B represent that spring and identifies the slimming figure as the Aztec goddess of water, Chalchiuhtlicue, “Jade[Green/Precious]-Her-Skirt”, who together with her consort was invoked by midwives during these rites. Although Chalchiuhtlicue is never identified as a Tzitzimitl in colonial sources, it therefore seems likely that Altar B was used by midwives or curers. The frieze decorations on the sides and back of this platform include scorpions, whose poison, Pohl (1998: 192) notes, was used to cure the sick (Durán 1971:

<sup>14</sup> In doing so, Caso rejected Seler’s (1990—, 3: 171-177) earlier identification of the skull altar as a *momaztli*, or stone seat set up at crossroads for the god Tezcatlipoca. In his 1935 essay, Caso argued, not very convincingly, that the skull altars are funerary monuments to the sun.

<sup>15</sup> Human skulls, hearts, hands, and shields also alternate across the frieze of a recently discovered painted masonry banquette at Ocotelolco, Tlaxcala (Contreras Martínez 1992: Pls. 1, 2). Pohl (1998: 187-188) identifies the principal figure in the scene painted on the front of the projecting altar as the female Tzitzimitl Itzppalotl or one of her variants, probably Citlalicue or Cihuacoatl.

115-117).

Caso (1935: 300; 1967: 134-137) suggested that it is just such an "altar" that supports a standing figure on *Codex Borbonicus*, Pl. 36 (Fig. 5b). *Codex Borbonicus* is an important source because it is generally thought to have been painted shortly after the conquest and therefore, like codices *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela*, to retain many iconographic features of prehispanic manuscripts. Caso's identification rests on the three crudely drawn skulls that appear to project from the sides of the Borbonicus platform. These projecting skulls closely match the three dimensional stone skulls that protrude from the sides of a rectangular Aztec altar at Tenayuca, where they are separated by low relief carvings of crossbones (Fig. 5c). In the center of this altar, accessed from the top, is a square pit lined with paintings of skulls and crossbones set off from a fringe below by a rope or cord (Fig. 5d).

The Borbonicus scene provides additional clues to the use of these platforms because it depicts, as Caso noted, rites that took place at the end of the solar year. In Borbonicus, these occur during the month Tititl, which also marks the end of a 52-year cycle. Caso pointed out that the same scene includes a depiction of a bundle of reeds, which we know represented the 52 years of the completed cycle among the Aztecs. Stone replicas of such bundles, which were reportedly burned as a symbol that a new era was soon to begin, were found interred within a stone carved skull altar excavated by Leopoldo Batres in the area of the main precinct of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan (Fig. 6). It was Caso's (1967: 134-137) opinion that actual year bundles, too perishable to survive the centuries, had been buried within the skull altars of Tenayuca and Cholula. The platform decorated with skulls and crossbones, according to Caso, was therefore used during rites that marked the end of every solar year and 52-year cycle, and thereafter served as a sepulcher for year bundles. At these times, it will be recalled, the Aztecs feared that the sun would cease to move and that "night would prevail forever, and the Tzitzimime would descend, to eat men" (Sahagún 1950-82, 7: 27).

### *Cihuacoatl-Ilamatecuhlli*

The Borbonicus skull platform, moreover, like the skull platform depicted in *Codex Tudela*, folio 76r (Fig. 5a), supports a standing figure with a skeletal face, tousled black hair, a crest of sacrificial banners, red and white cloth earrings, human hearts in its hairband, and a red skirt decorated with a border of shells. These, as we have seen, are all features of the

Tzitzimtl figures in the *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela* manuscripts (Fig. 1a,b). I (Klein 1988) have elsewhere identified the Borbonicus figure as a male priest wearing the costume of the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl, "Woman Snake" in her aspect of Ilamatecuhtli, "Old [Female] Lord", whom Sahagún (1950-82, 2: 156) identifies as the patroness of Tititl. Ilamatecuhtli is depicted as the patroness of Tititl on folio 6r of *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, sans the banners but wearing both the red shell-tipped skirt and the back apron seen on the figures of the Tzitzimime in codices *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela* (Quiñones Keber 1995: 149-50). The Borbonicus skull platform, then, is being used as a pedestal to support a priest-impersonator of the goddess Cihuacoatl-Ilamatecuhtli at the end of a 52-year cycle, when it was feared that the world might remain in darkness and the Tzitzimime would descend.

It follows from this that Cihuacoatl may have been identified with the Tzitzimime. In Juan de Torquemada's (1975, 1: 80-81) *Monarquía indiana, Cahuacihuatl*, a distortion of Cihuacoatl, is given as one of four alternative names for a legendary woman named Quilaztli, one of whose other names was *Tzitzimicihuatl*, "Tzitzimtl Woman".<sup>16</sup> Cihuacoatl, moreover, was a patroness of curers and midwives, as well as pregnant women and women in labor. Midwives attending a difficult labor petitioned Cihuacoatl-Quilaztli for divine assistance, while the woman trying to give birth was encouraged to be brave like the goddess (Sahagún 1950-82, 6: 160; 3: 49).

### *The Cihuateteo*

In prehispanic times, as the principal deity responsible for female reproduction, Cihuacoatl was closely associated with a group of female spirits of the dead known collectively as the Cihuateteo, "Divine Women" (s. Cihuateotl); the Cihuapiltin, "Princesses" (s. Cihuapilli); and the Mocihuaquetzque, "They Who Arose as Women" (s. Mocihuaquetzqui).<sup>17</sup> The Cihuateteo were shades of women who had died in childbirth (Sahagún 1950-82, 2: 37; 6: 161-165). Together these women dwelt at the western horizon where they were in charge of daily escorting the sun from its noon zenith to its disappearance at sunset. Some of Sahagún's informants claimed that the Cihuateteo were happy with their fate, but others portrayed them as angered by it instead. The latter said that the Tzitzimime were apt to descend furiously to earth at cross-

<sup>16</sup> Milbrath (1996) identifies Cihuacoatl as the new moon that eclipses the sun and agrees that in this role she was a Tzitzimtl.

<sup>17</sup> Mocihuaquetzqui is usually translated as "Valiant Woman"; I have used instead the translation suggested to me by Louise Burkhart (personal communication, 1998).

roads on certain nights of the year to harm pregnant women and children (Sahagún 1950-82, 4: 107).<sup>18</sup> People who encountered them trembled, their limbs withered and became twisted, and foam formed at their mouths, implying that the Cihuateteo caused palsy and epilepsy (Sahagún 1950-82, 1: 19, 71-72; 4: 81; Ortiz de Montellano 1990: 132, 157, 159, 161).

Aztecs therefore made offerings to the Cihuateteo, both at home and at crossroad shrines, to appease their hatred and thereby prevent and presumably cure the diseases they were thought to cause. Prehispanic stone statues of bare breasted, skull headed females are often identified by scholars as the statues of Cihuateteo that were reportedly set up at crossroads to receive these offerings (Fig. 7). The goddesses' association with Cihuacoatl-Ilamatecuhtli was expressed during Tititl, when priests dressed as the Cihuateteo danced along with the goddess's priest-impersonator (Sahagún 1997: 66).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, like Cihuacoatl, these supernaturals were petitioned by midwives on behalf of women in labor.<sup>20</sup> The Cihuateteo, in other words, were of special importance to midwives and, probably, curers in general, because they could help as well as harm people.

J. Eric S. Thompson (1960: 85) has suggested that the Cihuateteo did not come to be associated with the Tzitzimime until the colonial period, when the Spaniards began demonizing indigenous supernaturals. Pohl (1998: 195), however, compares the prehispanic Tzitzimime to the modern cult of the ancestors in parts of Central Mexico, where the dead are viewed with ambivalence; at the same time that they are feared, the ancestors are generally also loved and honored. Pohl (1998: 194) also provides compelling reason to believe that the Cihuateteo and their male counterparts, the Maquiltonaque or Ahuiateteo, were members of the Tzitzimime in prehispanic times and suggests that the former were invoked in the rites held at Altar B at Tizatlan.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, the association of the Cihuateteo with curers, especially midwives, would have ensured the Spaniards' animosity and encour-

<sup>18</sup> For additional references to these dead women, see Sahagún (1950-82, 6: 41, 45, 81-82, 91-96, 107-09, 161-62).

<sup>19</sup> The commentator of *Codex Tudela* (Tudela de la Orden 1980: 271) says that these transvestite priests —of which there were twenty to thirty— called themselves *tona*, a form of address that means "mother". Although, unlike Sahagún, he does not specifically identify these impersonators with the Cihuateteo, the term "mother" would be quite appropriate for them.

<sup>20</sup> That the hair, forearms, and fingers of a woman who had just died in childbirth were sought by warriors (as well as thieves) to augment their bravery and render the opposition helpless confirms these women's magical powers (Sahagún 1950-82, 6: 161-162).

aged them to portray the Cihuateteo as enemies of Christianity. This may explain why Sahagún's (1950-82, 4: 42) informants claimed that people (presumably males) born on the day 1 Rain (Ce Quiauitl), one of the days on which the goddesses descend, were vulnerable to becoming "sorcerers" who bewitched women. Just as friar Jerónimo de Mendieta (1980: 91) described Cihuacoatl as "the demon" in disguise, Sahagún (1950-82, 6: 163) says that the Devil reportedly sometimes appeared before people as a Cihuateotl. Moreover, the commentator of *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* describes the Cihuateteo on folio 18v as "demons" who come down from the sky "in the form of women that we call witches" (Quiñones Keber 1995: 265). Spanish misogyny, which helps to explain the progressive masculinization of the Tzitzimime, emerges clearly in Sahagún's (1950-82, 1: 72) response to Aztec accounts of the honors formerly accorded the Cihuateteo: "This which your forefathers proceeded to do, in worshipping many women, was indeed a confusion and laughable. Much were they thereby shamed".

#### THE SKIRT

Although we have no reliable Aztec depictions of the Cihuateteo that tell us much about their costume, it is likely that they were identified by their skirts. Skirts constituted signs of an Aztec woman's personal identity, as well as her social status, and served as a metaphor for femininity.<sup>22</sup> According to Jacinto de la Serna (1987: 430), the Cihuateteo were the clouds that each year bring the first heavy rains of the wet season. Since sixteenth century Tlaxcalans, as Pohl (1998: 197) points out, believed that their rulers and the rulers' principal wives were transformed into clouds upon dying (Mendieta 1971: 97), they may have believed the same of other distinguished dead, such as the Cihuateteo. Today, the Huastecs say that clouds are feminine and represent the skirts of the sea goddess, which their divinized male ancestors, called the Mamlab, drag across the sky (Stresser-Péan 1952, cited by Mendelson 1967: 407).<sup>23</sup> As we saw with the Aztec goddess of water, Chalchiuhtlicue, "Jade-Her-Skirt", the Aztecs similarly conceived of bodies of water as a personified skirt.

<sup>21</sup> Pohl (1998: 194) points out that signs for four of the days dedicated to the Cihuateteo appear on an Aztec greenstone statue in Stuttgart representing a skeletal male, which he identifies as the Tzitzimilitl Tlahuizcalpantecuhli. In his opinion, this increases the probability that the Cihuateteo were seen as Tzitzimime in prehispanic times

<sup>22</sup> Women were collectively referred metaphorically by the names of their principal garments. Sahagún (1950-82, 10: 54) reports the Aztec saying, "In truth, what great good is there in the skirt, the blouse?"

### *The Skull and Crossbones Skirt*

If the skirts of the skull headed stone statues thought to represent the Cihuateteo were ever decorated, the designs, probably applied in paint, have long since worn off. There is, however, in the pre-conquest Mixteca-Puebla style codices *Borgia*, Pl.'s 47-48, and *Vaticanus 3773* (also known as *Codex Vaticanus B*), Pl.'s 77-79, a series of five female figures wearing decorated skirts that are commonly thought to represent the Cihuateteo (Seler 1902-03, 304-307; 1963, 2: 63-74). Although the exact provenience of *Borgia* and *Vaticanus 3773* is uncertain, Pohl (1998: 187-188, 191-194, 196-197) notes a number of thematic and iconographic parallels between scenes in *Codex Borgia*, *Codex Vaticanus 3773*, and the paintings on Altars A and B at Tizatlan. It even is possible that one or both of these manuscripts were painted in an area where the principal language was Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs.

In both *Borgia* and *Vaticanus 3773*, the five Cihuateteo are bare breasted, wearing only a skirt and, in *Vaticanus 3773*, a male *maxtlatl*, or loincloth, as well. In *Vaticanus 3773*, Pl. 77, one of the five women wears a skirt decorated with what appear to be crossed bones partially hidden by the fringe at its hem. All five of the *Borgia* Cihuateteo wear fringed skirts decorated with bones, which in two cases are crossed (Fig. 8). Another of the women in *Vaticanus 3773* (Pl. 79) wears a distinctive skirt of pendant panels, or pleats, that is fastened at the waist by a bone belt with a skull attached. There is reason to think, therefore, that at least some of the Cihuateteo were associated with a skirt decorated with either a skull or crossed bones.<sup>24</sup>

This is relevant in view of Caso's (1935: 300; 1993: 150) suggestion that the decorations on the sides of the stone skull and crossbones platforms represent the skirt of a goddess. Caso's evidence was largely drawn from figures of recumbent goddesses in *Codex Borgia*, Pl.'s 32, 39, 41, and 43-46 (Fig. 9). Although they differ in terms of detail, these reclining figures all have attenuated bodies that take the form of a long black band decorated with repeated motifs

<sup>23</sup> Pohl (1998: 197, n. 9) notes that Martín Ocelotl, who claimed to personify the god Mixcoatl, "Cloud Snake", following the conquest, called upon his "sisters", the clouds, to bring rain.

<sup>24</sup> Sahagún's artists, in contrast, never depict the Cihuateteo as nude, bare breasted, or skeletal nor do they show them wearing skirts decorated with skulls and crossbones. In Sahagún's illustrations, they instead wear the skirts and *huipiles*, or shifts, of the typical Aztec woman. These are often decorated with slanting, v-shaped, or horizontal black lines. The *Primeros memoriales* (Sahagún 1993, fol. 266r; 1997: 111) says of the Cihuateteo that "Their

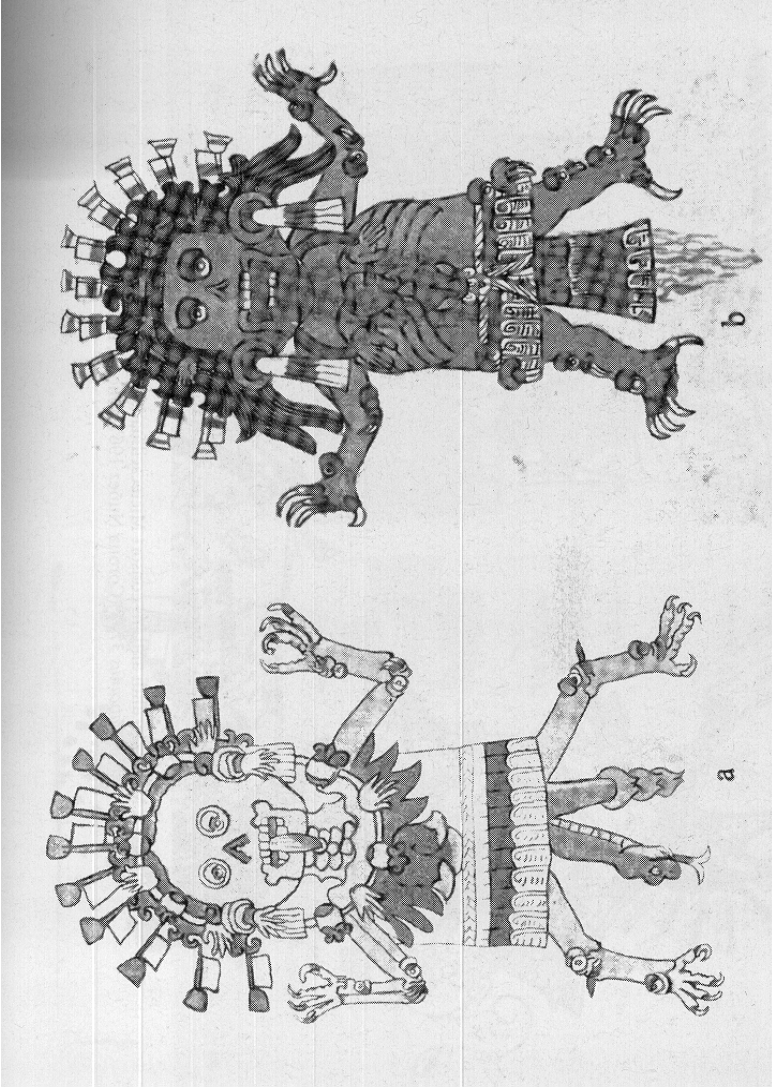


Figure 1. a. Tzitzimil, Codex Magliabechiano (after Nuttall 1978: folio 76r).  
b. Tzitzimil, Codex Tudela (after Tudela de la Orden 1980: folio 46r)



Figure 2. Miclantecuhli and his consort Mictecacihuatl, lords of the underworld  
Codex Vaticanus 3738 (Corona Nuñez 1967, folio 2v, detail)





Figure 3. a. Priests offering blood on behalf of the sick, Codex Tudela, folio 50r (after Tudela de la Orden 1980). b. "Vieja hechizera" (Old sorceress), midwife or curer kneeling in front of a skull and crossbones platform, detail of "a" (drawing by Eulogio Guzmán)



Figure 4. Kneeling midwife or curer attending pregnant client, Florentine Codex  
(after Sahagún 1979, 2 [libro 6]; folio 128v, detail).

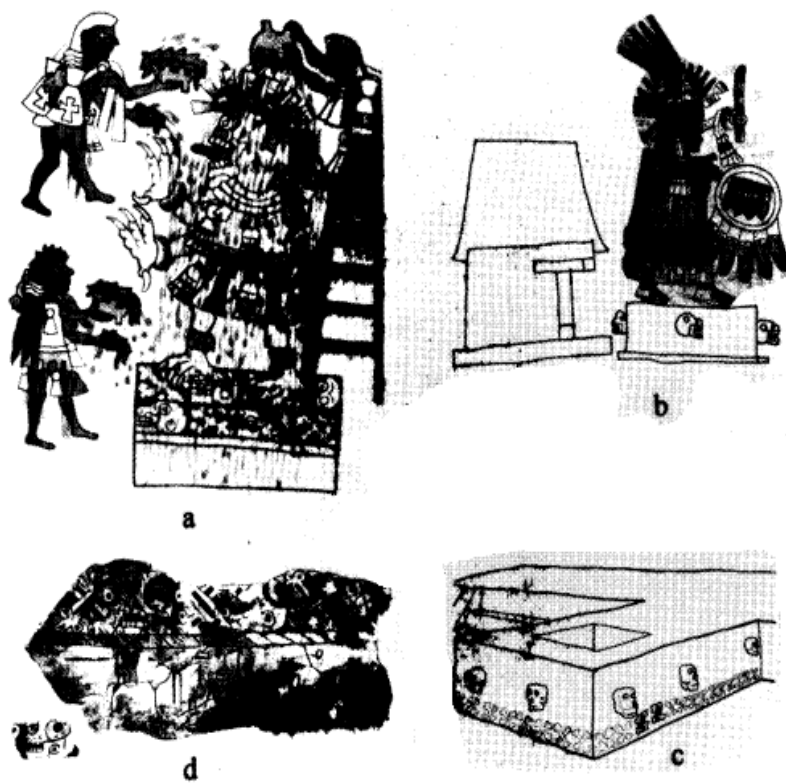


Figure 5. *a.* Priests offering blood to statue standing on a skull and crossbones platform, *Codex Tudela* (after Tudela de la Orden 1980: folio 76r, detail). *b.* Priest impersonator of Cihuacoatl-Ilamatecutli standing on a skull (and crossbones?) platform at end of a 52 year cycle during Tititl, *Codex Borbonicus* (drawing by Eulogio Guzmán after Nowotny 1974: Plate 36, detail). *c.* Skull and crossbones platform, Tenayuca (drawing by Eulogio Guzmán after I.N.A.H. 1960, fig. 7). *d.* Fragment of painting on stones lining rectangular pit in “c” (after Palacios *et al.*, 1935, opp. p. 300)

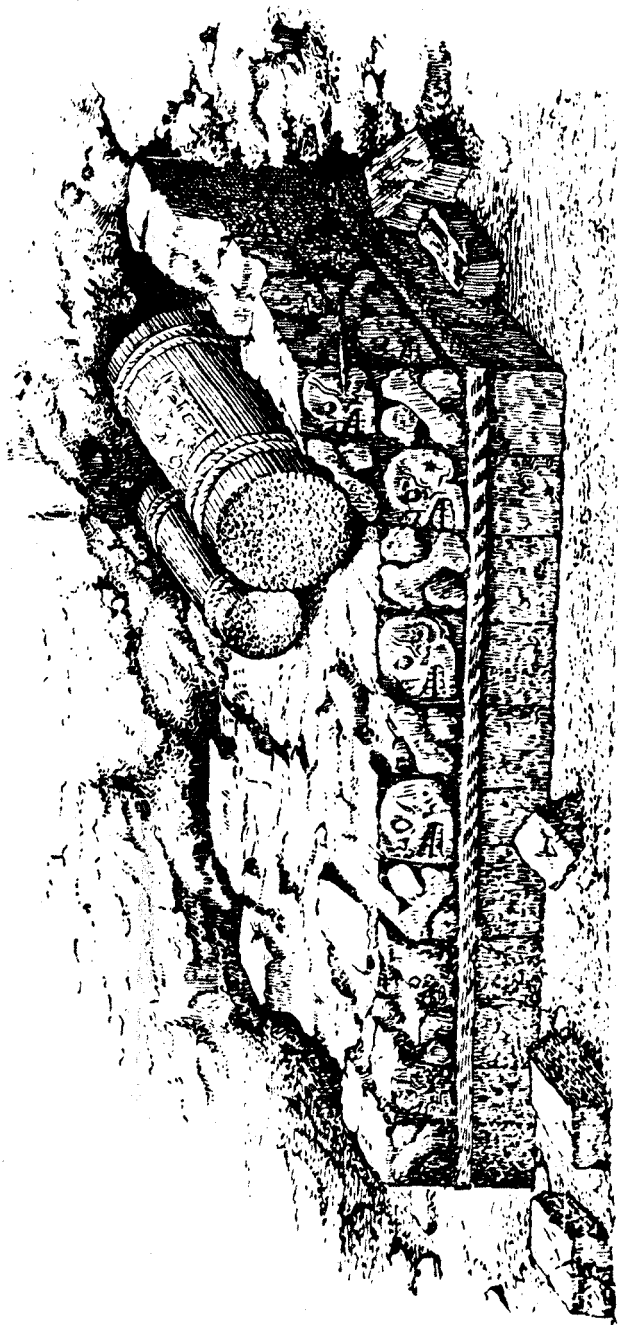


Figure 6. Stone Skull and crossbones platform with stone year bundles, Tenochtitlan (Batres 1902: 45)



Figure 7. Stone statue of a Cihuateotl (after Matos Moctezuma 1988: 81)



Figure 8. Cihuateotl, *Codex Borgia* (Nowotny 1967: Pl. 47. detail)



Figure 9. Goddess with crossed bones and flint knives on torso (and skirt?), *Codex Borgia* (Nowotny 1967: Pl. 44, detail)

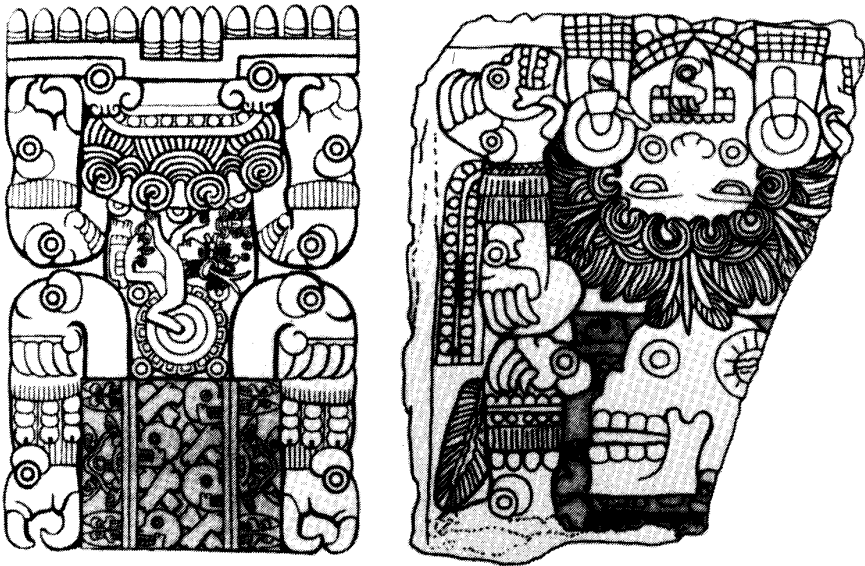


Figure 10. *a.* Tlaltecuhli giving birth to 2 Acatl (1 Reed) Tezcatlipoca. Stone relief, Tenochtitlan. H. 86 cm. Museo Nacional de Antropología, México (drawing by Eulogio Guzmán after Covarrubias 1957: fig. 140). *b.* Cihuacoatl. Stone relief, Tenochtitlan. H. 72 cm. Museo Nacional de Antropología (drawing by Eulogio Guzmán after Nicholson and Keber 1983: fig. 13)



Figure 11. Cihuacoatl ("Tona") as patroness of Tititl, *Codex Tudela* (Tudela de la Orden 1980: folio 27r)



Figure 12. Cihuacoatl as patroness of Tititl, *Codex Magliabechiano* (Nuttall 1978: folio 45r)





Figure 13. Cihuacoatl with insects in her hair, detail of stone relief (drawing). Museo Nacional de Antropología, México (Caso 1967: fig. 3)

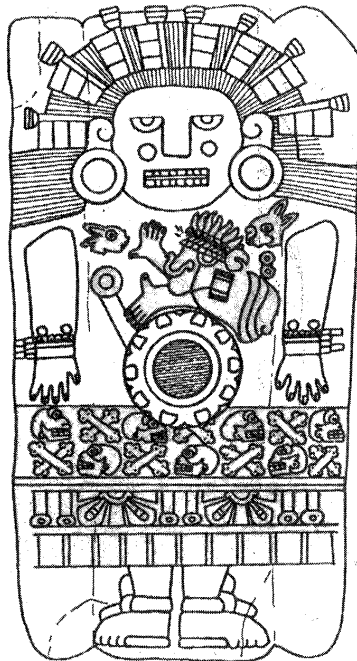


Figure 14. Citlalinicue giving birth to a Tzitzimitl. Stone relief found at the Main Temple, Tenochtitlan, 1440-69. 136 cm. H. Museo Templo Mayor (drawing by Eulogio Guzmán after López Austin 1979: fig. 4)



Figure 15. Citlalnicue, *Codex Borbonicus* (Nowotny 1974: Plate 5, detail)



Figure 16. Coatlicue. Stone, Tenochtitlan. 3.5 m. H. Museo Nacional de Antropología. (D. Carrasco and Matos 1992, p. 42)



Figure 17. Dough statue of Huitzilopochtli as the Tzitzimitl Omitecutli, wearing the skulls and crossbones cape and receiving offerings of dough bones during Toxcatl, *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1979, 3 [libro 12]: folio 30v, detail)

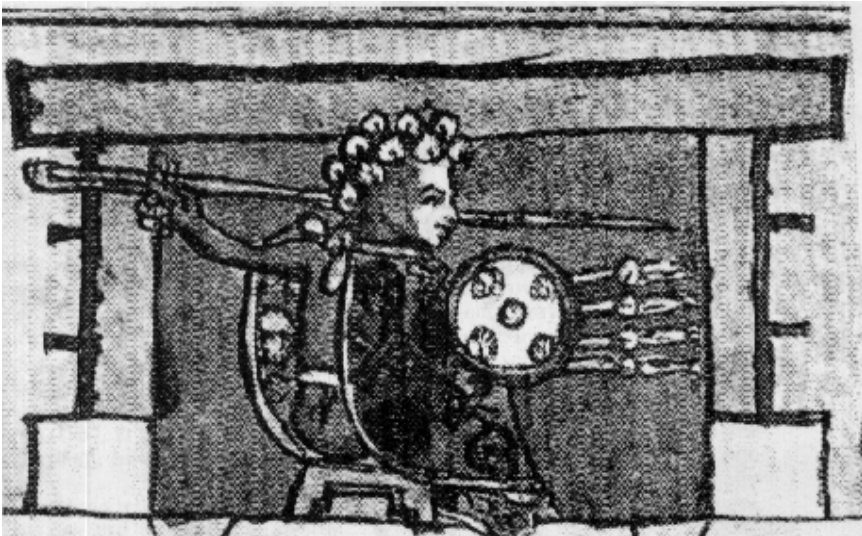


Figure 18. Toxcatl statue of "Tezcatlipoca" (Huitzilopochtli as Omitecutli?) (Durán 1967, 1: Pl. 9)

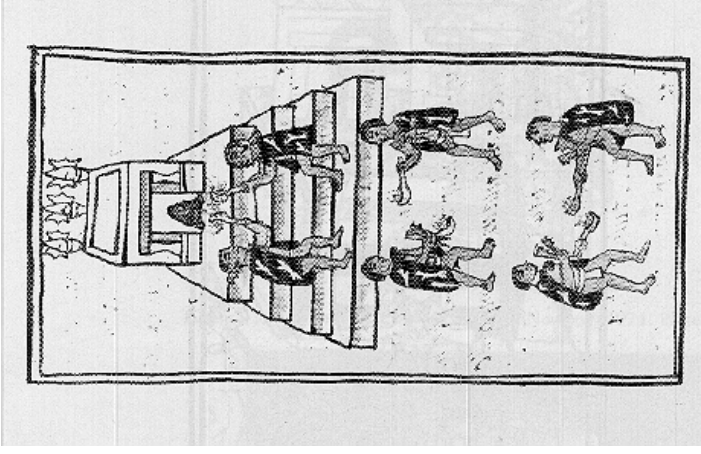


Figure 20. Newly elected ruler and chief officers in their "fasting capes" at the Main Temple, Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1979, 2 [libro 8]; folio 46v, detail)

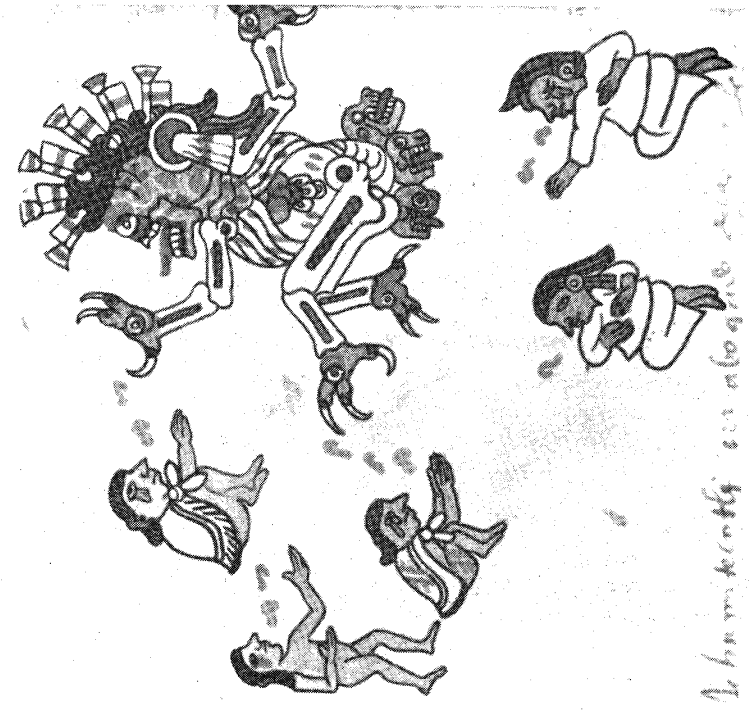


Figure 19. "Humitecuhtli" (Omitecuhtli, the young Huitzilopochtli?) receiving offerings on behalf of the sick, Codex Tudela (Tudela de la Orden 1980: folio 52r)

such as human hearts, sacrificial knives, and —although they never appear together on the same figure— skulls and crossbones. Moreover, in each case, as Caso noted, the front of the “torso” is edged with the fringed band seen on many of the skull platforms; this is the same fringe that we saw on the skirts of Cihuateteo in codices *Borgia* and *Vaticanus 3773*.<sup>25</sup> In his *Primeros memoriales*, Sahagún (1993, fol. 266r; 1997: 111) states explicitly that the skirts of the Cihuapiltin (Cihuateteo) have fringes.<sup>26</sup>

If Caso is right, the decorations on skulls and crossbones platforms in some way relate to the decorations on the skirts of Cihuacoatl and the Cihuateteo. This may explain the ambiguous form of the rectangle decorated with skulls and crossbones that appears on *Codex Tudela* 50 (Fig. 3 a, b). While this panel, as we have seen, almost certainly represents a stone platform, the lack of perspective in the painting simultaneously allows us to read it as an outstretched piece of cloth of the kind that the Spaniards called a *manta*.<sup>27</sup> While he makes no attempt to explain their presence, Pohl (1998: 192) reads the decorated rectangular panels interspersed among the skulls, hearts, and scorpions on the frieze of Altar B at Tizatlan as “blankets”. I suggest that these panels specifically refer to the skirts of the Cihuateteo, for Aztec women formed their skirts by wrapping a *manta* around their lower body and securing it at the waist.<sup>28</sup> Anawalt (1981: 33-34) notes that the commentator to the tribute list in the possibly preconquest painted manuscript called *Matricula de tributos* often directly refers to skirts as “mantas”. Moreover, as she points out, folio 31r of the partially cognate *Codex Mendoza* shows a woman’s skirt and blouse superimposed on the pictograph for *manta*.<sup>29</sup> In prehispanic times, particularly among the nobility, these skirts were beautifully decorated with woven and embroidered designs, as well as with fancy borders or fringes at the hemline.

A number of preconquest Aztec stone reliefs depict female

skirts have “thin black lines ... On these were [banks of] paper painted with obsidian points”. Obsidian points are commonly depicted on paper garments worn by the earth and fertility goddesses (Seler 1900-1901: 69)

<sup>25</sup> Caso’s reasons for interpreting the Borgia figures as the earth goddess are unstated, but their female gender is clearly implied by the short skirts that cover the upper part of their legs. Although no two of the skirts worn by the *Codex Borgia* goddesses are alike, one —that on Pl. 44— is decorated with the same motif —in this case, crossbones— that alternates with stone knives along the length of the figure’s torso.

<sup>26</sup> Although Caso identified the recumbent Borgia figures as earth goddesses, Milbrath (1988) sees them as celestial creatures and associates them instead with the Milky Way.

<sup>27</sup> Durán (1967, 2: 206) mentions fine mantas made for lords that were decorated with skulls; he does not, however, say that these skulls were combined on these fabrics with crossbones.

<sup>28</sup> As far as I can tell, none of these “blankets” are decorated with skulls and crossbones. Their designs vary and are difficult to identify.

supernaturals with skulls and crossbones on their skirts. On two of these reliefs, skulls and crossbones form a vertical column at the center of a rectangular panel bordered on right and left with vertical bands containing Aztec Venus symbols and sacrificial knives representing the night sky (Matos Moctezuma 1988, illus. on p. 76) (Fig. 10a). The panel reads, at one level, as a seat or platform that supports a bare breasted, bestial figure with a grotesque, up thrust face, and —like the Tzitzimime in codices *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela*— monster-faced joints and clawed extremities.

*Tlaltecuhli*. The example illustrated in Figure 10a supports the thesis that stone skull and crossbones platforms represented the sacred skirt of a female Tzitzimitl. There a small figure identifiable as the god Tezcatlipoca emerges from a circular pictograph for precious jade located at the larger figure's middle. Since the larger figure's legs are outspread and bent, H.B. Nicholson (1954; 1967) relates the pose to that today assumed by Indian women while giving birth; he suggests that the relief depicts a creator goddess giving birth to Tezcatlipoca. This would have occurred at the time that the world was still in darkness because the sun had yet to be created and put in motion.

On other reliefs depicting the same creature, the skulls and crossbones appear on what is unequivocally a skirt (Seler 1990-, 3: Fig. 25 on p. 98). When the figure's back is presented to the viewer in these images, we see the shell-bordered back panel, secured by a skull buckle, which was worn by the Tzitzimime. The woman's skirt in our relief, in contrast, simultaneously reads as a skull and crossbones "platform" that supports her. Caso must have had these reliefs in mind when he identified the skull platforms with the skirt of an earth goddess. At the end of the sixteenth century, Mendieta (1971: 81) wrote that "they [the Aztecs] took the earth for a goddess, and painted her as a fierce toad with mouths in all the joints full of blood, saying that she swallows and eats all (of it)" (translation mine). A similar description in the *Histoire du Mexique* calls this earth monster "Atlalteutli", a misspelling of Tlaltecuhli, "Earth Lord" (or "Earth Mistress"), which other sources confirm was an Aztec name for the earth (Jonghe 1905: 28-29). Because the huge heads and splayed limbs of the figures under discussion remind some people of the toad, the subject of these reliefs has been long been identified as Tlaltecuhli.<sup>30</sup> Tlaltecuhli, it was said, had been

<sup>29</sup> See Berdan (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, 3: 57, 66 n. 12) for a review of scholarly opinions on the dating of the *Matricula de tributos*, which she thinks is of preconquest manufacture. Nicholson (1992: 1-5) discusses the difficulties in dating *Codex Mendoza*, which he argues must have been painted between 1531 and 1553, with a dating of 1535-1550 not unlikely.

created far back at the beginning of time when the world was still dark (García Icazbalceta 1891: 231). If the skull-and-crossbones design referred to the period of darkness in the early days of the Creation, which I think was the case, it is understandable that it appears on the skirt worn by the primordial earth goddess.<sup>31</sup> Tlaltecuhltli, is a progenitress *par excellence*, as it is she who gives birth each morning to the sun and provides the vegetation and water that sustain mankind.

*Cihuacoatl*. Skulls and crossbones also appear on the skirt of a woman depicted in a closely related group of figural reliefs who, I (Klein 1988) have argued, can be identified as the goddess Cihuacoatl. Like Tlaltecuhltli, these figures' heads are inverted, as though thrown backward, and their upraised hands and feet are clawed; like her, they sport monstrous faces at their joints (Matos Moctezuma 1988: illus. on p. 74) (Fig. 5b). Like Tlaltecuhltli and the Tudela Tzitzimitl, as well, they wear the skull-buckled, shell-tipped back panel hanging from the back of their skirt. On these reliefs, however, the face is human and either partially or entirely fleshless and the body almost always appears in dorsal (back) view.<sup>32</sup> Reminiscent of the Tzitzimitl depicted in codices in *Magliabechiano* and *Tudela*, a long tongue in the form of a sacrificial knife emerges from the bared teeth. On folio 27r of *Codex Tudela*, in the scene representing the month Tititl, a skull-headed goddess identified in the commentary as "Tonan" wears a similar skirt decorated with a grid of crudely rendered skulls and human hands (Fig. 11). From the commentary to the cognate image in *Codex Magliabechiano* (fol. 45r), we learn that this is the goddess Cihuacoatl (Fig. 12). Tona or Tonan, as we have seen, was a form of address meaning "mother" that was also applied to the Cihuateteo.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Seler (1990--, 5: 5-10) followed Paso y Troncoso in identifying these images as the earth monster, Tlaltecuhltli. For more recent studies of the subject, see Nicholson (1967) and Klein (1976: 55-57). As Nicholson has noted, Tlaltecuhltli's gender is problematical, as the *Histoire du Mexique* (Jonghe 1905: 25) states that some informants claimed that Tlaltecuhltli was male. It is possible, if not likely, that the earth, like most Mesoamerican supernaturals, was conceived as having both a male and a female aspect. Many Mesoamerican peoples today say that their supernaturals have aspects, if not counterparts, of the opposite sex (see, e.g., Sandstrom 1991: 240). Although the word *teuhltli*, "lord", is normally reserved for men, it is genderless and therefore appropriate to a being of either sex.

<sup>31</sup> In a 1988 article, I argued that the skull-and-crossbones skirt worn by Tlaltecuhltli was a sign of her terrestrial nature. I have since rethought this suggestion, concluding instead that the skirt identifies Tlaltecuhltli, like other goddesses who may wear it, as creatures of the darkness who helped to form and populate the cosmos at the beginning of time.

<sup>32</sup> A drawing of a relief showing this being with an entirely skeletal face can be seen in Covarrubias, 1957, Fig. 141. The relief appears on the underside of a greenstone statue of a skeletal male, previously identified as the god Xolotl, which is in the Württembergisches Ländersmuseum in Stuttgart. In an earlier draft of his 1998 article, Pohl convincingly reidentified the statue as the Tzitzimitl Tlahuizcalpantecuhltli, Venus as the Morning Star.

Nahuatl songs sung to Cihuacoatl confirm that, just as she had the power and the option to cause excessive pain and death among her constituents, she also had the power to guarantee successful delivery and a healthy infant (Sullivan 1966). In addition to her ability to assure women in labor an easy and successful delivery, Cihuacoatl, as the patroness of midwives, would have presided over an array of medicines. Torquemada (1975, 2: 83) reports that some Aztecs worshipped a medicinal herb “that they call Picietl” (and the Spaniards call Tobacco), as the body of “a goddess whom they name Cihuacohuatl”.<sup>34</sup>

Certainly, as we have seen, Cihuacoatl was held responsible for maternal deaths. During the colonial period, she reportedly “ate” an infant in its cradle (Sahagún 1950-82, 8: 8). Nonetheless, colonial sources make it clear that Aztec midwives used certain medicines for such beneficial purposes as stimulating contractions during a difficult labor and inducing a wanted abortion.<sup>35</sup> The spider, centipedes, and scorpion that appear in one relief in Cihuacoatl’s tousled hair served as helpers to practitioners of the magical arts in ancient Mexico (Fig. 13); ointments and potions made from these insects were used by Aztec curers and midwives to induce visions, solve problems and cure diseases, including those of children.<sup>36</sup> The goddess’s hair, moreover, is

<sup>33</sup> Cihuacoatl’s Yucatec Maya counterpart at the time of the conquest, an aged, frequently clawed goddess named Chak Chel, likewise often wears a skirt decorated with skulls and crossbones. Identification of this goddess as Ix Chel or Chak Chel is based on David Kelly’s previous work with Bishop Diego de Landa’s Yucatec “alphabet” and the *Ritual of the Bacabs* (Taube 1992: 101). Taube (1992: 101, 105) says that Chak Chel’s principal role was that of midwife; he calls her “the great genetrix”. Taube cites Thompson regarding the comparison of Ix Chel to Cihuacoatl. See also Milbrath (1995: 81-82) on links between Cihuacoatl and Chak Chel. The presence of the skull-and-crossbones skirt on Chak Chel therefore reinforces my argument that the skull-and-crossbones design connoted the time of the Creation and the powers of regeneration and healing.

On page 44 of the Mixtec *Codex Nuttall*, a skeletal female named “9 Grass” likewise wears a black skirt decorated with white skulls and crossbones with a skull at the small of her back and a row of paper banners in (or behind?) her tousled black hair. On page 18, she also wears either a cape or a blouse similarly decorated with skulls and crossbones. I know of no link between her and midwifery. According to Pohl (1994: 69 ff.) she served as an oracle consulted by Mixtec dynasts and her priest guarded the remains of the highest ranking deceased Mixtec kings). 9 Grass therefore may have represented an ancient Mixtec supernatural whose creative powers continued to be put to good use by the Mixtecs.

<sup>34</sup> It is possible that, in addition to tobacco, Cihuacoatl personified the Morning Glory plant. The Morning Glory, which was the most important ingredient in healing medicines, was sometimes referred to by the Aztecs as “serpent plant” or “green serpent” (P. Furst 1974: 210). Ingestion of its seeds was said to produce visions of a powerful, poisonous snake. In the colonial period, the supernatural patron of native “sorcerers” was said to have been a giant snake (Brinton, 1894: 16, 27-28). This might explain the curious presence of the large snake between the legs of the *Codex Magliabechiano Tzitzimitl*. Whereas prehispanic Aztecs would have seen this serpent in a positive light, it must have triggered revulsion among the Spaniards, for whom the snake would have signaled a dangerous sorcerer. Europeans identified serpents with lust, witches, and the fall of Adam. According to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, witches cause inordinate hatred in men by means of serpents ( *Malleus Maleficarum* 1970: 172).



depicted here as tufts of the wild grass called *malinalli* (Matos Moctezuma 1988: illus. on p. 78-79), which, Jeanette Peterson (1983:121) points out possesses medicinal properties effective in childbirth. A form of Malinalli was used in colonial —and presumably preconquest— times to prevent miscarriages. Cihuacoatl's Malinalli hair and its contents therefore would have connoted not just the dangers threatening pregnant women, but also the goddess's potential to assist them.

### *The Starry Skirt*

*Citlalinicue*. Further evidence that the skull-and-crossbones skirt identified its wearer with creative, healing powers and the Tzitzimime comes from examination of a relief carved on a greenstone slab found lying in a late 15th century cache beneath the platform of the Aztecs' main temple (Fig. 14).<sup>37</sup> Incised onto the slab's upper surface and extending around its shallow sides is a standing figure of a woman dressed only in a skirt. Although she lacks claws and personified joints, this woman bears many of the features characteristic of Cihuacoatl and the other Tzitzimime. These include a face that lacks lips, bared teeth, long hair supporting a crest of sacrificial banners, and, most importantly, skirt decorations in the form of skulls and crossbones placed above a band of stylized stars and Venus symbols and bordered on the bottom by a fringe. This skirt, although it lacks the shell border on the skirt worn by the Tlaltecuhтли and Cihuacoatl figures, is therefore otherwise

<sup>35</sup> On Aztec medicinal practices regarding pregnancy and childbirth, see Ortiz de Montellano, 1990: 185-186, 191, and Quezada, 1975. On other positive uses of the ointments and potions created by Aztec herbalists, see Brinton, 1894:16, Sahagún, 1950-82, 11: 129; and Elferink, Flores and Kaplan 1994.

<sup>36</sup> The significance of the animals and insects in the goddess's hair can be inferred from a historical migration myth reported by Alvarado Tezozómoc (1975: 28-29), which tells how an ancient sorceress named Malinalxochitl (Malinalli Flower) called on all the centipedes and spiders to help bewitch her people. Later colonial sources claim that Aztec "sorcerers" used powerful potions made of the ground ashes of spiders, centipedes, and scorpions, among other materials, to induce visions, transform themselves, and make contact with the Devil (Augustine de Vetancourt, cited by Brinton 1894: 16; Acosta, cited by Cervantes, 1991: 23). Durán (1971: 115-116) tells of a special pitch applied to the bodies of Aztec priests to lend them courage in the course of cave sacrifices. Called Teotlacualli, "Food of God", it varied according to the god who "ate" it. According to Durán, "it was always made "of poisonous beasts, such as spiders, scorpions, centipedes, lizards, vipers, and others" that had been caught and kept on hand by schoolboys. The animals were burned and their ashes then mixed with tobacco, Ololiuqui [Morning Glory], worms, and soot. In addition to wearing the pitch on their bodies, Durán tells us, the natives drank it "to see visions" and used it as a medicine to cure sick children. Applied as a plaster, it deadened pain.

<sup>37</sup> This relief dates to either construction phase IVa or IVb, which correspond to the reigns of Motecuhzoma I and his successor Axayacatl, respectively. It is usually dated ca. 1460, which would place it in the earlier of the two phases ( Matos Moctezuma 1990: 64-65).

very similar to it.

Alfredo López Austin (1979) has linked this figure to an Aztec myth, recounted in the *Histoire du Mexique* (Jonghe 1905: 27-28), in which a primordial culture hero named Ehecatl goes in search of a woman named Mayahuel to acquire the intoxicating beverage now called pulque.<sup>38</sup> Pulque is made from the sap of the maguey plant, which in prehispanic Mexican painted manuscripts is personified as Mayahuel. In the myth, Ehecatl carries off Mayahuel, but the couple is pursued by a bevy of angry goddesses led by Mayahuel's grandmother. The grandmother's name, according to this source, is Tzitzimiltl and the "goddesses" who accompany her are Tzitzimime. Mayahuel and Ehecatl turn into a tree with two branches to elude these women, but the Tzitzimime break off the young woman's branch and eat it. As soon as the angry Tzitzimime leave, however, the despondent hero takes his original form, rejoins his girlfriend's bones, and buries them. From them grows the first maguey plant.<sup>39</sup>

With this myth in mind, López Austin (1979:141-42) has argued that the greenstone relief depicts Mayahuel giving birth to pulque. He comes to that conclusion because the larger figure bears on its breast a much smaller figure adjacent to the Aztec glyph for the day 2 Rabbit, or *Ome Tochtli*. Two Rabbit was the calendrical name and birthday of Patecatl, the most important of the Centzontotochtlin, or "400 Rabbits", who were the Aztec gods of pulque. As support for his interpretation of the woman as Mayahuel, López Austin points to the crescent-shaped nose ornament worn by the smaller figure. In colonial manuscripts such as *Codex Magliabechiano* (fols. 37r-45r), the pulque deities all wear crescent nose ornaments.

Karl Taube (1993) has argued, however, that the woman depicted on the greenstone slab represents, not Mayahuel, but a Tzitzimiltl.<sup>40</sup> Whereas none of the known depictions of Mayahuel show her with any of the iconographic traits seen on the figure on the greenstone slab, the frightening image of the Tzitzimiltl in *Codex Tudela* is located in the section of the manuscript devoted to pulque deities (Fig. 1b).<sup>41</sup> In this, according to Boone (1983:208), it follows the lost prototype.<sup>42</sup> Taube (1993: 7 ff.) notes that, in prehispanic art, the crescent nose ornament worn by the small figure on the woman's chest also appears on some Tzitzimime. He points in particular to four descending couples in *Codex*

<sup>38</sup> Thelma Sullivan (1982: 24) translated Mayahuel's name as "Powerful Flow", but Louise Burkhart (personal communication, 1998) notes that although *Meya* is a verb meaning 'to flow,' "you can't tag *huel* ("very, quite") onto a verb like this". She suggests that the name may come from *mayahualli*, "circle of hands", but is by no means certain of this.

<sup>39</sup> This event may be at the root of a garbled story recounted by one of the commentators to the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, folio 18v, in which the Tzitzimime are expelled from the garden paradise Tamoanchan for having cut the roses and branches of the trees. As Quiñones Keber (1995: 265) notes, this tale bears the signs of influence from the biblical story of Adam and Eve.

*Borgia*, Pl.'s 49-52, which he identifies as Tzitzimime, noting that their arms are in the same extended and upraised position as those of the smaller figure on the greenstone slab.<sup>43</sup> I agree with Taube that the subject of the greenstone slab represents a Tzitzimitl but disagree with his identification of it as Cihuacoatl-Ilamatecuhtli. In a 1994 (p. 128) article, I argued largely on iconographic grounds that the most likely identification of the greenstone figure is awesome Mayahuel's grandmother, Tzitzimitl.

There is, however, another name for this cosmic progenitress. In *Codex Borbonicus*, on each of the pages in the divinatory almanac (fols. 3-20), a seated profile figure presides over the thirteenth and last of the twenty day signs (Fig. 15). This figure has the skeletal head, disheveled hair, and crest of banners that characterized the Tzitzimime in colonial times. In the first three folios, it also wears a red skirt bordered by shells which identifies it with the Tzitzimime. In a number of the Borbonicus representations, the goddess's skirt is decorated with white dots that may represent the stars on the skirt of the woman on the greenstone plaque. Like Caso (1967: 19), following Seler (1990—, 5:22), I think that this figure represents the ancient Aztec creator goddess named Citlalinicue, "Star-Her-Skirt", and therefore propose that the greenstone relief found at the Templo Mayor depicts Citlalinicue.

<sup>40</sup> Taube apparently assumes that Mayahuel was not herself a Tzitzimitl. While it is true that Mayahuel is never included in lists of Tzitzimime, she is one of seven supernaturals who appear in the company of a spider in *Codex Borbonicus* (Pl. 8). Seler (1901-1902: 55-57) identified the spider as a symbol of the Tzitzimime. The other deities who appear with spiders in *Codex Borbonicus* are: Tepeyollotl (an aspect of Tezcatlipoca) (Pl. 3), Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (Pl. 9), Mictlantecuhtli (Pl. 10), Tlazolteotl (Pl. 13), Itzpapalotl (Pl. 15), and Xochiquetzal (Pl. 19) (Thompson 1934: 232). Note that of these Tzitzimime, over half (four out of seven) are female: Mayahuel, Tlazolteotl, Itzpapalotl, and Xochiquetzal. Of these, only Itzpapalotl is unequivocally identified associated with the Tzitzimime in the prose sources, whereas all three of the males are elsewhere so identified.

<sup>41</sup> Although Taube (1993: 13, Fig. 7) concludes that the splayed female figure on the back of the Bilimek pulque vessel now in Vienna represents Cihuacoatl-Ilamatecuhtli, Susan Milbrath (personal communication, 1998) notes that its breasts discharge their milk into a pulque vessel, a feature attributed to Mayahuel in Aztec myths. Milbrath suggests that the "milk" is actually *aguamiel*, the raw material of pulque and implies that the Bilimek figure represents Mayahuel. I agree that that figure may represent Mayahuel, but I do not agree with Milbrath's opinion that this figure strongly resembles the figure on the greenstone slab. Certainly, it does not wear a skirt decorated with skulls and crossbones.

<sup>42</sup> Boone (1983:208) concludes that the Tzitzimitl in *Codex Magliabechiano* has been relocated from the section on the pulque gods in that manuscript. She (personal communication, 1997) notes, however, that the extended and upraised arms of the small figure on the greenstone relief are characteristic of most of the deities who appear in the *trecena* sections of *Codex Borbonicus* and the *Aubin Tonalamatl*, not just the Tzitzimime.

<sup>43</sup> Additional crescents adorn these women's skirts. The crescent nose ornament is usually identified as a lunar symbol. This would be appropriate to the Tzitzimime, one of whom, Cihuacoatl, represented the moon in conjunction with the sun, according to Milbrath (1996; see note 14). In the *Leyenda de los soles*, the Tzitzimime detain the moon and dress it in rags, causing it to lose out in its competition with the sun (Bierhorst 1992: 149).

As the mother and grandmother of the gods and stellar bodies, Citlalinicue would have been the first and archetypal Tzitzimitl. This helps to explain the presence of the red, shell bordered back panel worn by so many of the prehispanic figures who prefigure colonial images of Tzitzimime. Sahagún (1950-82, 2: 155) says that the woman who impersonated the goddess Cihuacoatl-Ilamatecuhtli wore, over a white skirt, what he calls a “star skirt” (*citlalli icue*), which he says was bordered with small shells.<sup>44</sup> This garment must be the shell-tipped back panel, or apron, seen together with the skirt of skulls and crossbones on the Tzitzimime Tlaltecuhli and Cihuacoatl. As Carmen Aguilera (1972: 9) has noted, the correspondences between Citlalinicue and Cihuacoatl are so numerous that it seems fair to say that the two were very closely related. In the seventeenth century compilation of native chants and invocations collected by Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón (1984: 164), a goddess named *Citlalcueyeh*, “Star Skirt Owner”, is called upon for assistance by healers, much as Cihuacoatl had been a hundred years earlier.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of who wore it, the back apron apparently referred, in “shorthand” fashion, to Citlalinicue, and her generative powers during the darkness of the creation.

We know from Ruiz de Alarcón (1984: 104, 137, 144), as well as other colonial authors, that like the Tzitzimime, Citlalinicue personified the Milky Way.<sup>46</sup> She resided in the sky with her male counterpart, whom some sources identify as Citlalatónac. The *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 256) claims that Citlalinicue and her mate (whom it does not bother to name) had been created by an original creator couple to serve as guardians of the skies. By consensus of the colonial sources, Citlalinicue and her consort created the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars, many of whom were deities in pre-conquest times. By one account, she sent down from the sky exactly 1600 children, who perished immediately (Jonghe 1905: 29-30). This story relates to that told in the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 234), and *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, folios 4v, 18v (Quiñones Keber 1995: 147, 182, 255, 264), in which some of the earliest stellar deities fall to earth when the heavens collapsed. This explains the Aztec fear was that certain stars might one day descend again, this time bringing the world to an end.<sup>47</sup>

Final evidence that the subject of the greenstone plaque is Citlalinicue derives from the Aztec pictograph for “stone” from which the small figure on its breast emerges (Taube 1993: 6, 10) (Fig. 14).<sup>48</sup> In

<sup>44</sup> On the *citlalliacue*, or back panel, see Seler (1990--, 3: 125, 147) and Nicholson (1967: 86-87).

<sup>45</sup> See Ruiz de Alarcón (1984: 225) for a translation of the goddess’s name. Often invoked along with Citlalcueyeh in this text (p. 222) is Chalchiuhcueyeh (Chalchiuhclicue), “Jade-Her-Skirt”, the water goddess.

several accounts of the creation, some of the first men and women who peopled the earth either emerged from or were turned into stone. One rendition of the creation states explicitly that Citlalinicue gave birth to a stone, or stone knife, which her other children, out of jealousy and fear, threw to earth. The act was violent but the stone, upon shattering, turned into 1600 deities who were then sent to the underworld to gather the bones of previous races. From these bones the present population was to be created (Motolinía 1971:77-78).<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the infant son of Cihuacoatl was said to be a stone knife, which the goddess carried on her back (Sahagún 1977, 1: 46-47). This bundle would have resembled that carried by the male deity Mixcoatl, which contained a white stone. Mixcoatl's stone was all that remained of a murderous primordial being named Itzpapalotl, "Obsidian Butterfly", whose body had burst into a shower of colored stones when an angry Mixcoatl caught and burned her.<sup>50</sup> Although, as we have seen, late colonial sources imply that the majority of the Tzitzimime were male, Itzpapalotl is explicitly identified as a Tzitzimil by the commentator of *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (fol. 18v).<sup>51</sup>

The figure in the greenstone relief found at the Templo Mayor is therefore probably Citlalinicue, "Star-Her-Skirt", the first Tzitzimil, giving birth to one of her 1600 children, who were gods of pulque and at least some of whom were Tzitzimime. Citlalinicue not only bore within her the power to destroy the earth and mankind, but also personified the forces that sustain the firmament and thus preserve the tenuous existence that the present race enjoys here.<sup>52</sup>

### *The Serpent Skirt*

The importance of the skirts worn by female Tzitzimime may explain why the Aztecs erected giant statues of the Tzitzimime at their Main

<sup>46</sup> Cited by Brinton 1894: 60-61. The *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 256) says that Citlalinicue was a star in the first heaven who is never seen because she is "on the road that the heavens make"; the Milky Way was often described as a road in ancient Mesoamerica. Sandstrom (1991: 248) reports that present day Nahuatl speakers in the town he has studied call the Milky Way *Sitlalcueitl*, "Star Skirt".

<sup>47</sup> Thompson (1934: 228-231, 239), following Seler, concluded that the Tzitzimime included four stellar deities who were believed to have stood at the four corners of the cosmos and raised up the heavens when they collapsed during the Creation. There they continue to support them to this day. At the time of the collapse, the Tzitzimime fell to earth but at least some of them eventually returned to their home in the night sky.

<sup>48</sup> Taube, not very convincingly in my opinion, interprets this stone as a symbol of punishment.

<sup>49</sup> In the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 636-638), the god Camasale [Mixcoatl] strikes a rock from which emerge the first Chichimecs, who eventually become drunk on pulque made from the first maguey plant and, with two exceptions, are subsequently slain.

Temple in the capital. Durán (1967, 2: 333) states in his history of the Aztec people that the Aztec ruler Ahuitzotl ordered that two large statues called Tzitzimime be carved and set up on the temple. Alvarado Tezozómoc (1975: 486), referring to these same statues, describes them as “gods, signs and planets”. He also (p. 358) mentions a stone statue finished during the earlier reign of Motecuhzoma I that belonged to the class called “*Tzitzimime ylhuicatzitziquique*, angels of air [and] sustainers of the sky”, and “*Petlacotzitziquique*, sustainers of the cane mat”. Similar sculptures of Tzitzimime were placed around Huitzilopochtli’s temple during Tizoc’s reign, as well. These represented “gods of the air who brought the rains and water, the thunder and lightning” (Alvarado Tezozómoc 1975: 486).

<sup>50</sup> Itzpapalotl was the patron goddess of stonemasons (Bierhorst 1992a: 23, 152; Sahagún 1950-82, 9: 79). Today, some Aztec descendants believe that stones contain dangerous forces acquired in ancient times and that they have the potential to recuperate, or come to life, during periods of darkness to attack people, causing illness and injury (e.g., Williams García 1963: 192). It is stars who today protect people from these demons, shooting arrows at them in the form of meteors. Among the Nahuas studied by Alan Sandstrom (1991: 248), stones with holes in them are said to have been killed (i.e., shot) by these stellar guardians (cf. López Austin 1988a, 1: 245). There is, however, indirect evidence that at least some of these benevolent stars use, or are themselves made of, stone. Not only are meteors made of rock, but the modern day Huichol say that the stars are brilliant stones that were scattered throughout the sky when the moon defecated (Zingg, cited by López Austin 1988b: 77). The dangerous stones on the ground therefore may have been themselves once regarded as former stars and Tzitzimime. If this were so, then some Tzitzimime would have policed others, yet another indication that not all Tzitzimime were hostile to mankind.

<sup>51</sup> See Quiñones Keber 1995: 182, 265-266. Quiñones Keber (1995: 182), like other scholars before her, relates Itzpapalotl to the Cihuateco. In Torquemada (1975, 1: 80-81), Itzpapalotl’s incarnation elsewhere as a two-headed deer is assumed by Quilaztli, who we have seen was also known as Cihuacoatl and Tzitzimicihuatl, “Tzitzimil Woman”. Not surprisingly, she appears in prehispanic art with many of the diagnostic features of the Tzitzimime: a skeletal face, claws, and monstrous joints (Matos Moctezuma 1988: illus. on p. 90). In *Codex Borgia*, Pl. 11, her body is edged with stone knives; at times she is addressed as Itzcueitl, “Obsidian Skirt” (Seler 1900-01: 107; 1990-, 3: 147). In colonial times, of course, the Spaniards simply branded her a witch and a devil (Keber 1995: 265). In Aztec mythohistory, however, the vanquished Obsidian Butterfly served as an advisor to kings, suggesting that her dangerous powers had been harnessed and could now be tapped by her captors (Bierhorst 1992a: 27).

López Lujan and Mercado (1996) identify as Mictlantecuhtli the two life size hollow ceramic male figures recently found flanking the doorway to a large room north of the Main Temple in Tenochtitlan. While, as the authors note, these figures lack some of the diagnostic traits of Mictlantecuhtli, they do possess all of the characteristic features of the Tzitzimime. They may have guarded the contents of the room behind them, much as “9 Grass” guarded the remains of deceased Mixtec dynasts (see note 29). Exactly what the room was used for may never be known, since it is currently impractical to further excavate the area. The adjacent rooms, which have been fully excavated were almost certainly used for rites in which ruler-elects fasted and bled themselves, as well as those in which military leaders made offerings of gratitude to the gods for victory in battle (Klein 1987: 298-314). I therefore suspect that these ceramic statues represent the Tzitzimime from whom rulers and their officers derived their power and authority. These would not likely have included the death god, with whom the elite did not identify, as far as I know.

Boone (1973, i.p.; personal communication, 1997) has suggested that remnants of some of these sculptures exist today in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. Two full figure statues are on display in the Aztec hall of the museum and two fragments of at least one, possibly two other statues remain in storage. One of the stored fragments represents part of a skirt of braided serpents, while the other represents part of a shell-tipped back panel, or “Star Skirt”, together with part of a serpent skirt. The fact that there are remains of more than one statue with a serpent skirt may be explained by the fact that, as we have seen, more than one ruler commissioned statues of the Tzitzimime.

A skirt of interlaced serpents also appears on the best preserved and most well known of the two full figure statues, which can be currently seen in the museum’s Aztec hall. Standing over eight feet high, this impressive figure has been traditionally identified as the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, whose name literally means “Snake-Her-Skirt” (Fig. 16). The goddess’s skirt, in other words, tells us her name. The snakes that form her skirt may symbolize her intestines, since an alternate name for the entrails was *coatl*, “serpent” (Sahagún 1950-82, 10: 131). The figure also wears the braided, shell-tipped back apron secured by a human skull, as well as the necklace of human hearts and hands, that we have seen on other figures identified as Tzitzimime.

Coatlicue is best known today as the virgin mother of Huitzilopochtli, a role detailed in Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950-82, 1: 1-5). Although it follows logically that Huitzilopochtli’s mother would, like him, be a Tzitzimitl, Coatlicue is never specifically stated to have been a member of the Tzitzimime. The explanation of the statue’s costume therefore must be sought in the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*’s account of the creation of the gods, the earth, and the sun. That text (García Icazbalceta 1891: 235) states that while the earth was still in darkness, the god Tezcatlipoca, son of Citlalnicue, created 400 men and 5 women “in order that there be people for the sun to eat” (translation mine). The 400 men created by Tezcatlipoca died four years later, but the five granddaughters of Citlalnicue survived another twelve years, only to die on “the day the sun was created” (García Icazbalceta 1891: 235, 241).<sup>53</sup> In the *Leyenda de los soles* (Bierhorst 1992a: 149) version of the story of how the sun was first put in motion, the names of

<sup>52</sup> These powers were apparently encapsulated in her distinctive skirt. In her role of genetrix and dynastic founder, she resembles yet another legendary woman, this one named Ilancueitl, “Old Woman Skirt”. Ilancueitl often figures in Aztec histories as the wife, mother, aunt, or grandmother of the dynastic founder and, in some accounts of the creation, assumes a creative role comparable to that played by Citlalnicue (Motolinía 1971: 10). Susan Gillespie (1989: 50-52, 57 ff.) ties her to the “mother-earth goddesses” such as Cihuacoatl. Her name implies that her primordial powers, like those of the female Tzitzimime, were embodied in her skirt.

the female members of this group—who in this case are only two in number—both include the word for “skirt”. One of these doomed goddesses was *Yapalliucue*, “Black-Her-Skirt”, the other, *Nochpalliucue*, “Red-Her-Skirt”.<sup>54</sup> The *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 241), on the other hand, identifies one of these women as *Cuatlique* (Coatlucue) (“Snake-Her-Skirt”), the mother of Huitzilopochtli.

Coatlucue’s role as one who sacrificed herself in order to put the sun in motion may account for the curious form of the Coatlicue statue’s head and limbs. The goddess’s arms and legs each take the form of a giant snake, while two serpents appear to rise up from the neck and join at the nose to create a monstrous head. As Justino Fernández (1990: 134) observed some years ago, the serpents that form the peculiar head of the Coatlicue statue represent streams of blood, indicating that the goddess has been beheaded. The snakes that form her missing limbs suggest that she has also been dismembered. We know that decapitation was the favored Aztec method of sacrificing women in pre-conquest times and that virtually all those so sacrificed were afterward dismembered. It is therefore quite possible that the famous Coatlicue statue represents the goddess as a sacrificial victim who gave up her life in order to bring the world out of darkness. This could explain the enigmatic date “12 Reed” that appears on the statue’s upper back. Boone (i.p.) has pointed out that this date appears in the *Anales de Quauhtitlan* (Bierhorst 1992a: 25) as the first year of the second solar era. According to the *Anales*, the sun of this era was called “Jaguar Sun” because, on the day “4 Jaguar”, the sky collapsed, the sun ceased to move, darkness ensued, and “the people were eaten” (Bierhorst 1992a: 26).<sup>55</sup> If this interpretation is correct, the statue’s connotations would have been ambivalent, in sharp contrast to the exclusively negative image of the Tzitzimime bequeathed to us by some colonial sources.

The second full figure statue that Boone identifies as a Tzitzimitl, which is

<sup>53</sup> In other versions of this event, one of the gods first sacrificed the others by removing their hearts with a knife, and then killed himself (Mendieta 1971: 79; Torquemada 1975, 2: 78).

Like me, Graulich (1991) has argued that the colossal statue of Coatlicue should be seen as a testament to her positive, life-giving abilities rather than her destructive powers. Graulich, however, does not mention the story of the reanimated mantas, and, for him, the importance of the statue lies with Coatlicue’s role of earth mother and her own birth at the beginning of time, rather than with her sacrifice to get the sun to move. While he acknowledges the existence of the second full figure statue resembling Coatlicue’s (the Yollotlicue) and cites Boone’s unpublished 1973 paper, Graulich never mentions the fragments of similar statues in the museum’s storeroom that she discusses there.

<sup>54</sup> Siméon (1975: 162, 347) gives “black, color black” for *yapalli* and “*cochinilla*”, (red) for *nocheznopalli*, “red nopal cactus”; *nocheztl* means red. Bierhorst (1992b: 151) identifies *nochpalli* as “tuna color, i.e., carmine”; he does not translate *yapalli*.

Among the deities present at the creation of the sun and moon, Sahagún (1950-82, 7: 3-7) identifies only two—Nanauatzin and Tecuciztecatl—who sacrificed themselves to become the sun and moon respectively. He does, however, mention four women who were among



also on view in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, wears a skirt of human hearts. These recall the hearts that decorate Altar A at Tenayuca, which Caso (1935: 300) related to the skirts of the recumbent earth goddess in *Codex Borgia*, Pl. 45 (Matos Moctezuma 1988: illus. on p. 66). While the statue's skirt would suggest that the name of this woman was Yollotlicue, "Heart-Her-Skirt", the sources never mention a goddess of this name.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, it is significant that the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 241) states that at a mountain near Tula called "Coatebeque" (*coatepec*, "Snake Place", or *coatepetl*, "Snake Mountain"), the ancient Aztec migrants "held in great veneration the mantas of the five women whom Tezcatlipoca had made, and who died the day the sun was created...and from these mantas the aforesaid five women came again to life, and wandered in this mountain". These mantas were presumably the women's skirts. All of the statues in the group we have been discussing therefore may represent those goddesses who, having long ago sacrificed themselves on behalf of the sun, later reappeared as personified skirts.

We know that clothing once worn by the gods played an important role in Aztec legend and ritual. In some places, at least early in Aztec history, real garments emblazoned with these sacred designs were kept in—or wrapped around—sacred bundles as empowered relics of their original owners.<sup>57</sup> In his account of the gods' attempt to get the sun to move, Mendieta (1971: 79-80; cf. Torquemada 1975, 2: 78), states that the "mantas" of the gods who had allowed themselves to be sacrificed were wrapped around bundles of sticks, provided with new hearts of greenstone, and given the name of the deity they represented. According to Mendieta, Andrés de Olmos reportedly found one of these sacred bundles (*tlaquimiloll*), which was wrapped in "many mantas".

Bundles and belief in the magical properties of ancient garments still survive in parts of Mesoamerica today. E. Michael Mendelson reports that the Tz'utujil Maya of Santiago Atitlán speak of twelve "Marias", or sacred female beings, who are subordinated to an old, disintegrating cloth

those who watched for the sun to rise in the east. These goddesses were named Tiacapan, Teicu, Tlacoyehua, and Xocoyotl. Siméon (1975: 545, 548, 574, 775) gives "first born", "oldest son", for Tiacapan; "the second of the four sisters of the goddess of carnal pleasures called Ixcuina or Tlazolteotl (Sah.)" for Teicu; second child in a family of three or four children for Tlacoyehua; and "the last, the youngest of the children" for Xocoyotl.

<sup>55</sup> It is possible that, instead of "12 Reed", the carved date should read "13 Reed", the year when, according to the *Anales de Quauhtitlan* (Bierhorst 1992a: 25), the fifth and present sun was born. The text associates the two eras by stating that "the second sun is told and related to the fifth sun, or age". This final sun was called "Movement Sun" because "it moves along and follows its course". According to the *Anales*, it was not until a day "4 Movement" in the present era "that light came, and it dawned". This reading would also be appropriate for a Tzitzimitl.

apron decorated with the faces of three “corn girls”, which is kept on the altar of the *Cofradía San Juan* (Tarn and Prechtel 1997: 295-296). The apron represents a woman of ancient times, said to be crippled and bent but still powerful, who “opens the path for children”, that is, brings them into this world. Like *Cihuacoatl* and *Citlalinicue*, she is prayed to by midwives, who may place the cloth, face down, on a pregnant client’s belly to give the unborn child the propitious “face” of one of the corn girls. She is also petitioned by healers seeking cures for sick children (Tarn and Prechtel 1997: 122-123). Some of Mendelson’s informants said that the cloth represents “the insides” (*las tripas*) of the old woman. This cannot help but remind us of the presence of the other internal body parts — the serpentine intestines, hearts, skulls, and crossbones— that appear on the sacred skirts of the female *Tzitzimime*.

There is, in fact, indirect evidence that it was the designs and colors of these special fabrics that were believed to have magical properties. Diego Durán (1971: 454), writing in the second half of the sixteenth century, says that Aztec women who, during *Tepeilhuitl* (*Hueypachtli*), wore tunics “adorned with hearts and the palms of open hands” did so because “they besought a good crop with their hands and their hearts, since the harvest was upon them”. Short skirts painted with twisted entrails, on the other hand, “represented either the famine or the plenty which might come”.<sup>58</sup> It is therefore possible that the essence and the powers of the creator goddesses were specifically embodied in the designs on their skirt. This would help to explain why the skulls and crossbones design diagnostic of the *Tzitzimime* was so carefully replicated on so many Aztec altar platforms.

<sup>56</sup> Sahagún (1950-82, 2: 98-99) mentions skirts decorated with hearts that were worn by certain women participating in the ceremonies of the month *Huey tecuilhuitl*. These women were the special “courtesans” and “pleasure girls” who were provided to the highest ranking warriors and nobles. It is possible that these women, who Sahagún says were elaborately adorned for the occasion, dressed in garments identified with the *Tzitzimime*.

In the Nahuatl text of the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún (1950-82, 2:138-40) says that during the month of *Quecholli*, when two women representing *Coatlicue* were sacrificed, the Aztecs sacrificed yet another woman whose name was *Yeuatlicue* (*Yeuhaulicue?*). This name, as spelled by Sahagún, eludes translation, but when pronounced, it sounds much like *Yollotlicue*, the Nahuatl word for “Heart Skirt”. It is therefore tempting to assume that at least one of the women whose skirts had come to life was named *Yollotlicue*, “Heart Skirt”. Like the skulls and crossbones on *Cihuacoatl-Illamatecuhtli*’s skirt and, apparently, the serpents on *Coatlicue*’s skirt, the designs on her skirt represent interior body parts. In the Spanish version of his text, Sahagún (1977, 1:204-205) makes no mention of *Yeuhaulicue* but does make it clear, that like the consorts of *Tlamatzincatl* and *Izquitecatl*, *Mixcoatl*’s consort was named *Coatlicue*.

<sup>57</sup> For more on sacred bundles, both in Central Mexico and elsewhere in Mesoamerica, see Stenzel 1970. Stenzel (p. 349) cites Pomar’s report that the two most sacred bundles in *Texcoco*, which contained relics of the gods *Tezcatlipoca* and *Huitzilopochtli*, were wrapped in “many mantas”.

## THE CAPE

*Huitzilopochtli*. A number of the deities who can be identified as Tzitzimime were almost certainly appropriated by the Aztecs from peoples already living in Central Mexico. There is one deity, however, who was surely not added to the roster until the Aztec state had consolidated its power. This is the male Aztec national patron deity Huitzilopochtli, "Hummingbird-Left", who prior to the Aztecs was unknown in the region. At the time of the conquest, Huitzilopochtli was officially regarded as the most important supernatural in the Aztec pantheon.

Richard Haly (1992: 278) notes that, according to the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 229, 232), Huitzilopochtli was born at the time of the creation "without flesh, but with bones", remaining skeletal for 600 years prior to the birth of the sun.<sup>59</sup> In the same manuscript, another name for Huitzilopochtli is "*omiteciltl*", which Haly (1992: 278-281) transcribes as Omiteuctli (Omitecuhtli), "Bone Lord". Omitecuhtli is said there to have been one of four sons engendered by the creator couple Citlalinicue and Citlalatonic and, according to the *Anales de Quauhtitlan*, Huitzilopochtli was one of the deities who sacrificed himself in order to put the sun in motion (Bierhorst 1992a: 149). Moreover, as we have seen, Huitzilopochtli's name, although later crossed out along with most of the others, was listed in the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, folio 18v, as "one of those who fell from heaven" (Quiñones Keber 1995: 265). Since Alvarado Tezozómoc (1975: 486) states that the stone statues of Tzitzimime commissioned by Ahuitzotl were placed around Huitzilopochtli's statue at the Aztecs' main temple, it follows that, at the time of the conquest, Huitzilopochtli may well have been a Tzitzimitl.

Sahagún's (1979, 3[libro 12]: fols. 30v-32r) *Florentine Codex* includes several illustrations of an amaranth dough statue which, although the shield it holds lacks one of the five down balls diagnostic of that god, he says represented Huitzilopochtli. The illustrations accompany the author's description of the infamous May, 1520, massacre by Pedro de Alvarado of Aztecs celebrating the month rites of Toxcatl. The statue, Sahagún (1950-82, 12: 52; 2: 71-72) tells us, was wrapped in Huitzilopochtli's "cape with severed heads and bones". Beneath this cape was a breechcloth (maxtlatl) and sleeveless jacket (xicolli) decorated with severed heads, hearts, livers, hands, feet, and other body parts.

<sup>58</sup> Durán (1971: 452) places Tepeilhuitl in October, a correlation that has been confirmed by Pedro Carrasco (1976: 279). This is indeed a month of harvest in Central Mexico.

The *Popol Vuh* tells how three Quiché ancestral gods tricked their enemies by painting certain "figures" on their cloaks. One of the gods depicted swarms of yellow jackets and wasps on his cape, which he gave to one of his enemy's daughters to take back to her father. When the hostile chief put on the cloak, the insects stung him so violently that he was defeated (cited in Tarn and Prechtel 1997: 216).

The woven decorations on this jacket, like those on the cape and the god's loincloth, were called *tlacquauallo* (Sahagún 1950-82, 12: 52; 2: 71-72), a name derived from *quaqua*, "to bite", or "to chew" (Molina 1970: fol. 85r; translation mine). Sahagún adds that dough bones piled before the god were covered by another cape likewise bearing designs of severed heads, hands, and bones. His native artists' illustrations to this passage show a figure dressed in garments, including a cape, which are decorated with skulls (Sahagún 1979, 3 [libro 12]: 30v-32r) (Fig. 17).

Like women's skirts, men's capes were made of mantas that, in this case, were wrapped around the wearer's back and shoulders. The cape's association with the manta was so close that the Spaniards translated one of the Aztec words for cape, *tilmatli*, as "manta". Like women's skirts, the quality of the cloth used, as well as the designs on its outer surface, were signs of personal achievement and social status among the nobility. According to Anawalt (1981: 27), the *tilmatli* was "the most important status item of male wearing apparel". The skull and crossbones platform behind the kneeling curer on folio 50r of *Codex Tudela* (Fig. 3), then, may refer to the sacred cape of the infant Huitzilopochtli.

Although Sahagún identifies the dough statue in the illustrations of his discussion of the Alvarado Massacre as Huitzilopochtli, he (Sahagún 1950-82, 2: 9, 66) elsewhere states that Toxcatl was dedicated to Tezcatlipoca. Durán (1971: 98-127) likewise associates Toxcatl with Tezcatlipoca, whose statue he describes as wearing at the time a red cape decorated with skulls and crossbones. Nonetheless, Durán (1971: 77, 80, 95), too, contends that a dough "idol" of Huitzilopochtli was made and honored for the festival disrupted by Alvarado. In fact, the statue depicted in Durán's illustration of Toxcatl, which he says represents Tezcatlipoca and that wears a skulls and crossbones cape, carries the round shield with five down balls diagnostic of Huitzilopochtli (Fig. 18). Tezcatlipoca normally carries a shield decorated with seven, rather than five, down balls. It appears, therefore, that Sahagún and Durán confused two month rites that were held in close succession in the spring and that, in the confusion, their artists depicted a statue of Huitzilopochtli, who was honored during the earlier festivities, where they should have depicted a statue of Tezcatlipoca.<sup>60</sup>

If I am correct in this, it is also possible that Durán's (1971: 109) description of the acts performed, according to him, before the statue of Tezcatlipoca, were actually performed earlier, in front of the amaranth dough statue of Huitzilopochtli. This would be significant, since

<sup>59</sup> Haly translates this as "born without flesh, only bones", but the actual wording is "*nació sin carne, sino con los huesos*".

Durán claims that mothers with sick children dressed them in “Tezcatlipoca’s” costume prior to presenting them to him in the hope that he would cure them. The passage implies that the skulls and crossbones cape was placed over the body of a sick child because it contained special, supernatural powers to heal. If Durán is actually describing an act that took place before a statue of Huitzilopochtli, then it was Huitzilopochtli’s costume, not Tezcatlipoca’s, that was involved here. The god’s participation in such rites would compare well to that of Cihuacoatl, the Cihuateteo, and Citlalinicue, who I have argued were Tzitzimime petitioned on behalf of endangered children, in particular.

Further support that Huitzilopochtli’s cape had magical healing properties comes from Durán’s (1971: 89, 95) confirmation of Sahagún’s claim that hundreds of large bones made of dough were placed at the feet of Huitzilopochtli’s statue. These bones were called “the flesh and bones of the god Huitzilopochtli”. Priests chanted and danced over these bones and, following a sacrifice of prisoners, sprinkled the prisoners’ blood over them and the god’s statue. The statue and bones were then broken up and the pieces consumed by everyone present, including the children. The act was apparently expected to strengthen the participants, for “those who had sick ones at home begged for a piece and carried it away with reverence and veneration”. Again, the skulls and crossbones design is associated with curing.

Haly (1992: 278-285), cognizant of Durán’s description of the feast of Huitzilopochtli, notes that folio 52r of *Codex Tudela* depicts a frightening skeletal figure who faces a group of weeping, beseeching men and women (Fig. 19). The creature is identified by a gloss as “*Humitecutli*”, which Haly equates with Ometecuhtli—that is, Huitzilopochtli in his primordial manifestation as “Bone Lord”. The commentary to folio 52r states that this figure represents a god advocate for the sick, who offered him sacrifices in return for healing (Haly 1992: 278-285; Tudela de la Orden 1980: 109). This deity’s appearance is remarkably similar to that of the Tzitzimitl on *Codex Tudela*, folio 46r (Fig. 1b); it has the same tousled black hair crowned by sacrificial banners, bloody cloth earrings, and clawed hands and feet. Haly (1992: 282-284) com-

<sup>60</sup> Boone (1989: 34-35) attempts to resolve the seeming confusion in another way. She points out that Sahagún elsewhere claims that a dough statue of Huitzilopochtli was created for the month festival Panquetzaliztli, which occurred during the fall, in November. In Boone’s scenario, Sahagún has confused Toxcatl, which honored Tezcatlipoca, with Panquetzaliztli, which honored Huitzilopochtli. She supports her case by pointing out that certain aspects of the Panquetzaliztli rites—e.g., prisoner sacrifice—closely resemble rites described by Durán for the spring feast in honor of Huitzilopochtli. Some of the principal features of the April feast for Huitzilopochtli discussed by Durán, however, are mentioned in neither his nor Sahagún’s descriptions of Panquetzaliztli.

parens the deity to the creature seen on folio 76r in the same manuscript, who is being showered with blood from bowls carried by priests (Fig. 5a). Here again, the commentator explains that blood is being offered on behalf of the sick (Tudela de la Orden 1980: 290-91).<sup>61</sup>

I therefore suspect that Huitzilopochtli's cape referred to the god's formative years during the creation of the universe, at which time he was still without flesh. The healing powers encapsulated in the bones on his magical cape would have derived from the divine powers of creation manifested during that period. This reading is consonant with the Mesoamerican understanding of human bones as the very material of life and as therefore capable of regeneration, or rebirth (e.g., J. Furst 1982). As Haly (1992: 289) has noted, the Aztec word for bone marrow, *omiceyotl*—appears to relate to *omicetl*, the word for semen, as do the words for bone and skeleton, *omitl*, and *omio* (Bierhorst 1992a: 145). Siméon 1977: 356).<sup>62</sup>

That through ritual use of Huitzilopochtli's skull and crossbones cape, as well as ritual consumption of his "bones", his regenerative powers could be harnessed by the living surely explains why newly elected rulers donned such a cape at the time of their electoral penance.<sup>63</sup> According to Sahagún (1950-82, 8: 62-64), before being presented to the people, a royal elect was not only stripped of his outer garments, but also veiled with a green "fasting cape" decorated with bones. The four men chosen to assist the ruler donned similarly decorated fasting veils that were black.<sup>64</sup> The five men then fasted for four days, each night climbing the pyramid stairs of the main temple—their faces still covered by their capes—to offer their blood to Huitzilopochtli. Sahagún's (1979, 2 [libro 8]: fols. 46r-46v) artists twice depicted such an occasion (Fig. 20).<sup>65</sup> Richard Townsend (1987: 392) has independently suggested that the elects' costumes marked their return to "a symbolic time of origin, to the beginning of things". The "fasting capes" used on these occasions, then, like the cape placed on Huitzilopochtli's statue in April, may have alluded to that period in cosmic time when the god from whom royal elects derived their authority and divine power was still "in his bones".

Like women's aprons and skirts, men's garments in places are still attributed magical powers today. Mendelson (1958: 122-123) reports that the Maya of Santiago Atitlán keep a bundle of men's shirts on the altar of *cofradía* San Martín. The shirt at the bottom of the pile is considered so powerful that, unlike the others, it is never taken out. The Aitetecco say that formerly, when the village was in need of rain, the statues of Santiago, San Juan, and San Antonio were

<sup>61</sup> On *Codex Tudela*, folio 51r, a figure almost identical to that on folio 52r presides over a human sacrifice while two priests shed their own blood with sharpened bones. This figure, however, wears a red cape or shirt with a border of white shells recalling the skirt and back

clothed in green “cloaks of rain” (Tarn and Prechtel 1997: 214). Once the rain had ceased, red cloaks were placed on the statues in order to invite the sun to return.

## CONCLUSIONS

When we relate the images provided by both preconquest and colonial native artists to some of the seemingly enigmatic and contradictory colonial texts, it begins to look like the reputation of the Tzitzimime was radically altered during the decades following the conquest. Spanish writers conflated the Tzitzimime with the Devil and his servants, and in the process not only demonized but effectively masculinized them, as well. In prehispanic times, as we have seen, the most important Tzitzimime were apparently female, Citlalinicue’s role as a genetrix having been passed on to her daughters and granddaughters. These offspring include Cihuacoatl, who, like Citlalinicue, was patroness of parturient Aztec women and midwives, and with whom the Cihuateteo were associated. Itzpapalotl is another example, to which we can add Tlaltecuhltli, Coatlicue, and Coatlicue’s four self-sacrificing sisters. At a late date, once the Aztec government was in a position to rework official history, the national deity Huitzilopochtli was inserted into the stories of the creation of the cosmos as the youthful Omitecuhltli, “Bone Lord”. In this form, like the other Tzitzimime,

panel of the Tzitzimitl on folio 46r. While the commentary (Tudela de la Orden 1980: 280) identifies this figure only as a “demon”, it seems to represent the same being depicted on folio 52r. Its distinctive costume therefore suggests that both it and the figure on folio 52r are Tzitzimime.

<sup>62</sup> Haly (1992: 289) claims that the word for bone marrow (*omiceyotl*) derives from *omicetl*, the word for semen, but Siméon (1977: 356) says that *omiceyotl* derives from *omil* (bone) and *ceceyotl* (grease). Susan Milbrath (personal communication, 1998) has pointed out to me that the tenoned skulls known to have decorated the roof of Huitzilopochtli’s main temple may have carried, along with reminders of warfare and human sacrifice, a similarly positive message.

<sup>63</sup> I think it highly unlikely that other men were allowed to wear garments decorated with skulls and crossbones. A manta decorated with a skull surrounded by stars does appear in *Codex Tudela*, folio 86r, as one of a group of highly embellished mantas depicted there. Whether this design is based on the lost prototype to the Magliabechiano group of manuscripts, however, is not known and no crossbones are included. On the cognate page of *Codex Magliabechiano* (fol. 3v), the same manta is decorated with a personified heart (Elizabeth Boone, personal communication, 1997). None of the mantas in *Codex Mendoza* and the *Matricula de tributos* are decorated with skulls and crossbones. Durán (1967, 2: 206), however, does say that some cotton mantas were decorated with skulls. Whether these were worn by ordinary citizens or restricted to newly elected officials and rites dedicated to Huitzilopochtli is unstated.

<sup>64</sup> The green veils were called *nezaalquachtli xoxoctic omicallo*, “green fasting cape”, while the black veils were called *nezaalquachtli tliltic omicallo*, “black fasting cape” (Sahagún 1950-82, 8: 62-63).

he had the ability to heal the sick, especially children, in addition to bestowing upon newly elected officials his generative powers. All of these deities first came to life and performed their greatest deeds in the darkness of the creation. Their skeletal forms and the bones they used to perform their prodigious feats refer to this formative period and the creative powers they wielded at that time.

These magical powers were retained by mankind in the form of the decorations on the Tzitzimime's garments. These decorations typically took the form of skulls and crossbones that were often combined with symbols of stars and, occasionally, stone knives. This explains why petitions for their assistance were made at stone platforms representing those sacred garments. The designs on those structures embodied the creative powers of the original owners of those garments, thereby allowing the living to gain access to their powers and, thereby, an opportunity to avert illness and to prosper.

Nonetheless, whether these garments were used in curing rites or to empower rulers, their ultimate function was to keep the sun moving through the cosmos. Virtually all of the supernaturals who are identified with the Tzitzimime by dress or in verbal testimony assume heroic roles in Aztec cosmogony. Their acts explain why human life continues to this day and what is needed on mankind's part to ensure it is not interrupted in the future. In sharp contrast to the reductive, negative picture of the Tzitzimime that was painted by the Spaniards, in other words, the Tzitzimime played a constructive role in prehispanic thinking. It was only at moments when their efforts to keep the sun moving were in danger of failing that it was feared that they might turn into devouring demons and fall back to earth.

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<sup>65</sup> One of these images erroneously shows six, rather than five men wearing capes decorated with bones (no skulls). For more on these electoral events, see Klein (1987: 311-314)



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