

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Recreating the Cosmos

Seventeen Aztec Dedication Caches

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DURING FIVE SEASONS OF FIELDWORK (1978–1997), the Templo Mayor Project of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) recovered one of the most prominent ritual scenarios of the Mesoamerican world: the Sacred Precinct of Mexico-Tenochtitlán. Among the most significant discoveries during the past fourteen years are the remains of fifteen buildings, more than eight thousand objects, and a considerable agglomeration of sculptures, reliefs, and mural paintings (Matos 1987, 1988). In addition, our explorations have recovered a surprising number of buried offerings—134 in all (fig. 15.1).

One of the most significant results of the project was the discovery and recording of the complex disposition of the archaeological materials in the offerings. During the excavations we observed that each and every object was carefully placed, following strict principles of spatial composition.

Five years ago I began to study the offerings under the assumption that the arrangement of materials obeyed a code that, once deciphered, would contribute to an understanding of Mexica ideology (López Luján 1989, 1994; López Luján and Polaco 1991). In an analogy to verbal language, each component of the offering functioned as a sign or symbol that transmitted information when combined with others. Unfortunately, for more than two hundred years studies of Mexica offerings have been limited to the analysis of their contents, thus obscuring con-

textual relationships. For this reason, although today we are aware of the significance of many of the buried materials, we still do not understand the meaning of the whole complex. To continue the linguistic analogy, we understand the letters and even the words, but not the syntax of the phrase.

This study is based on the assumption that the systematic correlation of archaeological materials with architectural, historical, and ethnographic information will help not only to decipher the code of the offerings but also to identify the ritual ceremonies during which the offerings were made. I carried out a variety of descriptive as well as complex statistical analyses in order to detect possible patterns. The sample studied included more than 9,000 objects from 118 offerings, excavated by 4 different archaeological projects (López Luján 1994).

With the help of simple statistical techniques, it was possible to detect two classes of archaeological syntax: an “internal” one, corresponding to the distribution of the objects within each receptacle, and an “external” class, relating to the organization of the offerings with respect to architectural structures (López Luján 1994:chap. 6). With regard to the internal syntax, the organization of the objects observed one or more principles of a predetermined spatial arrangement: (1) the distribution of the objects followed imaginary axes on a horizontal plane



Fig. 15.1. Excavation of Offering 11 in 1978. (Courtesy of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

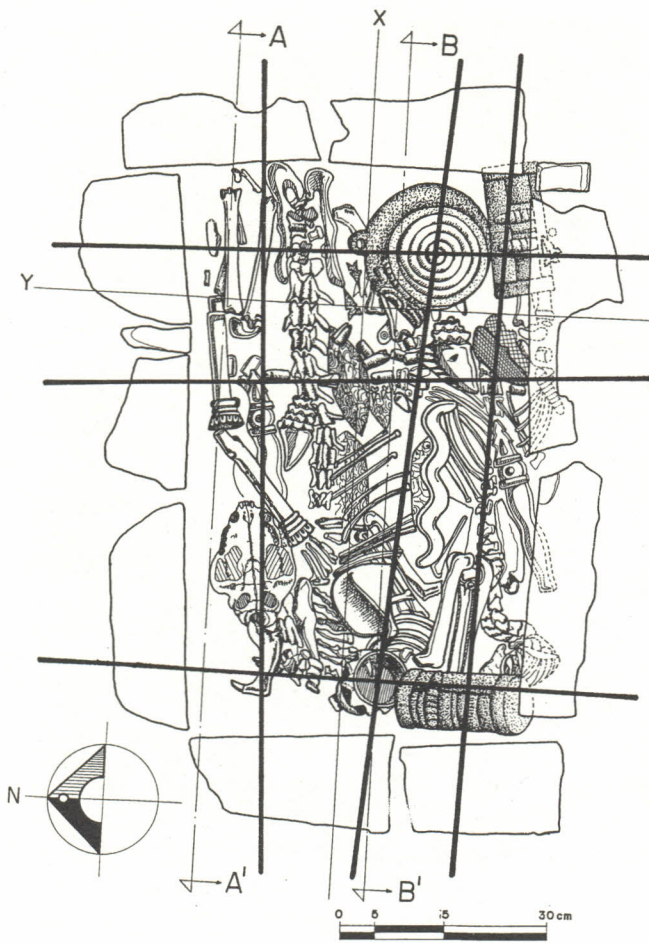


Fig. 15.2. Distribution of objects following imaginary axes: Temple B, Offering H, Level 1.

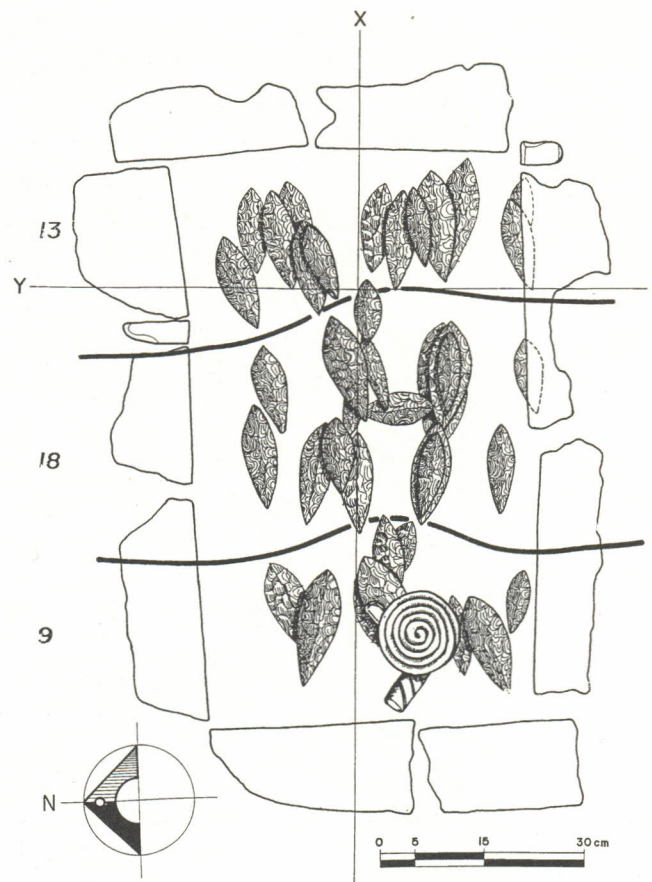


Fig. 15.3. Groups of 13, 18, and 9 flint knives from Temple B, Offering H, Level 3.

(fig. 15.2); (2) objects with the same morphofunctional characteristics tended to cluster horizontally in groups, with the number of components related to Nahuatl concepts of the cosmos (fig. 15.3); (3) the objects overlapped vertically in levels or superpositions. Each level contained the same type of objects, following taxonomic criteria based on indigenous “cosmovision” (fig. 15.4).

As for the external syntax, groups of offerings were clearly visible with respect to the general layout of the Templo Mayor. Their locations were dictated by the following principles: (1) the differential importance of the structures in which they were found; (2) the imaginary axes that dictated the distribution of architectural space in each building (fig. 15.5); and (3) the religious significance of the buildings, as well as their vertical and horizontal sections.

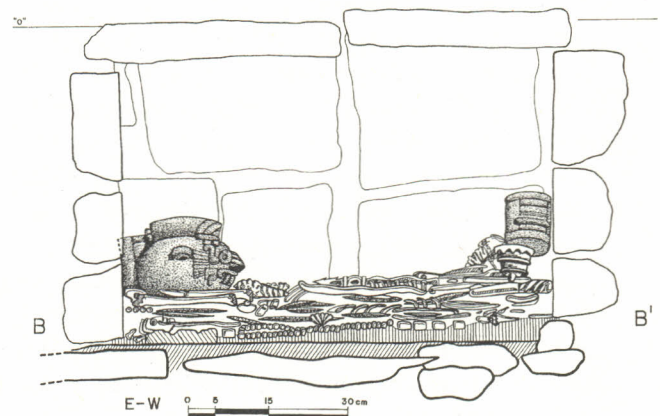


Fig. 15.4. Five levels of Offering H: ceramics, skeletons of mammals, flint knives, shells/greenstone sculptures, and marine sand.

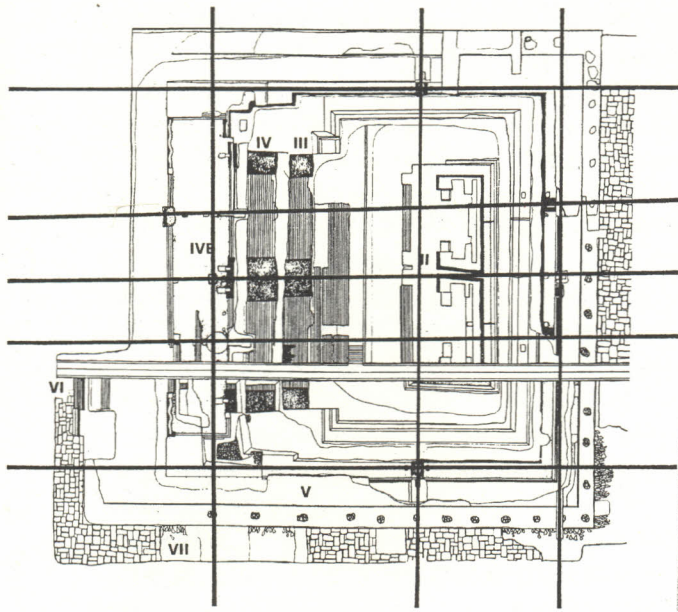


Fig. 15.5. Distribution of offerings following imaginary axes.

Other patterns could be detected only through the use of more complicated techniques. Thus, the second stage of analysis involved the classification of the 118 offerings using more complex statistical techniques (López Luján 1994:chap. 7). One of these was numerical taxonomy. This classification provided the basis for the analysis of the religious significance of the offerings and the reconstruction of the associated ritual ceremonies. In this chapter I will analyze two groups obtained by use of the computer, both of which relate to the ceremonies associated with the construction and inauguration of the Templo Mayor.

According to sixteenth-century Nahua concepts, the Templo Mayor was built in the center of the universe, exactly in the place where high, middle, and low articulated with the four directions of the universe. According to an indigenous myth, the foundation site was revealed to the migrants by the presence of a savine that had taken root on two large rocks (Alvarado Tezozómoc 1949:62–63; Durán 1984:2:44–48). Each of these rocks covered a pair of caves from which two springs flowed, one with blue water, the other with red. Later, both of these colors and the insistent duality of sacred geography would lend a distinctive note to the temple of Huitzilipochtli and Tlaloc.

This duality is reflected in the inauguration offerings of the Templo Mayor and seems to allude to “time-des-

tiny” forces of the Mesoamerican cosmovision that ran in a helicoidal pattern through the interior of the cosmic trees: descending, warm, and masculine, on the one hand, and ascending, cold, and feminine on the other (López Austin 1980:58–75, 1990:178).

Various authors agree that the form of the Templo Mayor reflected the spatial configuration of the universe (López Luján 1990:chap. 5; Matos 1988:133; Zantwijk 1981:71–73). Each time that it was enlarged, the architects were careful to repeat the previous structure and in this way to re-create the cosmos. However, similarity of form was not the only requirement to be met in order for the new addition to become a sacred space. It was also indispensable to carry out rituals, during the construction as well as at the dedication. These rituals repeated the primordial creation of the world in order to assure the vitality and permanence of the temple. The offerings described below are precisely the remains of rituals of this type, which reenact the cosmogonic acts of the gods.

The first group of offerings to be analyzed was interred during the construction of the third enlargement of the Templo Mayor (approximately A.D. 1427–1440). While the

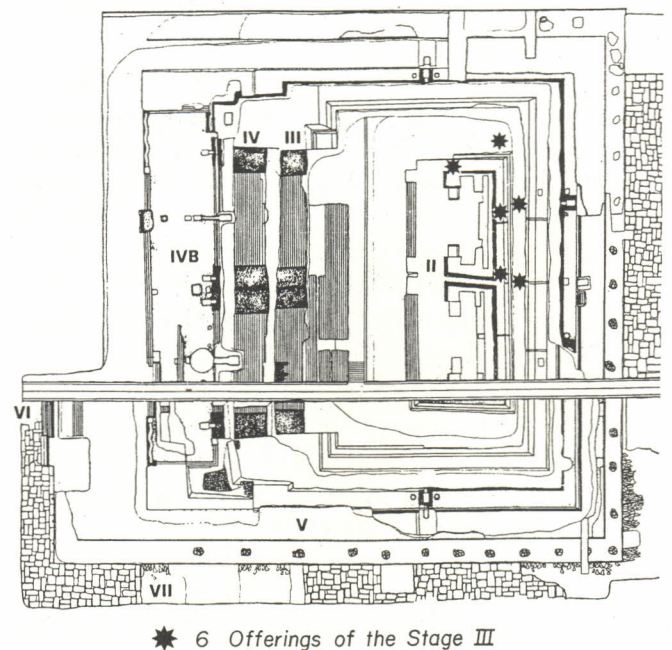


Fig. 15.6. Spatial distribution of the first group of offerings.



Fig. 15.7. Globular jar and bowl, from Offering 43. (Courtesy of INAH)

construction was still in process, a ritual was conducted, during which six offerings were buried in the fill of the northern part of the building, in the half dedicated to Tlaloc (fig. 15.6). These offerings formed part of a ceremony to ensure rain and fertility, which would grant its distinctive character to the new temple.

The six offerings are relatively poor. Each includes one bowl and a globular jar containing three or four beads of greenstone (fig. 15.7). Bowls and jars were made from an orange monochrome ceramic, splashed with a blue pigment of organic origin.

The correlation of the globular jars with the cult of the Rain God is unquestionable. The primary link involves their presumed function as containers for liquids and their blue color. A second connection is the northern position of these artifacts with respect to the Templo Mayor. In various sixteenth-century documents the image of the Temple of Tlaloc is crowned with parapets in the form of water vessels (*Códice Ramírez* 1944:pl. 19; Durán 1984:2:pl. 30). The globular jars also recur in the representations associated with the month of *Etzalcualiztli*, the principal festival dedicated to Tlaloc (*Códice Magliabechiano* 1983:fol. 34r; *Códice Vaticano Latino* 3738 1964–1967:pl. 60). Thanks to Sahagún, we know that blue-painted receptacles called “cloud jars” were used during this festival (*Códice Florentino*

1979:book 2, fols. 37v–46r; *Códice Matritense del Real Palacio* 1906:fols. 76r–83v).

The jars also appear in association with Tlaloc in Mexica myths. For example, the supposed function of these receptacles is mentioned in the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (1965:26):

Of that god of water they say that he has a chamber with four rooms, and in the middle of a great patio, there are four great tubs of water And this god of water, to make it rain, created many small assistants, who were in the rooms of that house, and they had pots in which they took the water from those tubs and some clubs in the other hand, and when the god of rain orders them to go and water some ground, they take their pots and their clubs and scatter the water that they send, and when it thunders, it is when they break the pots with the clubs, and when there is lightning, it is from what they have inside, or part of the pot. (my translation)

At the same time, the greenstone beads were one of the symbols par excellence of fertility. The aquatic significance of greenstone probably comes from its color, its shine, and its texture. Sahagún mentions the indigenous belief that greenstone had the double property of attracting as well as exuding humidity (*Florentine Codex* 1950–1969:11:222–23). In this century, Seler (1960:2:852) and Krickeberg (1975:152) have correctly surmised that beads of this material deposited inside ceramic receptacles could symbolize drops of water.

The full significance of the six offerings cannot be determined by a simple enumeration of their parts: Further contextual information is required. The key to their interpretation is found in the position of the jars, bowls, and beads. The archaeological record shows that the jars were regularly and intentionally buried lying down. The bowls were always found in a horizontal position, exactly below the opening of the jars (fig. 15.8). In other words, in each case we registered the presence of (1) a jar decorated with blue pigment, (2) containing greenstone beads, (3) lying on its side, and (4) with its opening associated with a bowl.

Based on this description, it is reasonable to propose that these offerings represent the jars of the *tlaloque* in a position that simulates the pouring of precious water on the surface of the earth. Perhaps all these objects formed part of a propitiatory act that endowed the building with the qualities appropriate to the world of Tlaloc: a cham-

ber from which the rains were generated, to ensure the fertility of the earth.

This suggestion is supported by further evidence, which I will enumerate briefly.

First, a Mexica stone box now in the British Museum, London, bears on one side the image of Tlaloc holding a jar decorated with a large greenstone bead (Box 13 in the catalogue of Gutiérrez Solana 1983:62–65). Maize cobs and streams of water ending in beads and shells emerge from this jar. Furthermore, we found a similar representation in Chamber 3 beneath Stage IVb of the Great Temple. It is painted on the ceramic lid of a Cholula-style polychrome jar (fig. 15.9).

The second piece of evidence is found in a mural painting covering the north side of the doorframe of Building A at Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala, dated to A.D. 750. There, a personage dressed in a jaguar skin and a blue pectoral holds with his right arm a jar decorated with a Tlaloc mask from which flow streams and drops of water.

Finally, in both the *Códice de Dresde* (1988:36c, 39b, 43b and 74) and the *Códice Madrid* (1985:9, 13 and 30), Chaac and the Old Red Goddess of Weaving appear, pouring water out of pitchers over the surface of the earth (fig. 15.10a-b). It is significant that almost all these scenes occur in sections dedicated to peasant almanacs and the glorification of the rainy season (Thompson 1988:214–216, 242, 245, 252).

The second group to be discussed here is made up of eleven offerings. All were interred during the ceremony to dedicate and consecrate Stage IVb of the Templo Mayor (approximately A.D. 1469–1481). Their distribution follows the principal architectural axes of the platform and maintains strict bilateral symmetry (fig. 15.11). This group is characterized by richness of offerings and by its dual significance.

The objects in the interior of each box of the offerings form six vertical levels, which represent scale reproductions of the three levels of the indigenous cosmos: the deepest level, with aquatic characteristics; the intermediate, signifying earth; and the highest, presided over by the gods of fire and water. Among the objects representing the highest level we find symbols denoting opposition, the insignias of Xipe Totec, and the skulls of decapitated humans (fig. 15.12).

Initially, a homogeneous layer of marine sand was placed at the bottom of each box. Next, a second layer made up of small shells was laid down, followed immediately by a third composed of corals and larger shells.



Fig. 15.8. Archaeological context of Offering 26. (Courtesy of INAH)



Fig. 15.9. Tlaloc pouring water: Element 256, Chamber 3, Great Temple.

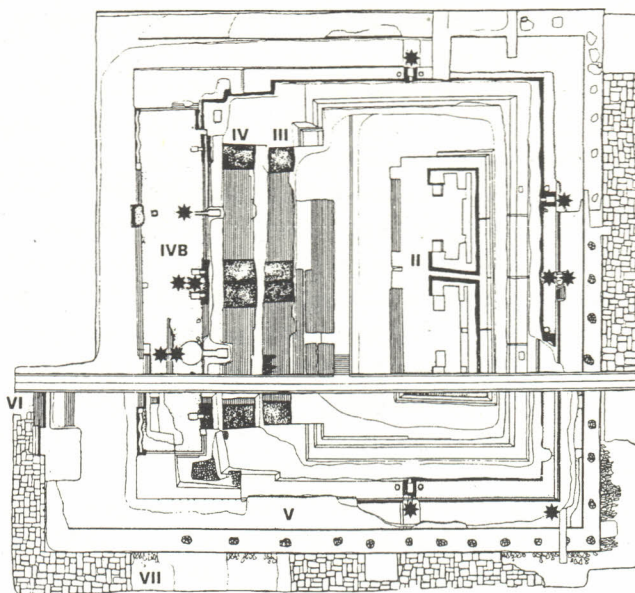


[a]



[b]

Fig. 15.10. Chaac pouring water: (a) *Códice Madrid*:13; (b) *Códice Madrid*:30.



* II Offerings of the Stage IV-b

Fig. 15.11. Spatial distribution of second group of offerings.

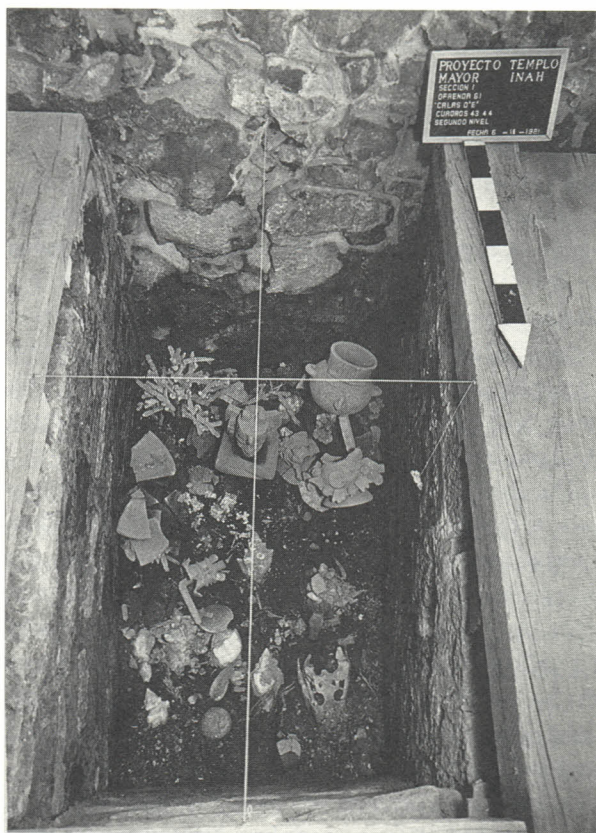


Fig. 15.12. Archaeological context of Offering 61. (Courtesy of INAH)

The fourth layer was made up exclusively of remains of fish and reptiles. However, only the external parts of these animals were deposited: the heads and skins of crocodiles, serpents, and fish; the rostral cartilages of sawfish; and turtle shells. The original impression given by this level would have been that of a "dermic layer," which physically and visually separated the aquatic, deepest level from those above. In my judgment, this intermediate level could be associated with Cipactli, original monster, feminine and aquatic, symbol of the earth. It is sufficient to recall here that the iconographic representation of Cipactli was in the form of a crocodile, a sawfish, or a serpent.

The fifth level was the richest of all, composed of images of the gods, miniatures representing divine paraphernalia, autosacrificial implements, and the skulls of decapitated humans. Outstanding among these objects are sculptures of Xiuhtecuhtli and the Tlaloc jars. The images of the God of Fire and the God of Rain were always found at the head of the deposit, as though presiding over the offering. Five objects related to divine paraphernalia occurred consistently: a scepter in the form of a deer head, symbol of the sun, fire, and drought; a scepter in the form of a serpent, associated with currents of water and with fertilizing rays; an *ollin* glyph, symbol par excellence of the unity of opposites (water-fire); a *chichahuaztli* and a plaque with a cleavage in both extremities, attributes of Xipe Totec (fig. 15.13). Also, there were numerous human skulls (fifty in all) with the first cervical vertebrae. These skulls were situated in the corners and the principal axes of the building.

The sixth and last level was detected just on top of the layer of stone slabs that covered the boxes of hewn stone. It contained ceramic incense burners that had been ritually destroyed.

From my point of view, an important key to the significance of this group of offerings is found in the presence of the skulls of decapitated individuals. Various scholars have pointed out that the rite of decapitation always took place in ceremonies of a dual character, such as the ball game, the ritual of planting and harvesting, the sacrifice of war prisoners to renew the *tzompantli*, and the consecration of temples (see Moser 1973). In relation to this last type of ceremony, there have been abundant discoveries of crania with their first cervical vertebrae in the corners of numerous religious structures, spanning the Middle Preclassic to the Late Postclassic, from the Maya area to the Tarascan Highlands

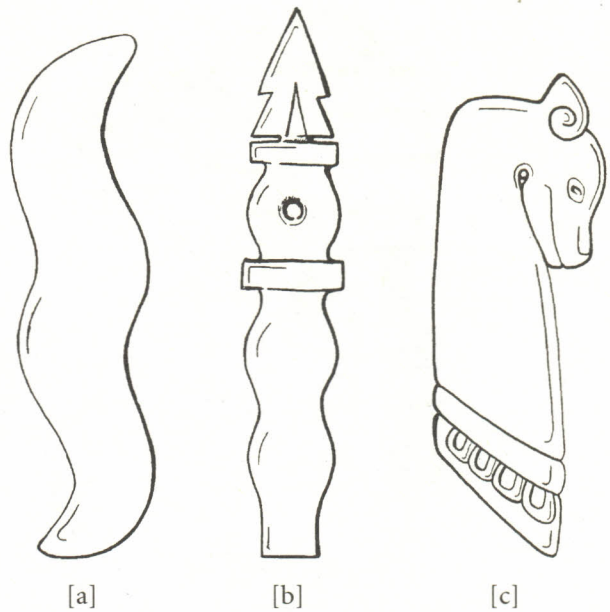


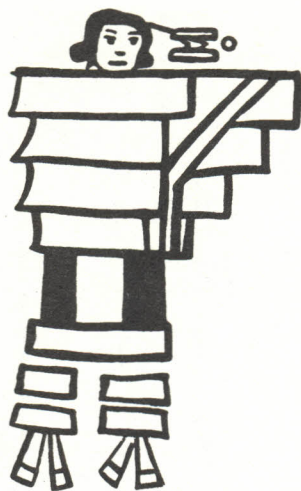
Fig. 15.13. Scepters of alabaster: (a) serpent; (b) Chicahuaztli; (c) deer head.

(Ruz 1968:160, 198–99). At the time of Contact, the indigenous population believed that the burial of heads provided the energy necessary for the functioning of the temples and the expulsion of negative forces (fig. 15.14a).

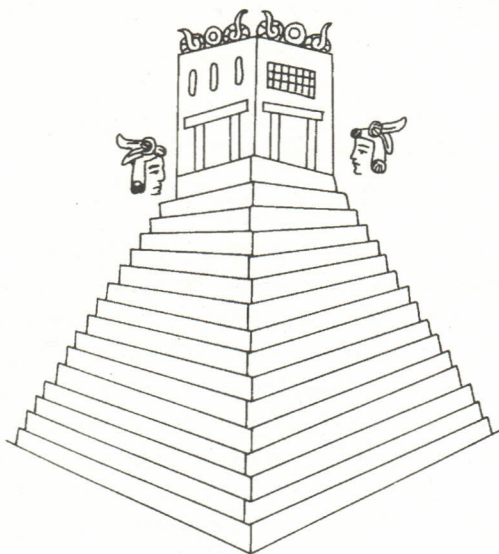
The sixteenth-century Nahua peasants conducted rites to consecrate their houses. They decapitated a bird and smeared its blood on the corners of the structure. Then they carried a lighted branch to each of the four posts and poured *pulque* on it. The ceremony was called *calmamalihua*, referring to the helicoidal movement of the *malinalli* in which the warm forces, represented by fire, were interlaced with the cold, symbolized by *pulque* (López Austin 1990:317).

More than a few traces of this practice remain today. The Huastecs, Nahuas, Tzotziles, and Tzeltals reproduce the structure of the universe each time they build a house. Before the final placement of the wooden posts, the heads of sheep, hens, or turkeys are buried in the foundation, synonymous with the ancient human heads. Somewhat later, during the dedication ritual, offerings are made that have complementary significance: *pulque* and fire, pine needles and red geraniums, or chicken broth and *aguardiente* (López Luján 1994:chap. 8).

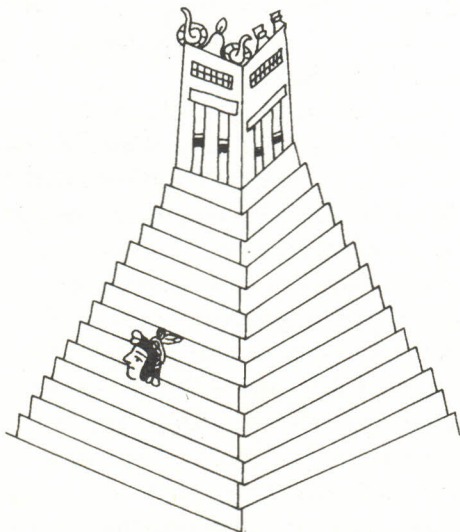
Returning to Tenochtitlán, the burial of decapitated heads in the offerings of the Templo Mayor was fortunately drawn and described in sixteenth-century docu-



[a]



[b]



[c]

ments (Barlow 1949:126–128; *Codex en Cruz* 1981:ii, years 1483 and 1487; *Códice Azcatitlan* 1949:xxi–xxii; Quiñones Keber 1984:101–2; fig. 15.14b–c). Just as various chroniclers reported, the Mexica offered heads in honor of the inauguration and consecration of the additions to their main temple. For example, Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1975:2:157) mentions that during the dedication festival of the Templo Mayor that took place in *Tlacaxipehualiztli* of 1487, numerous prisoners of war were taken to the sacrificial stone (fig. 15.15), “all of whom were sacrificed before this statue of the demon, and the heads were placed in some niches that were intentionally made in the walls of the Templo Mayor” (my translation).

It is important to note that just as the colonial documents of the Tradition of Chronicle X reported, *all* the inauguration ceremonies of the Templo Mayor were celebrated at the same time of the year—during the twenty-day period of *Xipe Totec*. This twenty-day period coincided with the spring equinox, the point of equilibrium between day and night. According to Kurath and Martí (1964:68–70, 76–77), at that time the rituals represented the conflict between heaven and earth, light and darkness, drought and rain. From this perspective, it seems logical that the consecration festival of this temple of dual composition, dedicated to a solar deity and an aquatic one, should take place during a period of twenty days associated with the concept of equilibrium among opposites. A recent discovery by Aveni and colleagues (1988:294) also agrees with this idea. While calculating the orientation of the Templo Mayor, they found that the sun rose exactly between the sanctuaries of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc on March 4 of each year—that is, the first day of the twenty-day period of *Tlacaxipehualiztli*.

Also to be noted is the political character of the dedications during *Tlacaxipehualiztli*, as revealed in the documents of the Tradition of Chronicle X. The following features are common to all the inaugurations mentioned:

Fig. 15.14. Burial of human heads in temples: (a) head of Mocatzin, Temple of Chiquiuhtepc (*Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*:fol. 41r); (b) heads of warriors with forked heron feathers, Ahuítzotl's dedication of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan (*Códice Azcatitlan*:XXI); (c) head of Xipe Tótec, Great Temple in 1506 (*Códice Azcatitlan*:XXII).

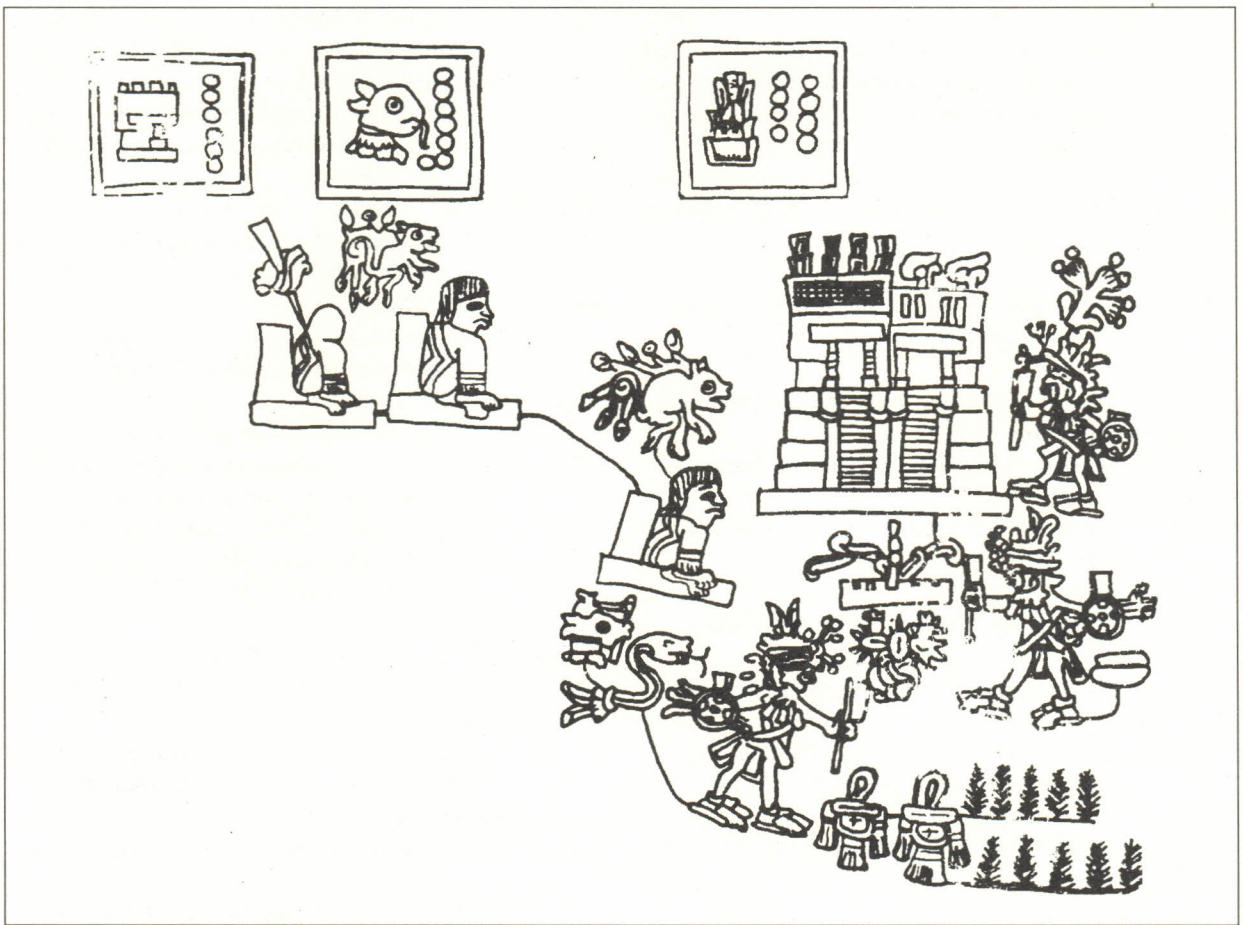


Fig. 15.15. Inauguration of the Great Temple in 1487. (*Códice Telleriano-Remensis*:xix)

1. As the addition to the temple was on the verge of completion, a conquest expedition was launched against an independent realm in order to obtain prisoners to be sacrificed during the consecration of the Templo Mayor.

2. Following the victorious return of the Mexica warriors, the twenty-day period of *Tlacaxipehualiztli* was awaited.

3. The governors of the allied realms, as well as those hostile to the Triple Alliance, were invited to the inauguration.

4. During the festivities, compatriots of the enemy lords were sacrificed.

5. The heads of the victims were interred in the corners of the Templo Mayor, and goods were distributed

among the participants as a symbol of their subordination to the Mexica *tlatoani*.

A careful reading of these documents reveals one transcendent point: the Templo Mayor grew in accordance with the increase in size of the empire. Thus, the frequent architectural additions glorified the voracious expansionist politics of the Mexica.

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The Sowing and the Dawning

*Termination, Dedication, and Transformation
in the Archaeological and Ethnographic
Record of Mesoamerica*

EDITED BY

SHIRLEY BOTELER MOCK

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS
ALBUQUERQUE

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First Edition

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

The sowing and the dawning: termination, dedication, and transformation in the archaeological and ethnographic record of Mesoamerica/edited by Shirley Boteler Mock—1st ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8263-1983-1 (cloth)

1. Mayas—Rites and ceremonies.
2. Mayas—Antiquities.
3. Votive offerings—Latin America—History.
4. Ceremonial objects—Latin America—History.
5. Dedication services—Latin America—History.
6. Ethnoarchaeology—Latin America.
7. Latin America—Antiquities.

I. Mock, Shirley Boteler, 1942—

F1435.3.R56S68 1998
972.81'016—dc21 98-23116
CIP

In Memoriam:

Frances Kathryn Hohman Meskill
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Anthropology
University of Texas, Austin
July, 1997

“And here is the dawning and sowing of the sun, moon, and stars. And Jaguar Quitze, Jaguar Night, Mahucutah, and True Jaguar were overjoyed when they saw the day-bringer. It came up first. It looked brilliant when it came up, since it was ahead of the sun.”

—The *Popol Vuh*, Tedlock 1985:165

and our mentor

Linda Schele, Ph.D.
John D. Murchinson Regents' Professor in Art
University of Texas, Austin
April, 1998

“And so it remained that they were respectful of their father's heart, even though they left him at the Place of Ballgame Sacrifice: ‘You will be prayed to here,’ his sons told him, and his heart was comforted. ‘You will be the first resort and you will be the first to have your day kept by those who will be born in the light, begotten in the light. Your name will not be lost. So be it’ they told their father when they comforted his heart. ‘We merely cleared the road of your death, your loss, the pain, suffering that were inflicted upon you.’”

—The *Popol Vuh*, Tedlock 1985: 159

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