

## The Ceremonial Cycle in Colonial Sources and the Ancient Books

The preceding chapters established the importance of calendrical knowledge and night ceremonies among the activities that the Mesoamerican priesthood was supposed to master. In Chapter 3, on the tonalpohualli, it was argued that the so-called veintenas constituted a liturgical calendar based on a specific partition of the tonalpohualli (65 × 4), which, while approximating the solar year, was eventually drastically refashioned during the colonial period according to Spanish missionaries' ideas. Earlier in Chapter 2, modern and historical Nahuatl and Mazatec chants clarified the primordial roles that ritual and lived experience played in the process of knowledge acquisition in Mesoamerica. This chapter explains that both calendrics and rituals played an essential role in the reinterpretation of the yearly ceremonial cycle in the ancient and colonial painted books.

### 4.1. Teotleco

Chjon na'ná nda'nitsian, jñe  
Our mother woman, water of the center (or marketplace), you are

Chjon na'ná, josin fana ntjao'na  
Our mother woman, like our blowing wind

Chjon na'ná, josin nginde, jñe  
Our mother woman, like underground, you are

Chjon xaa kamai, jñe  
Woman who turns into a jaguar, you are

Chjon ná xa kamai, jñe  
Our mother woman, who turns into a jaguar, you are

Chjon xon ndijin, jñe  
Woman charcoal-stained paper, you are

Chjóon ná xon ndijin, jñe, tso  
Our woman charcoal-stained paper, you are, says

María Sabina (Wasson and Wasson 1957a, side 2, band 1)  
([https://youtu.be/\\_KQwV3JixyI](https://youtu.be/_KQwV3JixyI))  
Transcription and translation by Santiago Cortés Martínez and Alessia Frassani

This short excerpt from a chant by María Sabina offers an insightful starting point for understanding some scenes from the veintena ceremonies. The *chjon chjine* claims to be like water, wind, and earth—three major natural forces. She quickly moves through different realms, much like the speaker in the chants collected by Alarcón and Sahagún (discussed in Section 2.3). The last two verses refer to perforated stencils and charcoal stamps that women use to embroider textiles, chiefly *huipiles* (female garments; Fig. 4.1). Women use stencils to leave small charcoal dots



Figure 4.1. Mazatec huipil with stencil. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. Photo by Javier García.

on the huipil, which outline the figure to be embroidered. In the words and experience of María Sabina, this almost exclusively female activity becomes analogous to transforming into a jaguar. The realization comes when she sees black spots appearing on the huipil. María Sabina knows how to become a jaguar because she knows how to interpret signs. The huipil is a common garment, and women know how to embroider them, but she is the only one who can recognize these charcoal shapes as the jaguar's spots. It is also noteworthy that she describes the embroidering—the process of creating a garment rather than the final product. She brings attention not to the outcome of the activity but to surfacing the signs that a

transformation is taking place. Figure 4.6 depicts an image from the Codex Tudela (f. 21r), in which the earth goddess Toci, also known as Tlazolteotl, patroness of the *veintena* of Ochpaniztli, is accompanied by a priest. Her skirt has black stains, usually understood to be liquid rubber, which resemble jaguar spots. This image of a female goddess seems to represent quite literally what María Sabina refers to in the chant transcribed above. The same skirt, identified as a *manta* (cloak), is depicted in the Codex Tudela (f. 87v; Fig. 7.6).

Figure 4.2 depicts the ceremony of Teotleco from page 31 of the Codex Borbonicus (Nowotny 1974, 19–22,

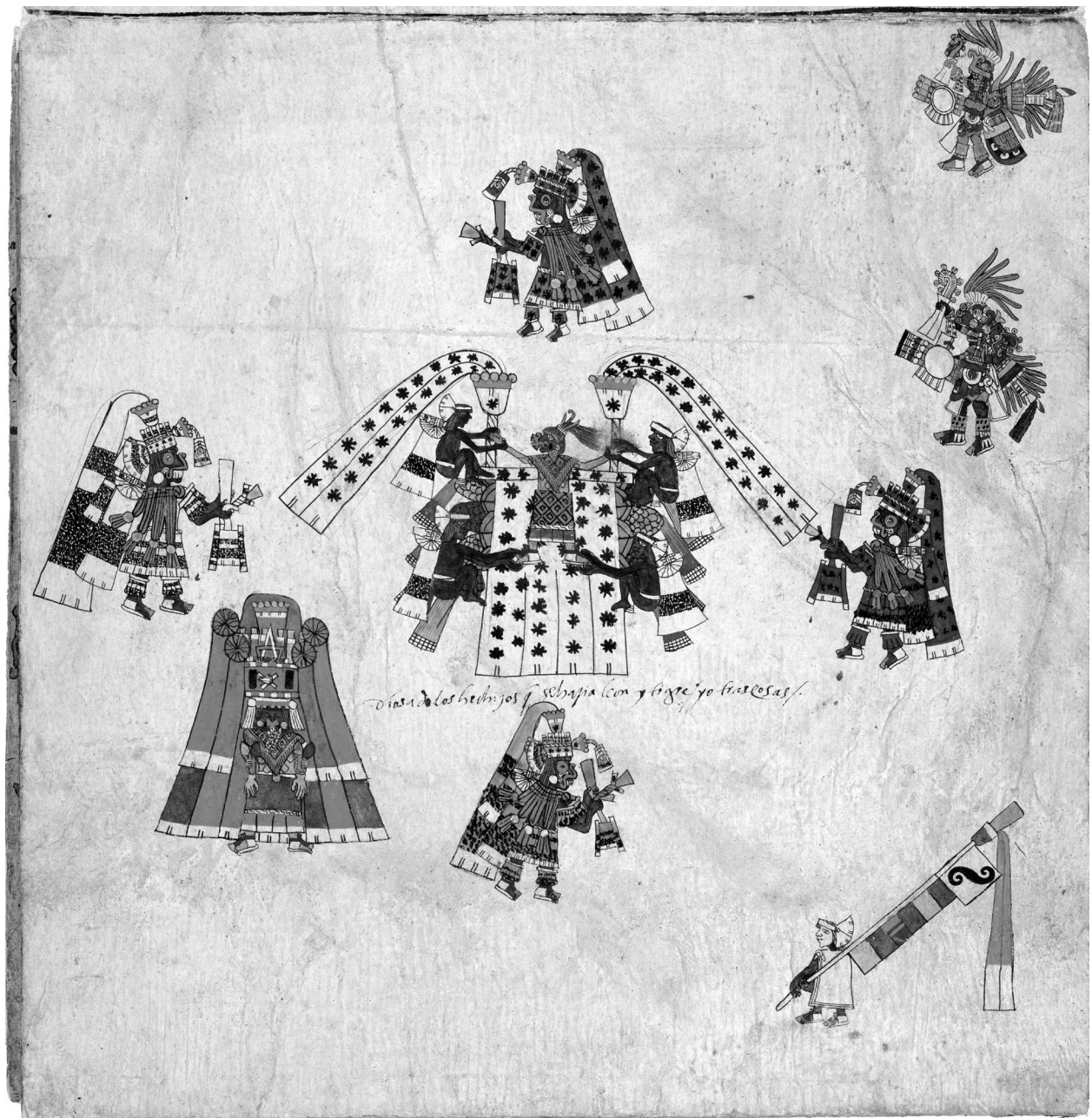


Figure 4.2. Teotleco. Codex Borbonicus, p. 31. Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée nationale, Paris.

Couch 1985, 74–75, Anders et al. 1991, 214–215). At the center is the *ixiptla* (impersonator) of the goddess Chicomecoatl-Xilonen, who is associated with ripped corn. She is stretched on a bed of maize cobs covered with black-stained paper strips. A Spanish gloss underneath the figure reads, “Goddess of magic who turned herself into a lion or a tiger and other things” (*Diosa de los hechizos que se hacía león y tigre y otras cosas*). This sentence clearly indicates the ascription of powers to a priest, akin to those of Mazatec curanderos and María Sabina in the excerpt above. While the gloss initially seems to be unrelated to the image, since no sign of transformation is evident, Anders et al. (1991, 215) noted that it probably refers to the act of seeing the nahual (image or double) of a god on a bowl filled with either maize dough or *yauhtli* (marigold leaves), which was left in the temple during the celebration of Teotleco. For example, according to the alphabetic text of the Codex Tudela (f. 22), an old priest would regularly check whether the footprint of “roosters and lions and many other animals” (*gallos y leones y muchos otros animales*) appeared on the bowl during this veintena. The revelation could occur at midnight, dawn, or midday. Footprints were taken as a sign that the gods had come—thus the festivity’s name, Teotleco, which means “God arrives.”

The gloss in the Codex Borbonicus does not explain the image that it accompanies but rather complements it. The writer of the gloss evidently did not refer to the image but another source; at the same time, they implied that the woman stretched out on the stained paper was a priest or priestess, identifiable by her attributes as the goddess Chicomecoatl. When combined, the text and the images suggest that the ability to read signs equates to transformation and, ultimately, divine presence, albeit from different perspectives. The annotator of the Codex Borbonicus was able to read something that was not readily visible into the image. The same could be said of the priest or priestess themselves: only the one who can read the signs is able to transform. In many contemporary Indigenous communities of Mexico, the ability to read and interpret signs is still considered the prerogative of curanderos and healers (Monaghan and Hamann 1998). Munn (1983, 475), paraphrasing María Sabina, stated that curanderos are the ones who examine the tracks of the feet and of the hands, as a hunter tracks his animals.

Similar to the Codex Borbonicus, the text in the Codex Tudela (f. 22r) explicitly relates to signs on dried dough or leaves, but the corresponding illustration does not bear any visual elements of this (Fig. 4.3). Yet, the two representations of the same feast are quite distinct despite being seemingly characterized by similar events. In later colonial manuscripts, a naked body, which is only partially visible from a temple on the left, cannot be identified with any god or goddess due

to the lack of any iconographic features. It lies on top of a series of round and yellow shapes, which may be identified as corn, although this is unclear. The hidden body’s nakedness and loose posture hint at death by sacrifice, which is akin to the central figure in the Codex Borbonicus, whose hands and feet are tied by four priests, possibly indicating that a sacrifice is imminent (Anders et al. 1991, 216). Batalla Rosado (1993, 127–130) further suggested that the central character in the Codex Borbonicus is not supine but rather in an elevated and diagonal position because the head does not rest on the bed of corn cobs. The black-stained paper and the two short poles that culminate in long strips on top of the structure should be understood as being much longer and in a vertical position in reality. The fact that the priest-goddess should be understood as standing is corroborated by several sources that attest to the use of a litter to parade a god impersonator of Chicomecoatl during Ochpaniztli, a festival that largely overlaps with Teotleco in this manuscript, as extensively discussed below (Batalla Rosado 1993, 129).

In the Codex Tudela the priest in the center of the illustration assumes the same outstretched position of the Codex Borbonicus’ central image, while his black body paint recalls the four officiating characters around the goddess in the Codex Borbonicus. The two white feathers on the priest’s head are usually attributes assigned to sacrificial victims, which would identify him as the sacrificed rather than the sacrificer. Finally, in the representation of Teotleco in the Codex Tudela, the last image on the right depicts a god, identifiable as Xipe Totec, ascending a temple stairway. This is an explicit reference to the name and celebration of the veintena of Teotleco (which means “God arrives”). The frontal depiction of Chicomecoatl in the bottom left corner of the Codex Borbonicus can be considered the equivalent of Xipe Totec in the Codex Tudela.

Compositionally, in the Codex Tudela, the priest is the central and connecting figure between the lifeless body on the left (perhaps his former self) and the fully manifested god on the right. He is also naked and painted black; he is no longer who he used to be or yet what he will become (Olivier 2003, 188). By contrast, the Codex Borbonicus, an earlier and stylistically pre-Hispanic manuscript, conflates and blurs the attributes and appearances of three images and bodies: the god or goddess, the priest, and the sacrificed. The ambiguity of the central image’s position in both manuscripts underscores its shifting ontological status: from sacrificer to sacrificed and from god or goddess impersonator to god or goddess revealed.

As remarked by Batalla Rosado (2002, 210–211), later scenes that are cognate to those of the Codex Tudela in the Codices Magliabechiano and Ixtlilxochitl



Figure 4.3. Teotileco. Codex Tudela, f. 22r. Museo de América, Madrid.

(Fig. 4.4) add gruesome details, such as blood spurts and flames around and inside the temple, that are not found in the Codex Tudela. The earlier document follows the Codex Borbonicus more closely in its consistent lack of explicit depictions of violence and human sacrifice.

Batalla Rosado considered the addition of horrific details in the Codices Magliabechiano and Ixtlilxochitl to be a result of the progressive demonization of Mesoamerican religion within the intellectual circle of friars, who fabricated information and images from



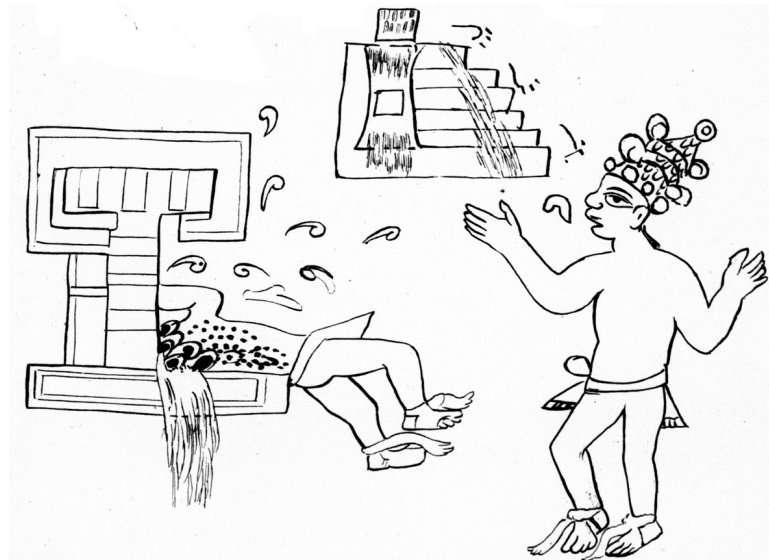


Figure 4.4. Teotleco. Codex Ixtlilxochitl, f. 99v. Durán 1880.

earlier manuscripts rather than direct knowledge of the rituals depicted. While I concur that these changes were incremental, specific consideration should be given to their nature and purpose. By adding gruesome details, tlacuilos responded to the desire for a “reality effect” (Barthes 1989) in the narrative and assumed the point of view of a fictitious eyewitness. However, the account’s brutal realism is a mere rhetorical device; it is factually and historically inaccurate, as even the Codex Tudela was written approximately two generations after the conquest. In general, realistic and gruesome details served the purpose of legitimizing the account based on an “evidential paradigm” (Ginzburg 1989) that began to take hold in Europe in the early modern period. Equally propelled by the Holy Office of the Inquisition’s systematic ecclesiastical persecution of religious minorities in the Old World (Pereda Espeso 2017, 209–235) and the wondrous discoveries that accompanied the conquest of the New World (Adorno 1992), new and more convincing proofs of veracity began to appear in historical accounts. Cortés’ letters, written as a kind of journal to justify the conquistador’s actions to the King of Spain, constitute an early and clear example of this new historiographic and epistemological stance. Cortés’ written first-person testimony was in fact substantiated with objects and gifts sent to Europe, thus producing compelling evidence of the truthfulness and reliability of his account. Once in Spain, Cortés relied on the traditional historical writing of López de Gómara (1552) to provide authority to his story based on customary references to biblical and Classical texts.

A comparison of the later Codex Ixtlilxochitl (f. 99v) and corresponding images of the festival of Teotleco in the Codices Borbonicus and Tudela indicates that the manifested god is not depicted in the former. A few footprints can be seen descending from an empty temple in the background, but only drips of blood are visible on

the stairway. Divine epiphany, which is seemingly the objective of the ritual itself, is completely bypassed here and replaced by blood, as an evidentiary clue of human sacrifice. A naked person, who is partially visible from the temple on the left, has black spots on their body—the result of burning at the stake, the form of human sacrifice to which the victim was subjected.

The casting of victims into the fire is an aspect of the ceremony of Teotleco described in numerous written sources, beginning with the Codex Tudela itself (f. 22v). The lengthiest narrative, however, is found in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 31), according to which victims were cast into the fire while a priest danced around them and moved like a squirrel. He wore an animal crest and whistled as he approached the fire, making chirping sounds that mimicked the animal. Another priest was dressed like a bat; these are both descriptions of *nahuales* (i.e., humans who can transform into animals and other natural phenomena). After the sacrifice, a row of priests descended the temple stairs while firmly holding one another. This caused some to fall on their face and others on their side. In the Codex Magliabechiano (f. 39v), by contrast, it is stated that some of the sacrificed fled when they were led in procession to the temple top. The priests’ and the sacrificed’s ascending and descending movements were interchangeable and complementary in a manner that resembles the interchangeability of their positions, as noted before. The Codex Ixtlilxochitl (f. 99v) refers to the name Teotleco as “rise to the god” (*subida a dios*), while the corresponding image shows downward-pointing footprints.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in the appendix of Book 2 of the Florentine Codex, two temples are listed in relation to the ceremony of Teotleco: Quauhxiccalco, where the priests danced arrayed as animals, and Teccacalco, where the victims were cast into the fire.

However, the Sahaguntine description of the same ceremony, as previously mentioned, seems to indicate that the two events occurred in the same place and were concomitant. The somewhat confusing back and forth between sacrificer and sacrificed in both the images and texts, in addition to what appears to be interchangeable and concurrent places and actions, simultaneously encompasses the unilateral and terminal experience of death and human sacrifice. To explain these discrepancies, it is important to bear in mind that, as is frequently repeated in the sources, ceremonies involving human sacrifice took place in the temple at midnight, i.e., a time and place that were at once hidden from public view and quite propitious for rituals involving altered states. Therefore, information regarding large braziers in which the victims were presumably burnt becomes particularly interesting. Durán (1971, *Gods and Rites*, ch. 5) related that such a brazier was found in the temple of Tezcatlipoca. It was used to create a black ointment consisting of poisonous animals (e.g., spiders, centipedes, and scorpions) with which priests painted their bodies black. The concoction, which also included substances such as piciete (wild green tobacco) and ololiuhqui (datura seed), was also ingested to induce visions in the priests. Thus, large braziers may have been used not to burn people but to create a vision-inducing soot that was also employed to stain the priests' bodies.

Archival sources corroborate this hypothesis. In 1544, during the Inquisition trials against the cacique and governors of Yanhuitlan (a Mixtec town in the modern state of Oaxaca), testimonies declared that the local Indigenous priest employed a black body paint made of charcoal soot to cover his own body (AGN, Ramo Inquisición, vol. 37, exp. 7, f. 40r, Sepúlveda y Herrera 1999, 210). Then, he proceeded to declare that he was no longer Christian and would duly follow the customs and mandates of the ancestors. Another example comes from a Nahuatl myth collected by Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 7, 50) in the *Memoriales con escolios* about the gods Nanahuatzin and Tecuztezcatl's voluntary self-immolation, which occurred during the last creation in Teotihuacan. Initially hesitant, the gods ultimately jumped into the fire to become stars; they were soon followed by the eagle and jaguar, which were left with burns and bruises as a result of the experience—the characteristic spots that they still carry to this day.

In light of this information, I suggest that the black spots on the naked body seen lurking within the temple in the Codex Ixtlilxochitl (f. 99v) may be understood not as (or, at least, not only as) a sign of death by burning but as the stains produced by the black charcoal soot that appear on the body as one transforms into a jaguar nahual. Both the friars and, tragically, the Nahuatl pupils who were educated by them produced often exaggerated and dehumanizing portrayals of Mesoamerican ancestral religion that persist to this day. The priests cast themselves into the fire—that is, they ingested the concoction and transformed themselves into animals. Colonial sources' insistence

on human sacrifice, which is still viewed as the nucleus of Aztec (and Nahuatl) religion by many scholars (e.g., Carrasco 1999, Graulich 2005), had a specific and clear objective: silencing the visionary experience. Therefore, what I propose here is not to discard colonial sources but to read them anew by using modern Mazatec experience as a wedge in the Spaniards' and their Indigenous converts' colonialist narratives.

I do not suggest that human sacrifice was not practiced by either the Mexica or other Mesoamerican peoples. Following López Austin and López Luján (2008) and, more recently, Restall (2018, 75–144), I propose confronting the abundant literature on human sacrifice with actual archaeological records. On the one hand, if sources are to be taken literally, thousands of victims were sacrificed every year in the Templo Mayor, the most important ritual site in central Mexico. On the other hand, while excavations are ongoing, only the remains of a few hundred people have been retrieved. Skulls, which are by far the most common skeletal remains, cannot provide any indication about the cause of death because decapitation was conducted post-mortem (López Austin and López Luján 2008, 139–141, Chávez Balderas 2010, 317–343). Skulls with perforated temples, frequently including those of female and even child, found in so-called *tzompantli*, altars with racks of skulls (Pijoán Aguadé and Mansilla Lory 2010, 307–310, Matos Moctezuma et al. 2017), suggest that these are secondary burials. The reuse of skeletal remains, especially skulls, in ceremonial contexts such as caches or sacred bundles is firmly established in both colonial sources and contemporary practice (Castillo 2001, 121, Tezozomoc 1997, ch. 94, Blom 1954, Jansen 2011, Maza García de Alba 2019). Indeed, it is a widespread phenomenon on the entire continent. In this context, many human remains in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan may be interpreted as ancestors' relics.

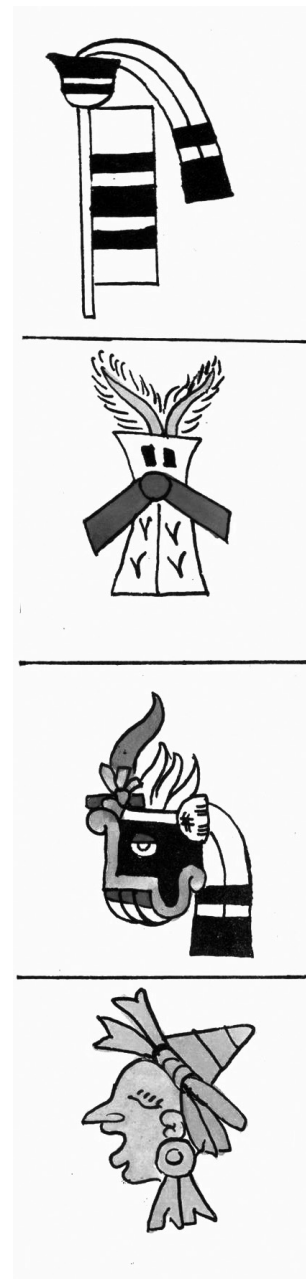
The astounding difference between the extant archaeological evidence from the main locus of practice of human sacrifice and colonial sources not only disproves the latter but begs the question of which practices were actually performed that the friars fatally misunderstood and misinterpreted. Rather than viewing human sacrifice as the nucleus of Nahuatl and Mesoamerican religion, I believe that sacrifice should be understood as part of a larger ceremonial complex that in no way led to the death of the sacrificed. Schele and Miller's (1986) now classic study famously demonstrated the importance of ritual bloodletting as a form of self-sacrifice among the Classic Maya. I believe that ceremonies involving altered states of consciousness, which implied a journey to the world of the dead (and back), were often misunderstood and ultimately mistaken by the friars as an ultimate sacrifice—the definitive termination of life. There may have been overlap between night ceremonies and human sacrifice. For example, Clendinnen (1995, 92–93) suggested that the sacrificed were drugged or sedated before execution with substances that may have been used to induce visions in other doses, combinations, and ceremonies, a practice

that has been both historically and archaeologically corroborated in the Inca Empire (McEwan and Guchte 1992). Another case of overlap and possibly confusion between death and altered states is accession rituals, which were often described as being akin to funerals (see below for further discussion). As seen earlier, travel to and from the world of the ancestors is a key aspect of knowledge acquisition in Mazatec ceremonies. Nightly rituals are deeply transformative experiences, and although they are perhaps existentially similar to death, they are not to be mistaken for physical death, let alone human sacrifice.

As studied by López Luján (2005), perhaps the most ubiquitous aspect of the archaeology of the Templo Mayor are the offerings—large caches of carefully placed objects that should be understood as a type of gift and which often included human remains (sacrificed or not). Offerings and sacrifices have often been said to have a similar underlying logic: giving to receive. In this context, the surrender of precious items or even life is intended to restore balance by giving what is due (Köhler 2001). In line with this book's main arguments, I propose that offering and sacrifice can also be understood as an open gesture or a quest—a process in which participants partake and are fully aware of the outcome's indeterminacy (Neurath 2010, 93). Indeed, sacrifice as offering allows for the possibility that an offer can be refused and a plea to the gods can remain unanswered. This view aims to question cosmological interpretations that rationalize human behavior and seeks to understand ceremony as an open-ended process that can generate meaning, not simply reflect a preconceived notion of reality or truth.

#### 4.2. Emblematic and narrative representations of the veintenas

The festivals of the yearly calendar can be grouped according to their style and iconography (Kubler and Gibson 1951, 37–41). For example, the Codex Borbonicus depicts full-fledged ritual scenes, including priests, gods, and temple structures. Other manuscripts, such as the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (see Section 7.1), only represent the tutelary god or patron of the veintena, who, as remarked by Quiñones Keber (1995, 136), should be more accurately understood as a godly impersonator. The Codex Tudela alternates ceremonial scenes and godly depictions in its representation of the veintenas. Another type of veintena representation consists of rather emblematic and glyph-like images that appear within larger scenes as a sort of temporal markers. In colonial manuscripts, this type of representation can be found in tributary accounts, such as the Codex Mendoza, Matrícula de Tributos, and the Humboldt Fragment (Fig. 4.5), that depict the four tribute periods of the Aztec Empire: Tlacaxipehualiztli, Ochpaniztli, Panquetzaliztli, and Etzalcualiztli (Long 1942, Barlow 1943). Tlacaxipehualiztli is represented by the conical hat of Xipe Totec, the tutelary god of the ceremony; Ochpaniztli is depicted as the broom of Tlazolteotl, the main goddess of this celebration; Panquetzaliztli, which means “the raising of banners,” is identified by an upright



**Figure 4.5. The four glyphs related to the tribute recollection in the Triple Alliance. From top to bottom: Panquetzaliztli, Ochpaniztli, Etzalcualiztli, Tlacaxipehualiztli. Humboldt Fragment. Kingsborough 1831.**

banner; and Etzlacualiztli, a festival dedicated to Tlaloc, is depicted as the head of the rain god.

The Codex Borbonicus employs emblematic markers within the larger narrative of the veintenas. As extensively recognized in the literature (Paso y Troncoso 1898, 165–179, Couch 1985, 70–82, Anders et al. 1991, 214–215, Graulich 2008), the twelfth festival of the year, Ochpaniztli, is given a larger and more elaborate treatment than any other celebration in the cycle. It extends over several pages and overlaps with the subsequent veintenas. On pages 29–32, the priest of Chicomecoatl plays a central role, differently from most later sources, which assign the festival of Ochpaniztli to Toci or Tlazolteotl. For example,

in the Codex Tudela (f. 21r; Fig. 4.6), the goddess is dressed in white cotton and accompanied by a richly adorned attendant carrying weapons. The corresponding scene in the Codex Borbonicus centers around a frontal depiction of a brightly colored Chicomecoatl, who stands atop a temple and is surrounded by numerous attendants

(Fig. 4.7). However, in the lower portion of the page, the mother goddess Tlazolteotl, who is dressed in white and holding a broom, appears in a rather diminutive position and does not seem to be participating in ceremonial activities. Anders et al. (1991, 208) described the presence of the tutelary goddess as a temporal marker.



Figure 4.6. Ochpaniztli. Codex Tudela, f. 21r. Museo de América, Madrid.





Figure 4.7. Ochpaniztli. Codex Borbonicus, p. 30. Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée nationale, Paris.

The same situation recurs on page 34 (Fig. 4.8), which depicts the celebration of Panquetzaliztli. In this case, the main ritual is the New Fire, which is not conducted yearly but rather every four years or, in the case of the year 2 Reed (1507), every fifty-two years. A symbolic representation of the veintena of Panquetzaliztli, an upright white-and-blue banner, is shown at the upper part of the page on a temple with Huitzilopochtli, to which Panquetzaliztli is normally dedicated, at its foot. The tlacuilo resorted to the same strategy of placing a glyph to mark a specific ceremony on pages 23 and 37 (Fig. 4.9), on which Izcalli is indicated by an offering of white paper cutouts. Xilomaniztli (the Offering of Tender Maize) is succinctly symbolized by a blue basket filled with colorful corn cobs on page 23, while

Etzalcualiztli, the feast of the bean porridge, is represented by a pot full of beans on page 26. Finally, the feast of Tititl is identified by its characteristic white bundle on page 36. The different manners of the veintena depictions in the Codex Borbonicus closely reflect an understanding of annual ceremonies that could be adapted to fluctuating calendrical, astronomical, or agricultural events rather than being tied to fixed chronological constrictions.

While several scholars have noted the Codex Borbonicus' narrative depiction of the veintenas as an outlier among surviving manuscripts (Couch 1985, XII, DiCesare 2009, 11–13, 123–125, Díaz Álvarez 2018, 159–162) because of its uneven distribution of celebrations throughout its pages,



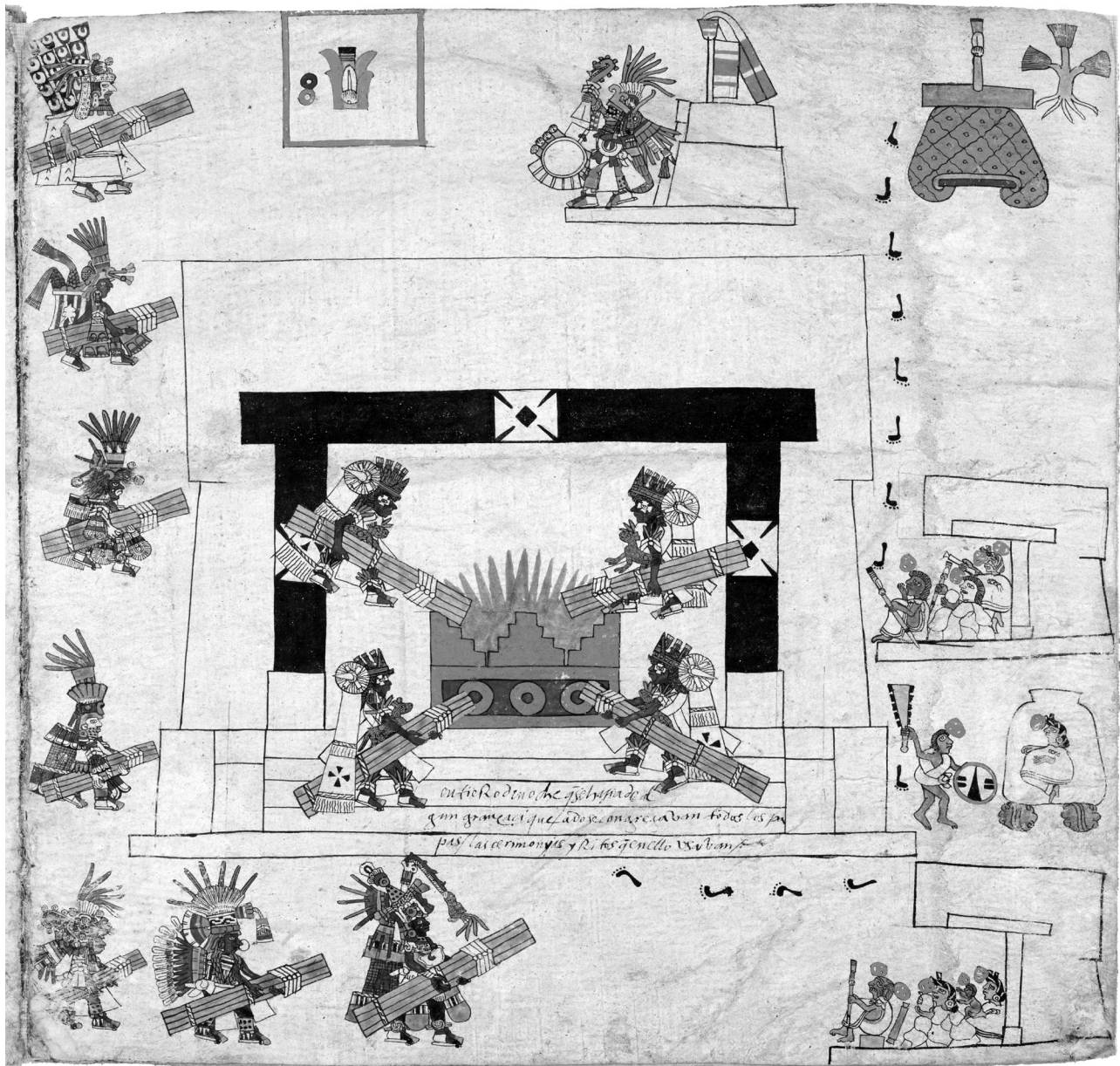


Figure 4.8. New Fire ceremony during Panquetzaliztli. Codex Borbonicus, p. 34. Bibliothèque de la Assemblée Nationale, Paris.

it is important to bear in mind that the Codex Borbonicus is virtually a pre-contact manuscript in style, format, and painting materials. Therefore, it is a more reliable and authoritative source on pre-Hispanic ceremonies and their representations than any other later document. Manuscripts such as those in the previously discussed Magliabechiano Group (Tudela, Magliabechiano, and Ixtlilxochitl) were drafted as late as fifty years after the last presumed public celebrations of any *veintena*. Moreover, they were not even independently produced and heavily relied on one other (see Chapter 7). The Codex Borbonicus is unique in its traditional and virtually unadulterated Indigenous outlook, format, and style. Later standardization, which derived from a concerted production developed within the friars' schools, should not be taken as a rule but rather as a colonial depiction of Indigenous culture and calendar and a product of their time.

Primeros Memoriales (paragraph 2A, ff. 251r–251v) offers another example comparable to the Codex Borbonicus. Its *veintena* illustrations were compiled in the Nahuatl town of Tepeapulco in the modern state of Hidalgo between 1558 and 1561 (Sahagún et al. 1997, 4). In the document, the mother goddess Tlazolteotl or Ixcuina is featured in the ceremonies of Micaillhuitontli and Huey Micaillhuitl (Small and Great Feast of the Dead; Fig. 4.10) that precede Ochpaniztli. Similarly to the Codex Borbonicus (p. 30), she can be seen wearing a white dress and holding a small broom.

As remarked by Jiménez Moreno (1974, 44), her presence in both scenes is not easily explained. In light of the Codex Borbonicus' depiction of Ochpaniztli, which extended over several pages and *veintenas*, it can be hypothesized that, in Primeros Memoriales, a period of observances in

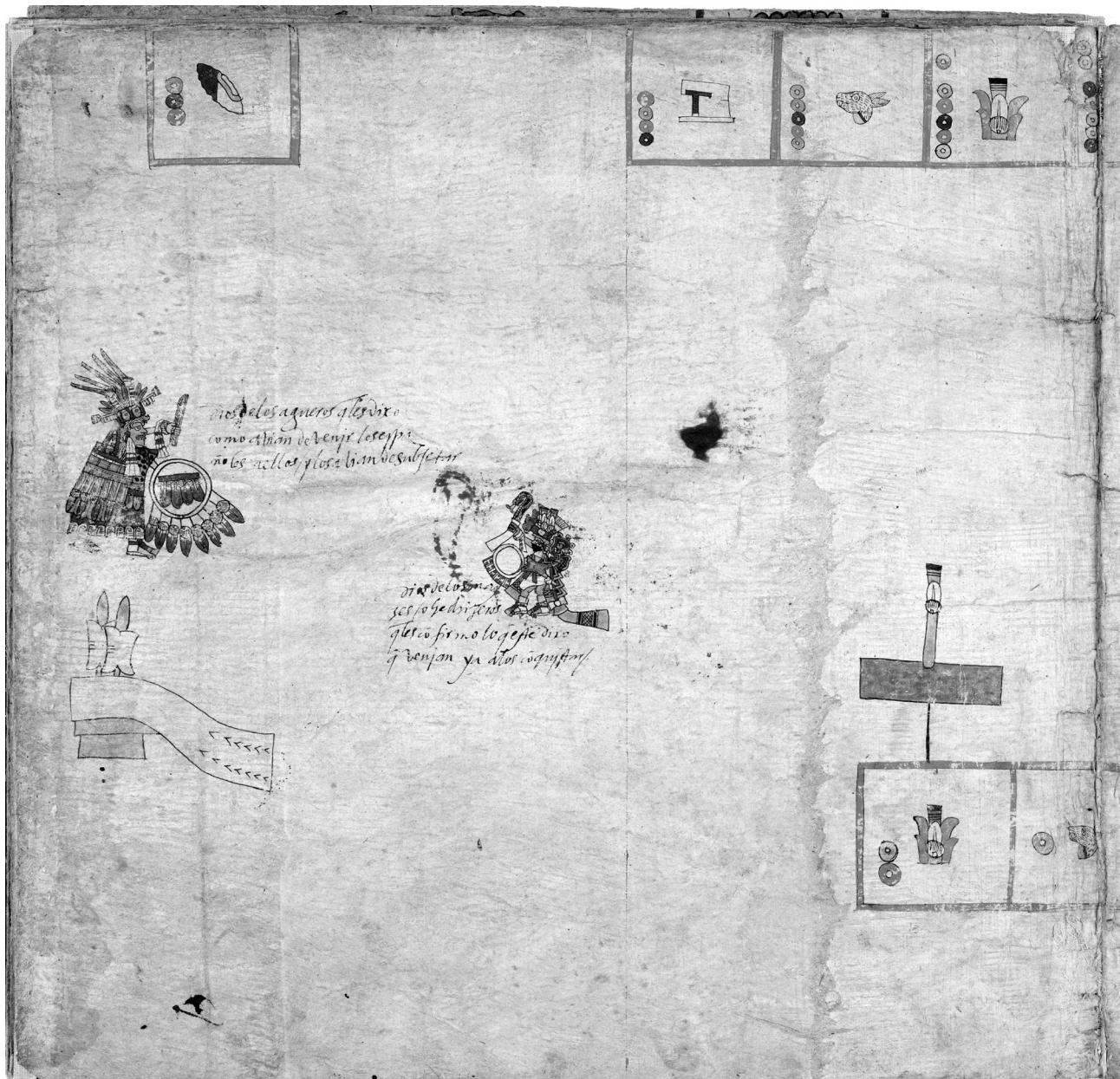


Figure 4.9. The closing of the veintena ceremonies during Izcalli. Codex Borbonicus, p. 37. Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée nationale, Paris.

honor of Tlazolteotl was marked and extended beyond the specific veintena of Ochpaniztli, which was dedicated to the goddess, to include seemingly unrelated ceremonies.

The synthetic depiction of the veintenas is the only one documented in pre-Hispanic and post-contact Aztec sculpture (Fig. 5.7; Nicholson 2002, 65–72, Díaz Álvarez 2018, 156–159). Therefore, early colonial images and sculptures attest that the representation of gods, goddesses, or some of their characteristic attributes as a kind of period marker was common and was not an exception in the representation of the veintenas. During seminar discussions at Leiden University, Prof. Maarten Jansen raised the possibility that several abbreviated representations of the twenty-day celebrations also appear in the pre-Hispanic Mixtec Codex Vienna (see also Jansen

and Pérez Jiménez 2018, 357–360). On page 48 (Fig. 4.11a), a well-known image represents the descent of Lord 9 Wind Quetzalcoatl from heaven. First, he sits in the sky and takes orders from older and larger priests, surrounded by several small objects. Eventually, he descends from the sky on a cotton rope, accompanied by two male figures whose dress identifies them as eagle and *yahui* (fire serpent) *nahuales*. Their role seems to be that of bringing to earth two temples, previously seen in heaven, by carrying them on their back. On the left, the jaguar character carries a temple that contains a mask of Xipe Totec, which possibly indicates Tlacaxipehualiztli. On the right, the temple carried by the fire serpent contains a sun disk, which could correspond to Panquetzaliztli. Eventually, both temples are placed on the ground (perhaps an indication that the cult has been established), along with another structure

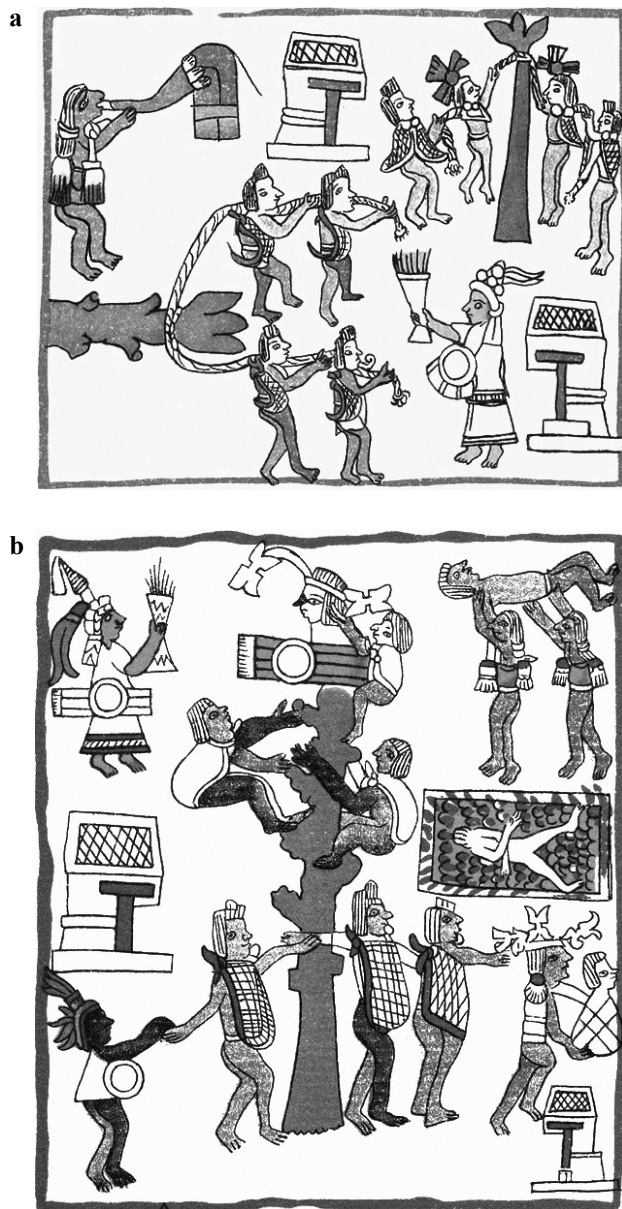


Figure 4.10. a. Micaillhuitontli, f. 251r. b. Huey Micaillhuitl, f. 251v. *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*. Paso y Troncoso 1926.

depicted within a black square; this may indicate Tlillan (the Place of Darkness), which is a temple usually presided over by Cihuacoatl. Later, on page 27 (Fig. 4.11b), the narrative includes two symbols on top of a volute within a larger scene that represents the creation of agriculture (Furst 1978a, 198, Monaghan 1990). In Mixtec codices, volutes indicate both a celebration and an offering, concepts expressed by the Mixtec word *huico* (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2018, 357). On top of the volutes stand a tree and a mummy bundle, which could correspond to Cuahuitlehua, and Micaillhuitontli or Huey Micaillhuitl among the Nahuas. The name of the former celebration means “raising of poles or trees” in Nahuatl, while that of the latter refers to celebrations of the dead. After these two symbols, more signs refer to the seasons and years. First,

there is half an A-O year sign with a single dot, then two depictions of the wind god. This strengthens the hypothesis that yearly celebrations and seasons are indicated. The line ends with a broken corn plant, followed by a rising sun and a small representation of a manuscript, complete with dots and a day sign. The narrative is evidently very abbreviated but seems to suggest that initial, unsuccessful attempts at agriculture could only be corrected through the use of the calendar to track the movement of the sun and the seasons. Several other possible veintena markers appear throughout the Codex Vienna (see, for example, pages 22 and 15), suggesting that seasonal celebrations and related ritual activities played a role in the mythical accounts of creation of the Mixteca.

The varied length and emphasis given to the veintenas and their pictorial expressions indicate that the ceremonies unfolded rather fluidly and were punctuated by single periodic markers. What follows in this chapter is a different and renewed approach to the possible representation of the festival cycle in the ancient sacred books based on the considerations expressed so far.

### 4.3. The veintenas in the Codex Borgia

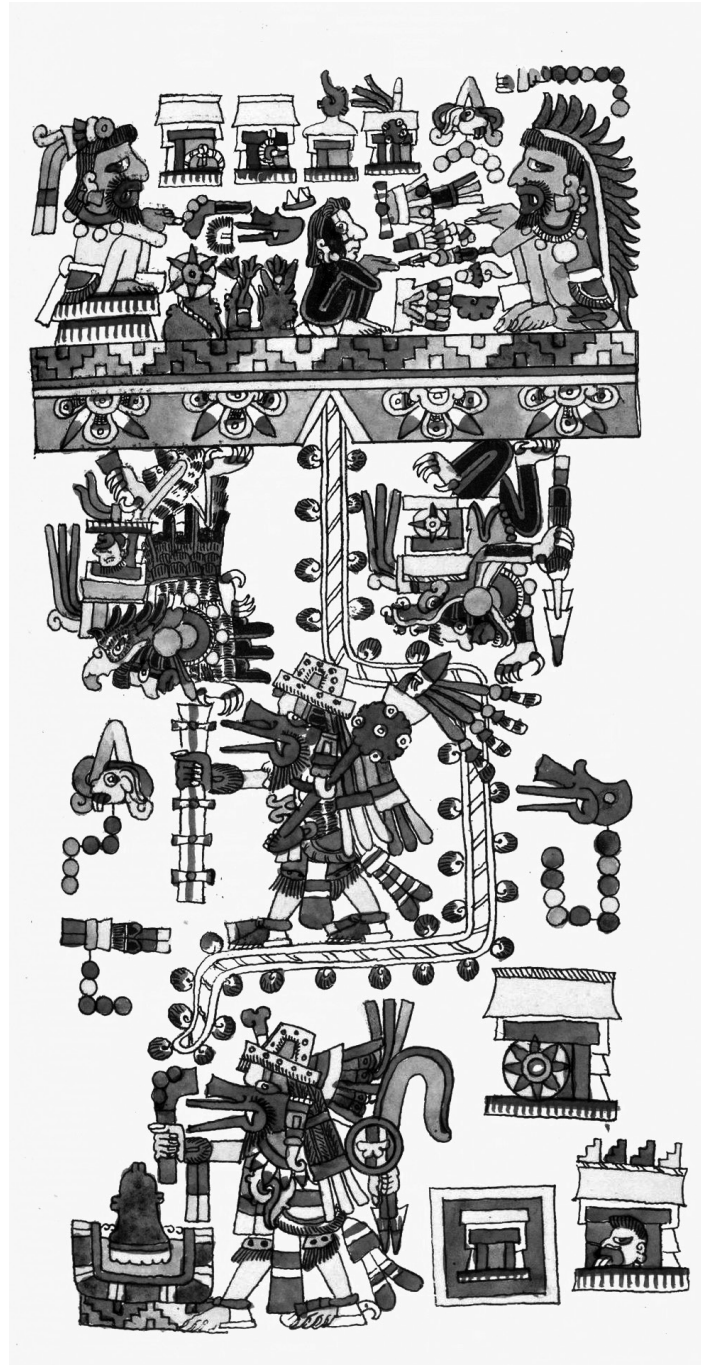
The central pages of the Codex Borgia (pp. 29–46) have attracted the attention of scholars since Seler’s (1904) seminal study. According to the German scholar (Seler 1904, vol. 2, 1–75), this section of the manuscript depicts a journey into the underworld of the Venus star, incarnated as a Quetzalcoatl priest who flies through and performs several ceremonies in a long sequence of scenes. According to Seler’s astral interpretation, the protagonist’s travel mimics the planet’s movement and its periodical disappearance and reemergence in the sky. While Seler’s interpretation has been rejected, the central role played by the Quetzalcoatl priest as the main, recurring character in the unfolding narrative generally remains accepted (see Boone 2007, 176–178).

Nowotny (1961, § 21b) was the first to provide a systematic critique of Seler’s interpretation. He proposed that the sequence on pages 29–46 of the Codex Borgia constituted a series of temple structures and related rituals that belonged to a specific ceremonial center. Although he did not offer any possible identifications of the center, he suggested a connection with Tenochtitlan’s sacred precinct, whose temples provided the stage for the eighteen yearly feasts of the veintenas. Nowotny further noted that the date clusters that irregularly appear in the sequence are indeed yearly occurrences over the span of a four-year period; in other words, they correspond to the veintenas of the solar year, a point developed in Section 3.2 of this book. Nowotny’s suggestion that the central pages were a sequential presentation of rituals and their settings is an important point of departure for the present analysis.

Anders et al. (1993, 49–69, 175–190) offered another important contribution to this study by establishing the



a



b

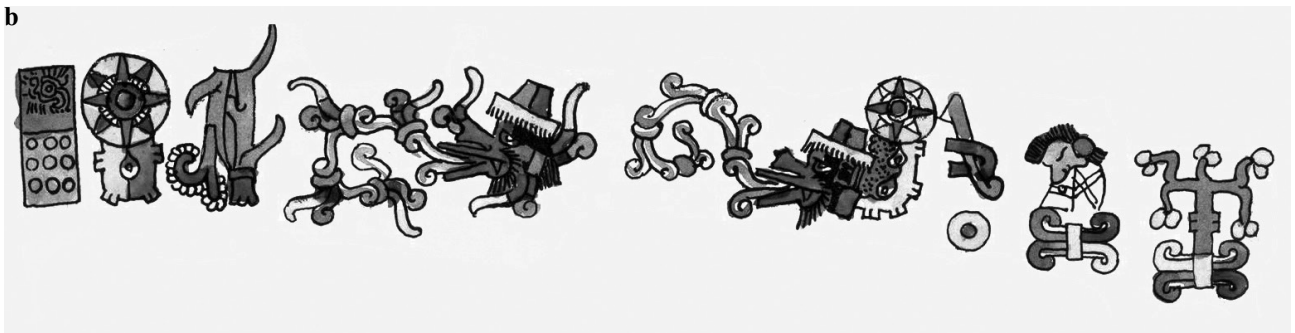


Figure 4.11. a. Lord 9 Wind Quetzalcoatl descends from heaven with two helpers carrying the cults of the sun (Panquetzaliztli) and Xipe (Tlacaxipehualiztli) on their back. Codex Vienna, p. 48. b. Cuauhtlehua and Micailhuilt followed by two wind gods. Codex Vienna, p. 27. Kingsborough 1831.

visionary aspect of the Codex Borgia's ritual sequence within the wider context of Mesoamerican religion. In their view, the Quetzalcoatl priest must be understood as a nahual who can transform and embody different natural forces for the sake of the community's well-being. More recently, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 431–530) further developed this idea and offered a detailed analysis of the rituals and places of the Codex Borgia's central pages in relation to the veintenas known through colonial Nahua sources. The relationship between the vision quest and the veintena ceremony is of particular importance. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 450–451) also stressed the interdependent relationship between the officiating Quetzalcoatl priest and Cihuacoatl, the mother goddess figure who protects and guides the priest in his ritual endeavors throughout the Codex Borgia's central scenes. In Chapter 1, I discussed the importance of priestly figures as intermediaries between the world of the living and the dead, from whom they derive their knowledge and authority. Night ceremonies can indeed be described as a journey to the world of the dead to meet the ancestors.

Jansen and Pérez Jiménez's identification of the veintenas in the Codex Borgia partially coincides with a previous study by Milbrath (2013, ch. 2), who nevertheless believed that the ritual sequence took place during a specific period between 1496 and 1506. In contrast to the methodology espoused by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, Milbrath opted for a systematic chronological correlation largely based on a study by Aveni (1999). While I find the suggestion to anchor the Codex Borgia in historical time interesting (as further discussed in Section 6.3 of this book), the main problem with Aveni and Milbrath's identification of chronological and astronomical events is that it is based on selected dates that appear in the pages of the Codex Borgia while ignoring at least as many other dates found in the same pages but that do not corroborate their chronology. More generally, the important issue of the genre of the manuscript, its mantic and ceremonial content, is never considered when framing astronomical and chronological interpretations of the document. In other words, was Codex Borgia painted before, after, or during the period between 1496 and 1506 that was presumably depicted in the manuscript? What was the purpose of recording past agricultural or astronomical events? How past events shape the outlook of religious pictorial manuscripts is an important question that is addressed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Here, I am mostly concerned with iconographic identifications and their significance within the corpus of religious manuscripts.

My analysis largely follows clues in the Codex Borbonicus' veintena section to find parallels in the Codex Borgia's central pages. There is a general similarity between the composition and placement of the ritual section in these two manuscripts. In both instances, the reader must either move around the document or turn it ninety degrees to follow the narrative. The Codex Borbonicus is a particularly large document. Each page measures roughly 40 × 40 cm. Although the Codex Borgia is the largest of the surviving pre-Hispanic codices, it is

considerably smaller than the Codex Borbonicus and measures approximately 27 cm on each side. However, the section in the Codex Borgia spans both sides of the document. Thus, the sequence cannot be appreciated at a glance; rather, the reader is forced to follow the sequential unfolding on each page.

As previously mentioned, the black Quetzalcoatl priest in the Codex Borgia is accompanied throughout his journey by the mother goddess Cihuacoatl, who is represented outstretched, functioning as a framing device or temple enclosure, and found mainly in the opening and closing scenes of the ceremonial cycle. By comparison, the Codex Borbonicus' veintena section opens and closes with the Cihuacoatl and an accompanying Xiuhcoatl (fire serpent) priest. In the first instance on page 23, the former is glossed as "main priest" (*papa mayor*), which is consistent with the major priestly role of the Cihuacoatl in the Mexica Empire. The Xiuhcoatl priest, by contrast, is identified as the tlatoani Motecuhzoma. At the end of the cycle on page 37, they reappear, this time identified by their divinatory powers: Cihuacoatl as "god of the omens" (*dios de los agüeros*) and Xiuhcoatl as "god of the maize kernels [used in divination] and magicians" (*dios de los maizes y hechiceros*). Thus, the two characters are comparable to modern Mesoamerican and Mazatec priests, whose powers and knowledge were discussed in previous chapters.

In both manuscripts (page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus and page 46 of the Codex Borgia), the New Fire ceremony is depicted towards the end of the sequence and constitutes a pivotal event in the cycle, either over a year or a period of years. In my analysis, I focus on the ceremonial trajectory that begins with Ochpaniztli, whose long and elaborate depiction in the Codex Borbonicus indicates its importance in the sequence, and ends with the New Fire on Panquetzaliztli.

On page 29 of the Codex Borbonicus (Fig. 4.12), the representation of Ochpaniztli begins on the left, with the priest of Chicomecoatl dancing in front of her assistants, who are playing different musical instruments such as conch shells and trumpets. The scene then proceeds towards a temple decorated with colorful corn cobs, which is longitudinally placed to indicate that the priest is entering it. Eventually, a character exits the temple, wearing a human skin and carrying corn cobs in their hands and a quail in their mouth. These attributes identify the character as Centeotl, the god of corn, who continues to walk towards a smaller temple, presumably the one depicted on the next page (p. 30; Fig. 4.7). A comparable scene can be found on page 43 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 4.13), which is entirely occupied by a yellow quadrangular enclosure decorated with corn cobs. A priest descends from above, through the body of Cihuacoatl and inside the temple, where a large frontal and squatting Xolotl is being sacrificed. Xolotl's upward head may also indicate a state of trance. The skin that the god wears on their hands and feet is spotted like that of a jaguar, while their chest and trunk are shaped like a round jeweled altar (*cuauhxicalli* in Nahuatl) that contains

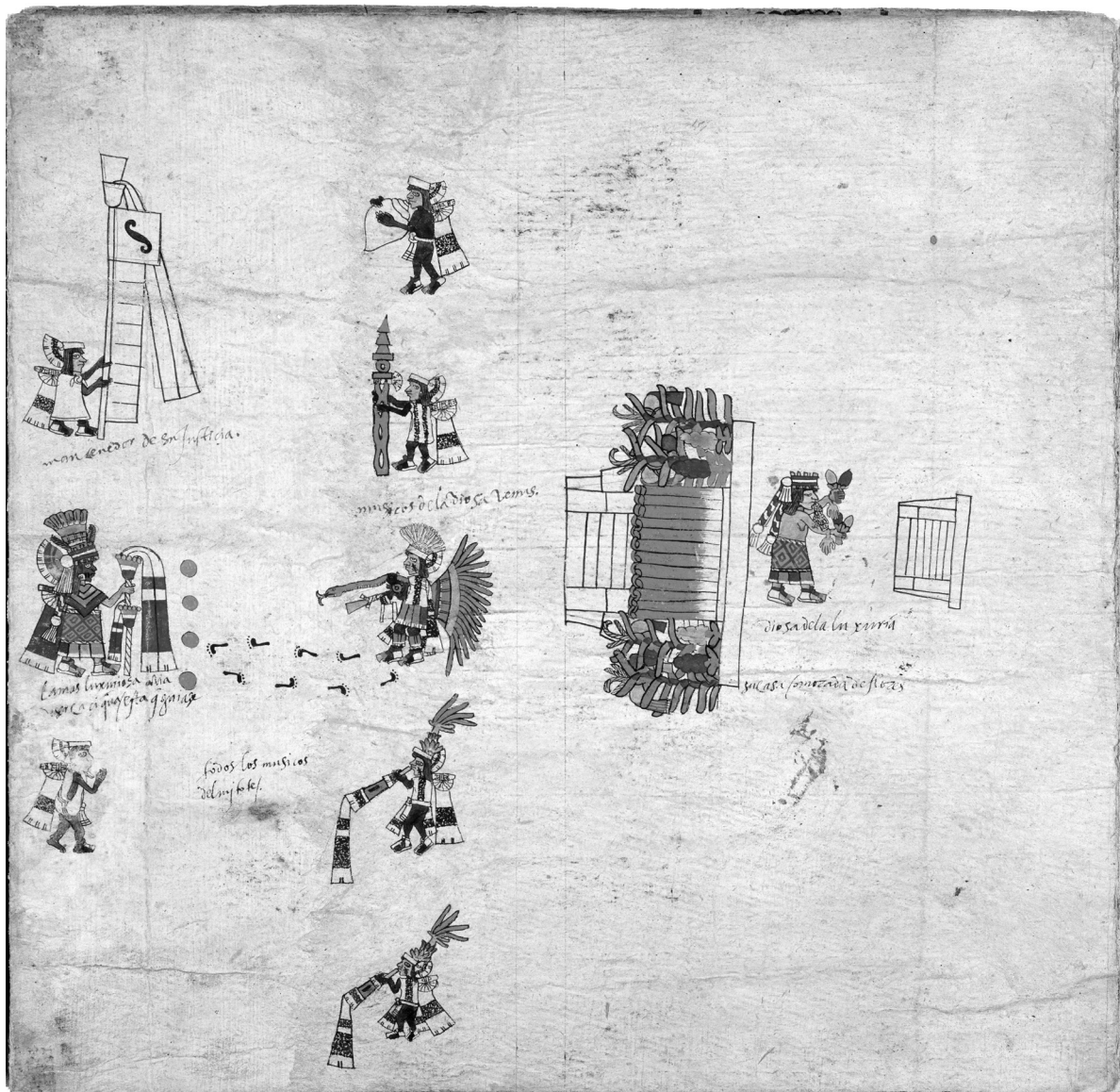


Figure 4.12. The beginning of Ochpaniztli. Codex Borbonicus, p. 29. Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée nationale, Paris.

their heart. Several characters surround the Xolotl altar. In the upper corners of the image, two male figures are seated on jaguar and eagle thrones (a reference to political power), while two women below carry children on their backs while grinding corn, typically female and domestic activities. In the middle section, four gods with distinctive colors (most likely in reference to the cardinal directions) kneel and pour offerings into two containers. Beneath Xolotl lies the body of a Cihuacoatl decorated with both nocturnal symbols (the gray and starred body) and corn cobs. The scene ends with the priest's successful exit from an opening in the temple enclosure at the bottom of the scene. He is carrying corn cobs on his back, which means that he has become Centeotl. The scene in the Codex Borgia is much more complex than the one in the Codex Borbonicus, and many iconographic details cannot be fully explained. Yet, both scenes depict a ritual that takes place within a similar temple and in which the protagonist is a priest who becomes Centeotl by virtue of successfully passing through the temple.

According to the written information provided in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 30, 120–121), during Ochpaniztli, Chicomecoatl was a priest who celebrated a ritual involving the human sacrifice of a woman, who represented Toci. The sacrifice would take place at midnight in the temple, where the victim was flayed. Her skin was eventually worn by another person named Teccizquacuilli. Another part of the victim's skin, taken from the thigh, was worn by an impersonator of Centeotl. On page 29 of the Codex Borbonicus, the ritual begins with Chicomecoatl on the left and ends (or, better yet, proceeds) with a person wearing a skin exiting a temple on the right. The Codex Borgia, by contrast, makes clear that the same person who enters the temple exits it and that the sacrifice is of a god's vicar, Xolotl, whose body animates the sacred offering altar. The latter pre-Hispanic manuscript provides an internal perspective that focuses on what happens within the temple's enclosure, which is exactly what colonial sources omit, including the Codex Borbonicus.





Figure 4.13. The sacrifice of Xolotl in the maize temple. Codex Borgia, p. 43. Kingsborough 1831.

Nowotny (1961, § 21b, 247) and Jansen (2002) aptly noted that the Codex Borgia offers a mystical and spiritual view of the ritual rather than the external and public aspects of the cult. In colonial sources, human sacrifice often became a placeholder for any ritual activity that was conducted away from the public eye, especially in light of the secrecy that surrounded private ceremonies conducted inside temples at night. These rituals involved a deep and personal transformation on the part of the people involved, who eventually emerged as different gods or characters due to having acquired new knowledge and power. While colonial sources speak of human sacrifice, the Codex Borgia depicts the anthropomorphizing of the temple's altar. Xolotl, who wears a jaguar skin (much like the human skin of Centeotl in colonial sources), is a god related to the underworld and the otherworldly travels of Quetzalcoatl. Here, he functions as a surrogate for the priest, and his sacrifice is not death but rather a process of transformation.

The scene that precedes the ceremony in the maize temple on page 42 of the Codex Borgia includes other elements that refer to Ochpaniztli and its protagonists (Fig. 4.14). The main action revolves around Itzlacoliuhqui (Curved Obsidian Blade). His body is skeletonized, and he wears a conical hat and a black-and-white face covering (Anders et al. 1993, 227–231). As noted by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 504), Itzlacoliuhqui's body in the Codex Borgia may consist of some type of dough due to its white color and red dots. Ixiptla (god impersonators) were often made of corn or other edible staples. In Sahagún's text (1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 31), Itzlacoliuhqui partook in the ceremony of Ochpaniztli as an aspect of Centeotl, the maize god, who is born from the sacrifice of Toci. In the Codex Borgia, Itzlacoliuhqui undergoes sacrifice by heart extraction on a stone slab, as seen in the top scene. Before this, he is in a ball court, where he is stoned and beaten by four characters. After his sacrifice on a stone, he travels to another underworld





Figure 4.14. The sacrifice of Itzlacolihqui. Codex Borgia, p. 42. Kingsborough 1831.

realm—a flooded sunken courtyard—and drowns. He is finally immolated on a crossroad at the bottom of the page. In this last sacrifice, which immediately precedes the ritual in the temple of maize on the following page, an offering of sticks wrapped in a white cloth is placed on top of a colored strip, which may represent the earth. I follow Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 509) in interpreting the offering as a glyphic reference to the festival of Ochpaniztli, as previously discussed (see Humboldt Fragment). In a similar manner to the Codex Borbonicus and Primeros Memoriales, the glyphic marker indicates a time of the year, even if the ceremonies depicted may not necessarily follow a predictable outlook or duration, rather displacing themselves or overlapping in a rather fluid manner. Once again, the image in the Codex Borgia is particularly complex, and many details cannot be fully accounted for. However, it is worth noting that the corresponding text

by Sahagún related to the *veintena* ceremonies, including Ochpaniztli, are far from clear, a fact described at length above in the case of the varied descriptions of Teotleco. Characters often overlap and exchange roles so that the straightforward trajectory of the action is often difficult to follow, defying any simple progression or narrative.

In Primeros Memoriales, it was noted that the goddess Toci appeared before her putative festival of Ochpaniztli during the *veintenas* of Micaillhuitontli and Huey Micaillhuitl (ff. 251r–251v). In the Codex Borgia, it seems that a ritual preparation that involves the sacrifice of Itzlacolihqui as a manifestation of Centeotl is similarly noted in the period leading up to the celebration of Ochpaniztli. Indeed, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 509) identified elements of the *veintenas* of Micaillhuitontli and Huey Micaillhuitl in the Codex Borgia (p. 42), such as the importance of dough

ixiptla in those veintenas, according to colonial sources. In the corresponding image in *Primeros Memoriales*, a decapitated dough figure can be seen lying on a bed of corn in the second illustration related to Huey Micailhuiltl, which can be compared to Itzlacolihqui in the *Codex Borgia* (p. 42). Unlike most colonial sources, the scenes in the *Codex Borgia* are characterized by the central role played by the priest, at once sacrificer and sacrificed, as the prism and catalyst through which ritual action is enacted. Every ritual and successive place comes into being because it is visited and activated by the sacrificed priest.

The New Fire ceremony concludes the ceremonial cycle on page 46 of the *Codex Borgia*. The corresponding veintena of Panquetzaliztli is introduced by the abbreviated symbol of a blue upright banner on page 45 (Fig. 4.15), where it appears on the upper portion of the

page. The banner pierces through the temple enclosure and is wrapped around a night vision serpent. The central image on this page is the tzompantli, the skull altar, on top of which stands a character with a fleshless head and a white body with red stripes, akin to Camaxtli, the god of hunting. Behind him (or stemming from him) is a tree with different colored banners. Anders et al. (1993, 239) noted the custom of placing banners atop trees during Panquetzaliztli (Durán 1971, *Calendar*, Fifteenth Month, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, f. 5r). Below the tzompantli, the officiating priest is seated on an altar structure in a particularly dynamic position. He appears to be bleeding (perhaps dematerializing) and turning into a sacred bundle, as indicated by the cloth that covers him. According to Tezozomoc (1997, ch. 94), the tzompantli was not an altar but rather the sacred bundle containing the body of the deceased. In particular, the source relates the solemn

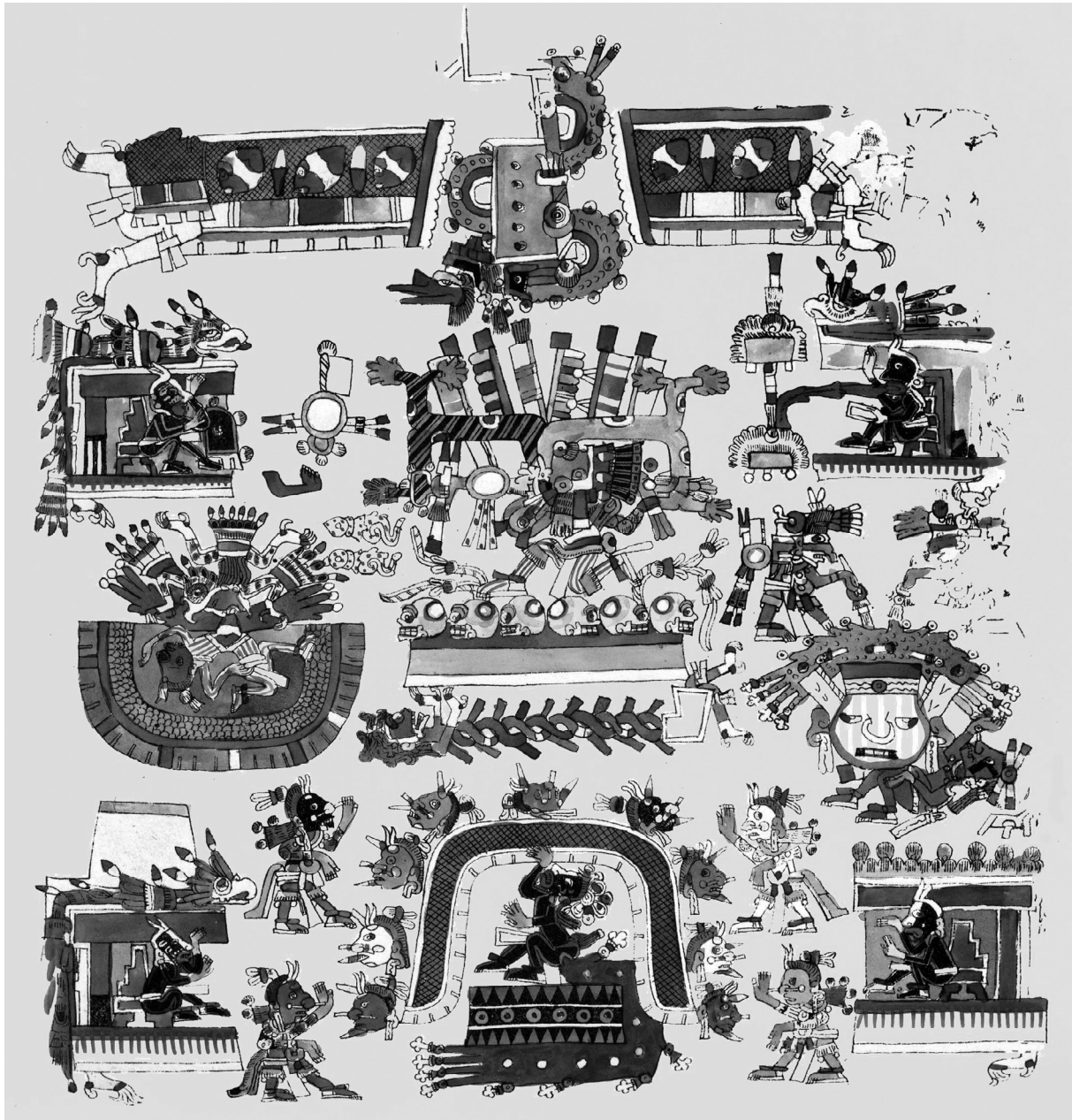


Figure 4.15. Mixcoatl atop the tzompantli. *Codex Borgia*, p. 45. Kingsborough 1831.



burial of warriors, including a brother of Motecuhzoma, that took place after a particularly deadly and fierce battle against the Huexotzinca army, from the town in the modern state of Puebla. Once the bundles were burnt, the remains were scattered in a place called *tzompantitlan* near the temple of Huitzilopochtli in the Templo Mayor, where the archaeological remains of the Huey Tzompantli were recently located. A somewhat similar but complementary piece of information can be found in Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 7, ch. 12), who claimed that a noble taken captive from Huexotzinco was sacrificed in Tenochtitlan during the celebration of the New Fire at the end of the fifty-two-year cycle. Finally, a gloss on page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus, which depicts the ceremony of Panquetzaliztli, can be seen on the stairway of the temple. It reads, “Night burial of an important cacique, during which all the most important priests would gather to perform the ceremonies and rituals they were accustomed to do” (*Entierro de noche que se*

*hacia de algún gran cacique, a donde se congregaban todos los papas, con las ceremonias y ritos que en ello usaban*). All these relatively disparate references indicate a connection between certain ceremonies related to the creation of sacred bundles from the remains of deified warriors and ancestors, the New Fire, and the *veintena* of Panquetzaliztli. Historical events, such as the battle between the Mexica and the Huexotzinca, and periodic ritual occasions are blurred and confused, perhaps because the distinction between ceremonies for the gods and human deeds was not as clear-cut as we may want it to be. Was there a common source for both Nahua and Spanish historians, who framed the same information in distinct terms that responded to distinct conceptions of time and human action?

In the Codex Borgia, the ritual of the New Fire is depicted on page 46 (Fig. 4.16) in a scene dominated by an animated



Figure 4.16. New Fire ceremony. Codex Borgia, p. 42. Kingsborough 1831.

pot, from which the officiating priest emerges. Four colorful serpents enclose the burning pot. The Florentine Codex contains the following:

Thereupon likewise descended the fire serpent. It was just like a blazing pine firebrand. Its tongue was made of flaming red feathers. It went [as if] burning [like] a torch. And its tail was of paper, perhaps two fathoms or three fathoms long. As it came down, it was like a real serpent; it showed its tongue; it was as if it bent back and forth.

And when [the priest] had brought it to the base [of the pyramid], he proceeded carefully there to the eagle vessel. Then he went up [to the eagle vessel]: he also raised [the fire serpent] in dedication of the four directions. When he had [so] raised it in dedication, then he cast it upon the sacrificial papers; then they burnt.

And when he had come to leave it, when he went ascending to the top, then shell trumpets were blown. (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34, 147)

The Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 5r) confirms that the feast of Xiuhtecuhtli was also celebrated during Panquetzaliztli. Four priests, each carrying a large pinewood bundle, performed the ceremony by orienting themselves towards the four directions, as seen in the Codex Borgia, where the four serpents around the burner form a square. On page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus, several god impersonators carry large pinewood bundles, but only four priests dedicated to Yoaltecuhtli (the lord of the night invoked during the New Fire ceremony, according to Sahagún; Anders et al. 1991, 223) direct their torches to the turquoise hearth in the temple. The New Fire ceremony was conducted not only to mark the conclusion of a fifty-two-year count (*xiuhmolpilli*) but also, on a smaller scale, to celebrate the closing of a four-year cycle (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 37–38). In the Codex Borbonicus, it is clear that the New Fire ceremony was conducted during Panquetzaliztli, as also corroborated by Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34). However, the same source (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 37) relates the drilling of a new fire during Izcalli. Similarly, in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 5r), the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli's ceremonies are described as part of Panquetzaliztli, while the god himself is depicted as the patron of Izcalli on folio 6v, where he can be seen sporting attributes of the “fire bearers.” These seemingly confusing elements indicate that the two celebrations (Panquetzaliztli and Izcalli) share overlapping features, despite occurring sixty days apart. In this light, the ceremony of the New Fire in the Codex Borgia (p. 42) can also be related to Izcalli (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 521–523).

The proposed analysis is based on a close reading of a ceremonial trajectory that begins in Ochpaniztli and culminates in Panquetzaliztli with the New Fire ceremony in both the Codices Borgia and Borbonicus. However, there are two more important rituals that take place during

this long ritual sequence in the Codex Borgia that find a parallel not in a religious manuscript but rather in a historical account.

#### 4.3.1. The quest

In folios 20r and 21r (Fig. 4.17 and 4.18) of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, an early colonial document from Cuauhtinchan (a town in the vicinity of Puebla), two scenes depict consecutive rituals of political accession. First, four characters with the attributes of the god of hunting, Mixcoatl (e.g., red-and-white body paint and the instruments of his trade), lie atop a tree. According to the accompanying text (Kirchhoff et al. 1989, 171), the four men are *tlatoque* (rulers), who fasted for four days while alone in the woods. Two eagles and two jaguars, symbols of royalty, pour nourishing liquid into their mouths. As discussed by Olivier (2015a, 466–473), the objective of the ritual was to attain the status of nobility, which was finally accomplished with the perforation of the septum, the ritual represented in the following image. Nowotny (1961, § 15b, 251–252) first indicated that both scenes have a parallel on page 44 of the Codex Borgia. Figure 4.19 depicts a quadrangular temple enclosure, within which stands a colorful tree that sprouts from a round solar disk on the chest of Cihuacoatl, who also displays the attributes of the rain god. On top of the tree, a character dressed as an eagle receives precious liquid from a descending bat-like figure. The eagle-person is being nourished in the same manner as the *tlatoque* in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. At the same time, on the lateral openings of the temple, the beaks and teeth of an eagle, a jaguar, and a bird perforate the noses of three men who appear as fire serpent *nahuales*. Thus, the image fuses the two successive scenes of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, the nourishment of the *tlatoque* on the trees, and the perforation of the septum.

The nose-piercing ceremony on page 44 of the Codex Borgia is placed exactly between the sacrifices of Itzcolihuiqui on page 42 and Xolotl on page 43, which are tentatively tied to the *veintena* of Ochpaniztli in the present analysis, and pages 45–46, which end the ritual cycle with the New Fire during Panquetzaliztli. *Primeros Memoriales* states that, “at this time [of Panquetzaliztli], abstinence was practiced for eighty days, although there was not abstaining from eating. There was eating, but no one washed himself with soap or took a steam bath; no one slept with a woman” (Sahagún et al. 1997, 64). Information from the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34) confirms that Panquetzaliztli was the culmination of eighty days of fasting that began during Ochpaniztli. Finally, a previously discussed passage in Motolinía (1971, ch. 25) states that priests known as “fire bearers” (*cargadores del fuego*) from Tehuacán, Teotitlán, and Coxcatlán began their preparation for Panquetzaliztli eighty days prior to the feast.

Elements of a quest are especially evident in the fasting of the aspiring *tlatoque*, as indicated in the image and text of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. Olivier (2008,



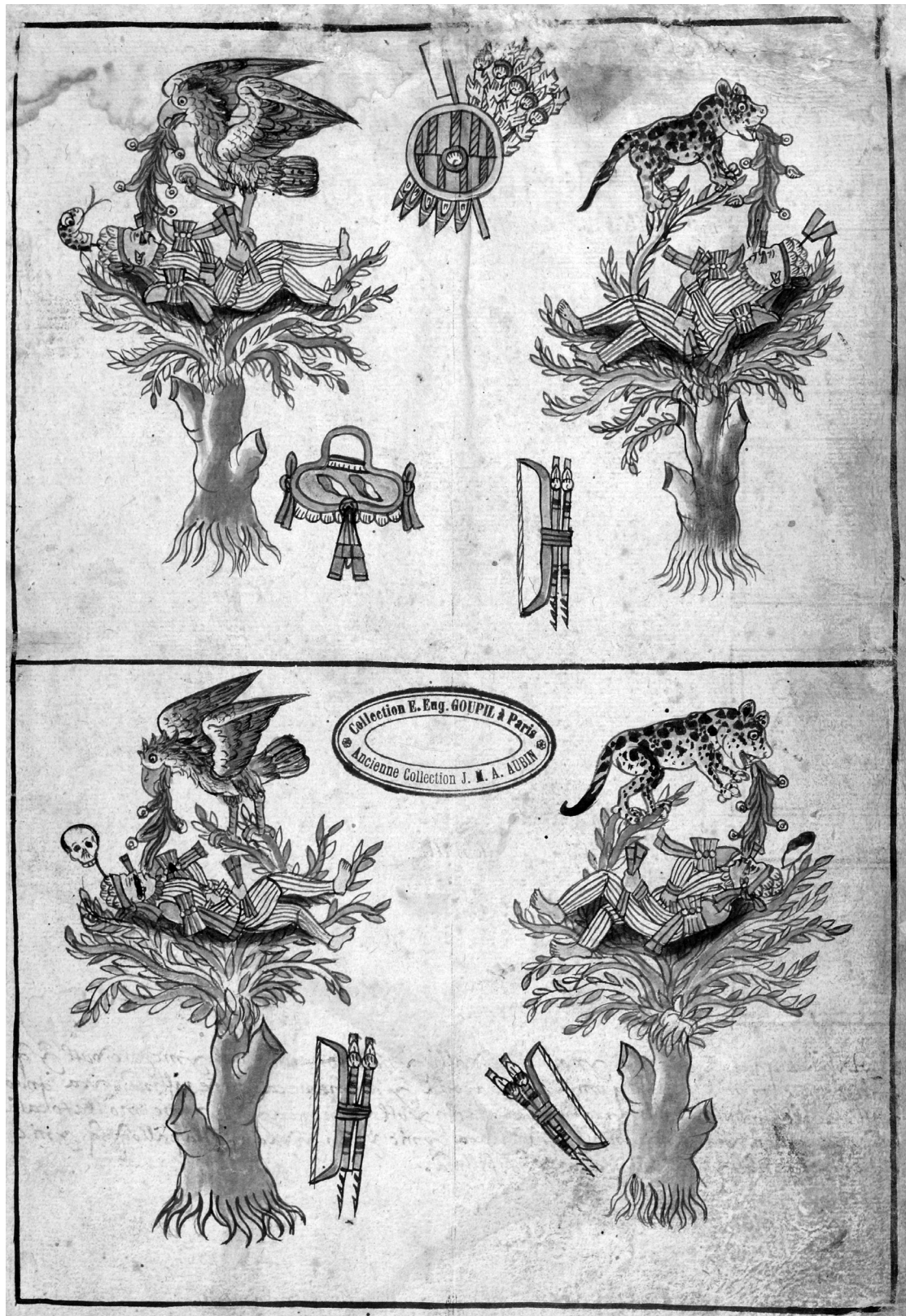


Figure 4.17. Vision quest of the tlaoque. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, f. 20r. Mexicain 46–58. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

271–274) noted a relationship between the naked red-and-white striped body, conical hat, pierced nose, and other features of the so-called Huastecs (León Portilla 1965) and the ceremonies for the royal succession, when the

aspiring king symbolically died and was reborn with a new identity. I propose that these specific elements do not indicate a ritual death but are rather signs of a vision quest, a journey to the world of deified ancestors from which

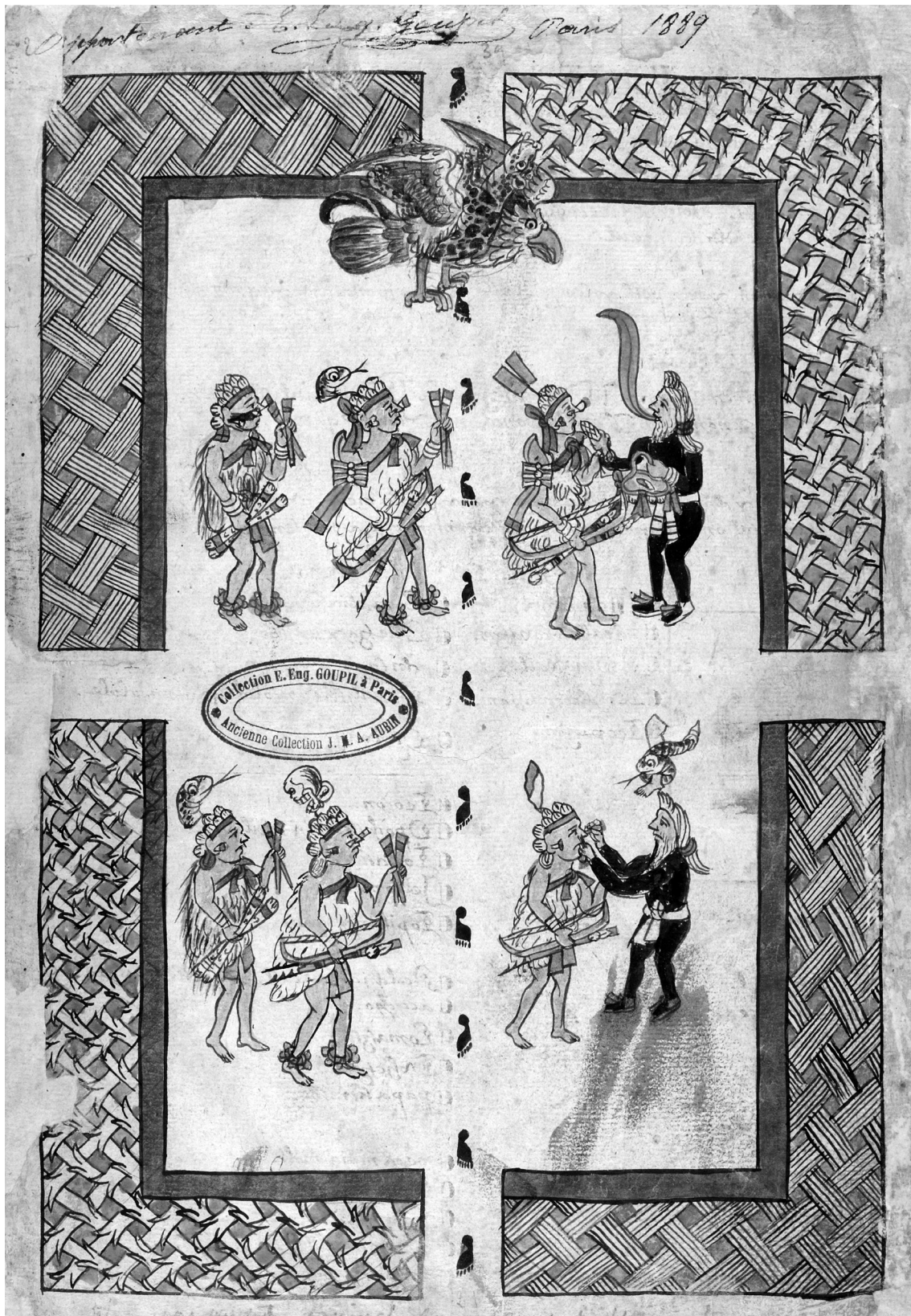


Figure 4.18. Nose-piercing ceremony. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, f. 21r. Mexicain 46–58. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

aspiring rulers return with the knowledge and experience necessary for their leadership role. In the Codex Borgia, the sacrificed priest on page 43 is Itzlacolihqui, who begins his journey during Ochpaniztli and self-immolates

during Panquetzalitzli as Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli on page 45. Although political overtones may be present in the nose-piercing ceremony on page 44 of the Codex Borgia, the protagonist is the bird nahual priest in the middle of





Figure 4.19. Nose-piercing ceremony inside a temple. Codex Borgia, p. 44. Kingsborough 1831.

the scene who receives the precious nourishment while on top of a tree (possibly fasting), not the three characters on the sides.

As in Mazatec chants, the polyhedral figure of the priest can consecutively embody many and different characters, to the point of a confusing accumulation of identities. He is the absolute protagonist of the pages under discussion in the Codex Borgia. For example, on page 45, the Quetzalcoatl priest can be seen in the middle left of the image transforming into an eagle nahuatl and extracting the heart of a sacrificial victim plunged into a river. The same character, identified as Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (Seler 1904, vol. 2, 71) due to his white body with red stripes, is on top of the tzompantli structure in the middle of the scene. The dynamic posture indicates that he is alive. The same attributes, in addition to the small net that he holds in his right hand (used to carry food during hunting), connects him to Mixcoatl, the god protagonist of the

veintena of Quecholli, which is celebrated right before Panquetzaliztli (Milbrath 2013, 30, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 517–519). Mixcoatl, the god of hunting, also shares attributes with the tlatoque of the fasting and nose-piercing ceremony in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (ff. 20r, 21r). Next, the priest himself appears bleeding on an altar. His body is in a dynamic posture and covered in a large white cotton cloth, which indicates that he is transforming into a sacred bundle known as *tlaquimilolli* in Nahuatl (Anders et al. 1993, 239). This means that the priest first made the sacrifice, then became the fruit of his own sacrifice. I propose that the priest, as the protagonist of the story, has the ability to subjectively take on the role of people, sacrificed, sacrificers, and even powerful objects in a rapid and dynamic manner, as was initially proposed for the scenes of Teotleco in the Codices Tudela (f. 22r) and Ixtlilxochitl (f. 99v), which are admittedly much simpler in their iconography and compositions.

### **4.3.2. Conclusions**

In this chapter, I proposed approaching ritual representations in colonial and ancient manuscripts in a novel manner. First, iconographic complexity and idiosyncrasies were framed within the idea of transformation—that is, the human ability to change and take different shapes, such as animals, gods, and natural elements. This ability, which is sometimes defined as “instability” in the anthropological literature on South American shamanism (Viveiros de Castro 1994, Alberti 2007, Lagrou 2009), creates a constant interplay between different characters and corresponding ceremonial roles.

While mythological explanations pursue clear meaning, imply causality, and create a reassuring but somewhat fictitious linearity for the narrative, the focus on ritual action brings process itself to the fore. Second, I propose primarily interpreting this process as a quest, again relying on anthropological literature on Indigenous American cultures (Irwin 1994) as much as my own field work in the Mazateca. The quest implies that ritual action is not only a process but also an open one with a desired—but not a guaranteed—outcome. While a shared and common belief system may provide a road map to the destination, individuality and subjectivity play a major role in the ceremonial context. In the literature on ancient Mesoamerican religion, ritual is mostly understood as a public event whose purpose was to create and foment social cohesion. By contrast, in this book, I propose that in the case of religious manuscripts, pictography was not merely a reflection of religious beliefs but rather a means through which religious knowledge was constructed and materialized. Although the purported mysticism of the Codex Borgia’s ritual pages, as remarked by Nowotny, may ultimately seem to preclude any possible definitive interpretation, we should not refrain from asking even unanswerable questions in our own quest for meaning. The following chapter argues for a reassessment of the backbone of religious books, namely the Mesoamerican calendar, vis-à-vis its representation in colonial times.



## Ritual and Historical Time

The preceding chapter proposed the identification of a ceremonial sequence in the Codex Borgia with the *veintenas*, relying on a critical analysis of written and pictorial sources from the early colonial period. Specifically, I argued that the erasure of the visionary aspect of *veintena* ceremonies had a major impact on the way in which they were represented after the conquest. Following Díaz Álvarez (2013, 2018, 2019), I argued that the normalization of the ceremonial cycle was geared towards the creation of a solar calendar akin to the one in use in Europe, conceived as separate from the *tonalpohualli*, whose only function became that of a zodiac, a divinatory device seemingly divorced from timekeeping. In the present chapter, I attempt to reconstruct an internal chronology of the *veintena* ceremonies in the Codex Borbonicus, the earliest surviving post-conquest manuscript that presents crucial ritual and historical information on the Mexica without relying on later sources. This leads to a questioning of the accepted correlation between the Christian and Mesoamerican calendars.

### 5.1. Historical time and the Codex Borbonicus

The Codex Borbonicus is the closest example of a pre-colonial manuscript from central Mexico that has survived. It stands out among the Mesoamerican sacred books because its provenience and dating are known, although not in detail. As first suggested by Nicholson (1988), several remarks about the swamps (*chinampas*) in the glosses indicate a probable southern locale in the basin of Mexico. Nicholson also remarked on the importance given to Cihuacoatl as the main priest of the ceremonies in the section dedicated to *veintenas*, which points to the towns of Colhuacan or Xochimilco, where the goddess was venerated as a patron deity. The manuscript also contains several dates associated with the solar year (*xihuitl*), specifically the consecutive years 1 Rabbit, 2 Reed, and 3 Tecpatl. According to the most accepted correlation, these dates correspond to the consecutive years of 1506, 1507, and 1508. *Veintena* celebrations unfolded over the course of 2 Reed (1507).

The approach to the Mesoamerican ceremonial festival cycle that I propose is flexible and requires an understanding of these celebrations in conjunction with the *tonalpohualli*, to such an extent that dates in the 260-day calendar could determine which rituals to undertake at any given point in the year. Therefore, it is important to look for clues in the same manuscript that connects the *tonalpohualli* with the solar year. In the case of the Codex Borbonicus, several authors (Quiñones Keber 1987, Graulich 1997, Anders et al. 1991, 40n6) noticed the

presence of a main priest, who is identified by a gloss as *papa mayor* in the image of the *trecena* 1 Rain on page 7 (Fig. 5.1). This priest, who wears a human skin and carries corn cobs in his hands, eventually plays a major role in the ceremony of Ochpaniztli on page 29 of the *veintena* section, as previously discussed. As its seventh day 7 Serpent, the *trecena* 1 Rain includes Chicomecoatl, which is indeed the Nahuatl name of the god impersonated by the priest during Ochpaniztli in the manuscript. While no other pre-Hispanic *tonalamatl* (Borgia, p. 67 and Vaticanus B, p. 55) depicts Chicomecoatl during its tutelary *trecena*, the colonial *Tonalamatl Aubin* (p. 7), which closely follows the Codex Borbonicus, prominently presents him as a co-regent along with the rain god Tlaloc. According to extant sources, Chicomecoatl is not the principal officiating priest or goddess of Ochpaniztli, and its prominent role in the Codex Borbonicus constitutes an exception compared to later depictions of this *veintena*, which is more commonly presided over by Toci or Tlazolteotl, as in the Codices Tudela (f. 21r), Telleriano-Remensis (f. 3r), and others.

DiCesare (2009, 133–134) interpreted the anomaly of Chicomecoatl's role during Ochpaniztli in the Codex Borbonicus by referring to information reported by Durán. The Dominican friar (Durán 1971, *Gods and Rites*, ch. 14–15) dedicated two consecutive chapters to Chicomecoatl and Toci because, in his words, their celebrations fell one after the other. Chicomecoatl was first celebrated on September 15, while Toci supposedly fell on September 16 during the Ochpaniztli festival. Chicomecoatl (i.e., 7 Serpent) is a movable feast within the solar calendar whose specific occurrence during the harvest in September—and the related Ochpaniztli festival—would not take place every year. Durán's information indirectly suggested that Chicomecoatl may have been chosen instead of Toci as the principal goddess because of a specific occurrence of the *tonalpohualli* during the year 2 Reed portrayed in the *veintena* section of the Codex Borbonicus.

If the *trecena* 1 Rain, whose seventh day is 7 Serpent, fell during the harvest festival of Ochpaniztli in September, this also means that Panquetzaliztli, which occurs eighty days after Ochpaniztli, would roughly fall during the *trecena* 1 Dog. Chimalpahin (1998, 7<sup>th</sup> *Relación*, ff. 186r–186v) stated that the New Fire ceremony for the year 2 Reed, the same one celebrated on page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus, took place on the day 4 Reed, the fourth day of the *trecena* 1 Dog (see also Anders et al. 1991, 39). This means that 7 Serpent (Chicomecoatl) would fall during Ochpaniztli exactly in the year of the New Fire depicted in both the *trecena* and *veintena* sections of the Codex Borbonicus. In the preceding chapter, the ritual trajectory