

Night and Day in the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan

The Different Renderings of Huitzilopochtli's Creation Myth

LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN

This research explores a paradigmatic case in the Mesoamerican religious tradition, where myth, architectural setting, and ritual are inextricably linked. My analysis is based on a rich and diverse array of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century evidence, including native pictography, colonial sources, and various archaeological artifacts and contexts excavated in the Historic Center of Mexico City by the Templo Mayor Project team under my direction. My objective here is to deepen the century-old proposition that the narrative account of the extraordinary birth of the Mexica patron deity Huitzilopochtli had its most lucid worldly manifestation in the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, thus linking the ideal with the material, that is, the collective imaginary with tangible cultural creation. It is well-known that evocations of this myth permeated the 45-meter-high mass of earth, stone, wood, and stucco, in terms of both its structural plan and its iconographic program. In fact, in the Templo Mayor one could say that architecture, mural painting, and polychrome sculpture came together to make the Mexica empire's preeminent religious edifice the perfect theater for ritual remembrance. As we will see in this chapter, it was the religious scenarios where the cyclical battle between the sun and the moon was performed and, consequently, the triumph of the daylight over the night shadows was publicly celebrated in crowded festivals organized by the Mexica state. Let us examine, then, various aspects of the proposition, beginning with the ideal, imaginary realm of myth.

MYTH

Fortunately, today, several poetic evocations and narrative versions of the myth recounting Huitzilopochtli's birth have survived (Garibay Kintana 1958, 78; 1965, 43). The fullest and best-known account is recorded in book 3 of the Florentine Codex, produced by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and his native colleagues and informants (Sahagún 1979, 3:11–41; Sahagún 2000, 300–302; López Austin and López Luján 2009, 238–44). Allow me to briefly summarize the basic elements of this myth:

It begins with a woman named Coatlicue performing her daily penance on top of Coatepetl, that is, “Serpent Mountain” in Nahuatl. One day, while sweeping, a ball of down fell from above, right before her eyes. Without hesitating, she snatched it up and placed it on her abdomen, which resulted in a miraculous pregnancy. A short time later, Coatlicue's children—Coyolxauhqui and the Centzonhuitznahuah—learned of this inexplicable transgression, and, feeling dishonored, they decided to go and kill the very woman who had given them life.

Setting out for Coatepetl, Coyolxauhqui and the Centzonhuitznahuah went through Tzompantitlan, Coaxalpan, Apetlac, and then up the mountainside to reach the summit. When they got to their mother, they witnessed the birth of their brother Huitzilopochtli, already a young man fully equipped for battle and prepared to fight them. With a magical *xiuhcoatl* fire serpent, he slashed his sister Coyolxauhqui's torso, beheaded her, and threw her down the mountain, where her limp body landed at the bottom in pieces. Huitzilopochtli then attacked his male siblings and chased them toward the sky.

This fascinating account, written in the Florentine Codex in alphabetic script, is also accompanied by two illustrations (López Austin and López Luján 2009, 244–45). In the first, we see Coatlicue, identified by her serpent skirt, giving birth to Huitzilopochtli, who is depicted as a fully grown adult holding a throwing stick, a spear, and a shield (figure 2.1a). In the second illustration, Huitzilopochtli wields an obsidian-blade-studded club and a shield against one of the Centzonhuitznahuah, while another below him prepares to fight their newborn brother (figure 2.1b). Between these combatants rises the glyphic image of a mountain with a serpent, which identifies the place as Coatepetl. Halfway down the slope, we see a severed human head and, at the bottom, a headless, dismembered corpse. One might suppose that these corporeal members belong to Coyolxauhqui, but the body is clearly male and wears a truss. In addition, it has a male hairstyle and lacks the goddess's characteristic facial insignia.

To these accounts and evocations of the great warrior Huitzilopochtli's exploits we should add a supposedly historical passage from the *Crónica Mexicáyotl*



Figure 2.1. (a) Coatlicue giving birth to Huitzilopochtli (Sahagún 1979, 3:3v). (b) Huitzilopochtli attacks the Centzonhuitznahuah (Sahagún 1979, 3:3v).

(Alvarado Tezozómoc 1949, 34–36), which records an episode during the Mexica migration at a place significantly called Coatepec in which the protagonists receive the names of mythical characters. Huitzilopochtli, the main leader of the exodus, gets into a conflict with the Centzonhuitznahuah, a portion of the group led by Coyolxauhcihuatl. The reason for the disagreement was the Centzonhuitznahuah's refusal to leave the paradisiacal settlement of Serpent Mountain, in spite of the main leader's order to do so. The leader armed himself for war, confronted and defeated them in the divine ballgame (Teotlachco), and, finally, opened their chests and viciously devoured their hearts.

How should we interpret this passage from the *Crónica Mexicáyotl*? Some researchers, adopting a euhemerist position, think that a historical event during the migration gave rise to the cosmological myth (Matos Moctezuma 1991; 2003, 48–49). Alfredo López Austin and I, on the other hand, believe that an actual episode was subsequently adapted and resignified by augmenting historical memory with elements of an old mythic account (López Austin and López Luján 2009, 245). In our judgment, this was a way to sacralize lived events by joining them to ancient cosmic exploits long recognized by the community.

Whatever the case may be, the various versions of this account were analyzed more than a century ago by Eduard Seler (1993, 157–62; 1996, 96). The German Mesoamericanist insightfully identified Huitzilopochtli with the young rising sun, Coyolxauhqui with the moon, and the Centzonhuitznahuah with the stars and explained that the myth represented the astral struggle between diurnal and nocturnal forces (see also Caso 1953, 23–24; Milbrath 1997, 186–88; Read 1998, 74–76). López Austin and I agree with Seler's general interpretation and that this excerpt from the Florentine Codex is the classic expression of a canonic Mesoamerican myth, beginning with a stable situation of absence, followed by a destabilizing divine adventure, and then concluding with a creative act in the space-time of creatures (López Austin and López Luján 2009, 236–37).

In this specific case, the nodal sense of the myth focuses on the primordial existence of a nocturnal domain, the successive gradual development of a diurnal force, and the ultimate overcoming of the night by an impulse that produces the permanent dynamism of the daily dark/light cycle in the form of a divine contest. This account specifically refers to the daily rising of the sun out of darkness, thus it differs considerably from the well-known myth of Nanahuatzin at Teotihuacan, which posits the beginning of the world with the pristine appearance of the sun and the subjection of all creatures to its dominion (Sahagún 2000, 694–97).

MYTH AND ARCHITECTURAL SETTING

Inspired by Seler, the Mexican archaeologist Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (1982, 110; 1986, 74–75; cf. Seler 1992, 138; 1996, 96) argued that the Birth of Huitzilopochtli Myth was materially crystallized in the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. The most striking proof of this proposition is the spectacular round Coyolxauhqui monolith from Phase IVb, found on February 21, 1978, which depicts the goddess decapitated and dismembered. Matos Moctezuma rightly observed that this massive stone was located precisely at the bottom of the stairway leading to the top of the pyramid, where the solar Huitzilopochtli's image stood triumphant in zenithal position.

Matos Moctezuma also noted that certain architectural elements of the Templo Mayor recorded the name Coatepetl. This was enunciated, in his judgment, by the four large serpent heads protruding from the rough-hewn stone bands flanking the stairway, at the respective bases of the two superimposed bodies of the pyramid. According to this logic, the serpents had the phonetic value of *coa[tɬ]*, while the numerous rough stones set into the facades corresponded to the mountainous nature of the word *tepetl*.

Upon this firm basis, Matos Moctezuma (1982, 112) then formulated a series of hypotheses intending to provide coherent explanations for other elements in the

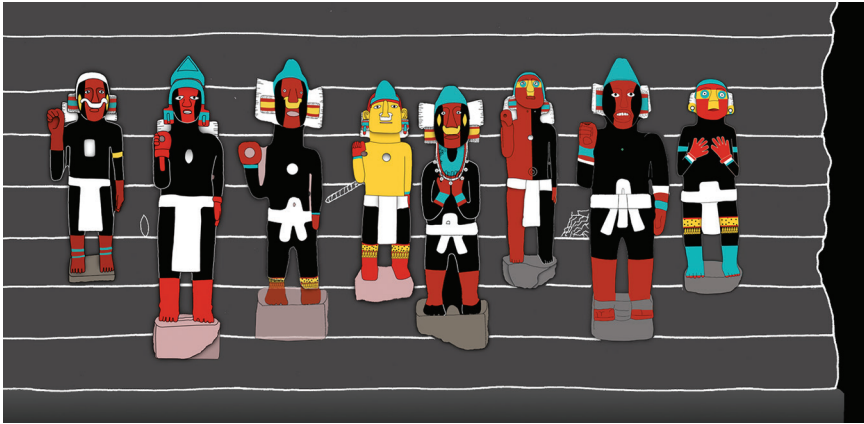


Figure 2.2. Anthropomorphic sculptures from Phase III (drawing by D. Matadamas and M. De Anda Rogel, courtesy of the Templo Mayor Project).

Templo Mayor's iconographic program. He suggested, for example, that the large anthropomorphic sculptures he discovered on the southern stairway of Phase III (figure 2.2) were effigies of the Centzonhuitznahuah mentioned by Alvarado Tezozómoc (2001, 291), who said that Huitzilopochtli's astral warrior siblings were depicted around the pyramid with shields. Matos Moctezuma also assumed that the human visage sculpted on the top step of Phase II represented the informant Cuauhitlicac and that the famous Coatlicue sculpture probably would have been situated at the top of the Templo Mayor (Matos Moctezuma 1986, 75), as many other authors have stated (Boone 1999, 201–2; Gurría Lacroix 1978, 23–34; López Austin and López Luján 2009, 454–62; López Luján 2012, 220–29; Seler 1992, 115).

To Matos Moctezuma's list of monuments, we could add, on the one hand, the mural paintings he discovered in 1979 inside the Huitzilopochtli shrine corresponding to Phase II, and, on the other, the three sculptures we fully exhumed in 1987 from Phase IVa-1 (López Austin and López Luján 2009, 401–3). Although severely damaged, the pictorial group depicts a motley collection of weapons and elite military items, including shields, arrows, banners, and devices, all associated with the solar war god Huitzilopochtli.

The sculptural group, however, consists of a rudimentary effigy of Coyolxauhqui, a serpent mat, and a stone slab with a shield, a banner, and four arrows carved in relief (López Austin and López Luján 2009, 298–303). Here the goddess—headless and dismembered—is represented as an archetypal victim lying at the bottom of the serpent mountain-pyramid. The weapons, in turn, commemorate the confrontation between the sun and the moon while also sanctifying war as the way to

supply divine sustenance. Finally, the mat alludes to an augury mentioned in the Florentine Codex, that those who sat on this web of serpents were already dead, as would happen to Coyolxauhqui as in the case of Huitzilopochtli.

MYTH AND RITUAL PERFORMANCE

According to Seler (1992, 97–98), the moniker Coatepetl bestowed upon the Templo Mayor in the historical documents (Alvarado Tezozómoc 1949, 304–413; Sahagún 1979 2:108r; see also, León-Portilla 1987, 79–81; López Austin and López Luján 2009, 15–18; Schwaller 2019, 140–43) clearly identifies the structure as an arena for ritual performance, that is, the stage where a procession of the faithful, bearing Huitzilopochtli's image during the Panquetzaliztli festival, reenacted the mythic offensive against the Centzonhuitznahuah. The German scholar also noted that this connection was further reinforced by the names Tzompantlitlan, Coaxalpan, and Apetlac given to the places visited by Coyolxauhqui and the Centzonhuitznahuah in the myth, and to three of the structures in the sacred precinct, which include the trophy skull rack found in front of the Templo Mayor, the base of that pyramid, and its platform (López Austin and López Luján 2009, 247–52, 304–10; Paso y Troncoso 1979, 214; Seler 1992, 96).

Based on Seler, researchers such as Yólotl González Torres (1968, 182–90), Miguel León-Portilla (León-Portilla 1978, 58–65), H. B. Nicholson (1985, 83), Matos Moctezuma (1987, 200–201), Michel Graulich (1990, 380–86), David Carrasco (1999, 64), and John F. Schwaller (2019, 144–45) have developed the idea that during Panquetzaliztli, the Templo Mayor was converted into the ritual axis of the annual reenactment of the myth. Their evidence includes a passage from Sahagún (1993, 252v), which states that during this festival period, “Huitzilopochtli was born.” Moreover, this same writer, when enumerating the structures inside the sacred precinct, mentions that at the Huitznahuac Teucalli, “they killed the images of the gods they called *centzonhuitznahuah* in honor of Huitzilopochtli, and they also killed many captives . . . each year, during the festival of Panquetzaliztli” (Sahagún 2000, 275; see also Garibay Kintana 1965, 43).

In addition, the description of the festival reveals the mythic origin of many of the ritual actors' names and accoutrements, as well as various songs, paintings, libations, and cult objects, as passages from the cosmic drama were evoked during its worldly reenactment (López Austin and López Luján 2009, 252–53). For example, in one of the most spectacular parts of the ceremony, a priest descended from the top of the Templo Mayor with a pine torch in the shape of a serpent, with paper head and tail, and red feathers between its jaws simulating fire (Sahagún 2000, 162–63, 247–53).

This fantastic being came down wiggling its tongue until it reached the foot of the pyramid. There it was lit to burn the sacrificial papers known as *teteuhuitl*, which were material metaphoric representations of the Centzonhuitznahuah (Dehouve 2009, 19–33). This figure was significantly named *xiuhcoatl*, indicating that it was the weapon Huitzilopochtli used to kill his siblings.

RITUAL MATERIALIZATION

Our recent archaeological excavations at the foot of the Templo Mayor resulted in the discovery of another way of invoking the myth of Huitzilopochtli's birth that complemented the various oral and written accounts, its allusion in songs, its ritual dramatization, and its iconographic crystallization in the pyramid's architecture, mural painting, and sculpture (López Luján 2015, 296–313; 2017, 35–57). Although quite different, this particular form of expression, unknown to us up until now, is part of the same semantic complex. It follows a kind of general code or metalanguage that offers an alternative explanation for the same transcendental phenomenon of the daily rising of the sun in the east.

This form of expression is the sacrifice and offering of human beings, animals, plants, and cultural objects as gifts to the divinities (López Luján 2005). In very general terms, it consists of the delivery of these gifts to the gods to establish communication with them, pay homage and propitiate them, and, finally, obtain retribution. This ritual action is materialized in the sacrificial and oblatory deposits that were definitively buried by the faithful within the bowels of the Templo Mayor, only to be uncovered and analyzed by archaeologists five centuries later.

These discoveries occurred at the intersection of Guatemala and Argentina Streets, in the Historic Center of Mexico City (López Luján 2019). The explored area is located precisely on the central axis of the Huitzilopochtli shrine, that is, the southern half of the Templo Mayor. Unfortunately, this section of the pyramid has been severely damaged by the successive installations of a sewage collector in 1900, a cast iron pipe in the 1950s, an electric transformer by the Light and Power Company in the 1970s, a utility box by Telephones of Mexico in the 1990s, and a high-density pipe in 2011.

Nevertheless, we still were able to document a complex superimposition of modern, nineteenth-century, colonial, and pre-Hispanic architectural features, as well as three exceptional Mexica ritual deposits alluding to Huitzilopochtli, which I will now describe.

THE HUITZILOPOCHTLI IMPERSONATOR

The first deposit was discovered in June 2005 while excavating a pit in the platforms of Phases IVa and IVb, which correspond to the reigns of Motecuhzoma I (Ilhuicamina) and Axayacatl, that is, between 1440 and 1481 (López Luján et al. 2010). At a depth of just 50 centimeters, and totally unexpectedly, we found the complete skeleton of a very young individual who apparently had been sacrificed. We were quite bewildered by this, since the only child victims previously discovered by the project were found in 1980 at the opposite end of the building, that is, on the side associated with Tlaloc, the rain god.

This was the famous Offering 48, which contained the remains of forty-two children between the ages of 2 and 7, in addition to eleven vessels depicting this pluvial deity (López Luján 1982; 2005, 148–58; 2018). The presence of this offering in the northwest corner of the Templo Mayor (figure 2.3) fully concurs with the sixteenth-century documentary sources that say that the vast majority of child sacrifices were intended to propitiate aquatic and fertility deities. It is well known that the Mexica and their neighbors used this method to solicit rain and abundant harvests. During such ceremonies, whether subject to the calendar or performed during severe droughts, the children were symbolically associated with the rain god's dwarf assistants, and their profuse tears shed when they were being sacrificed served as a heartening augury of copious precipitation.

Thus we were able to grasp the exceptional nature of the deposit, which, twenty-five years later, we were about to exhume on the southern side of the pyramid and would call Offering 111 (figure 2.3). The cadaver of the child was found on the stairway of the platform in a seated position upon an irregular surface of sand with its back leaning on the riser of a step. The priests carefully oriented it toward the west, although the head and torso were turned slightly north (figures 2.4a and 2.4b). The skeleton was accompanied by the remains of a bird of prey, copal, and tomato seeds, along with a few artifacts, all of them quite modest. In a particularly interesting manner, the child's shoulders had two superimposed carpometacarpals and the first and second phalanges of the wings of a sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*). The bird's bone laterality suggested that both of the wings were originally extended with ventral feathers upward, exposing their characteristic horizontal ocher-colored stripes.

Associated with the bones were three pine objects. Two of them were found respectively on the left forearm and next to the right foot. They are arcs of a large circle, perhaps the miniature representation of a shield. The third and best preserved object is a wooden ring placed on the chest, which had collapsed northward as a result of the cadaver's decomposition. Each of the child's ankles were strung with two strands of pear-shaped copper bells that flanked a central strand bearing

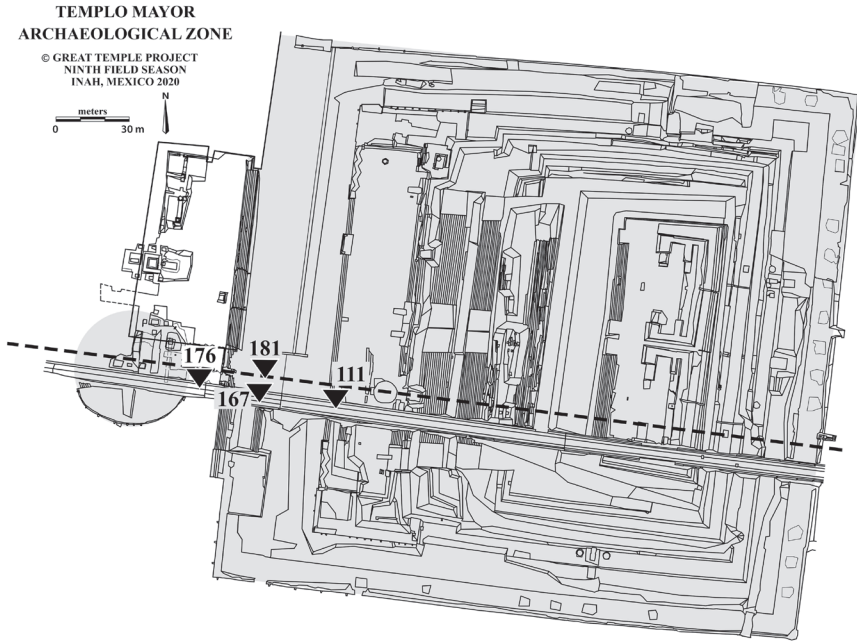


Figure 2.3. Location of Offerings 111, 167, 176, and 181 at the Templo Mayor (drawing by M. De Anda Rogel, courtesy of the Templo Mayor Project).

four sea snails. These sea snails were white with a hole made in the ventral area and belonged to the *Polinices lacteus* species from the Atlantic Ocean. Next to the child's left elbow were three orange ceramic aerophones, including two transverse flutes with a single finger hole, and a dual instrument consisting of a transverse flute and a whistle. We also recovered two greenstone beads, along with a biface and an obsidian blade.

Based on dental examination, we ascertained that the individual was approximately five years of age at the moment of death. Unfortunately, it was impossible to determine the sex, as we were not able to extract enough DNA for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) analysis. We were, nevertheless, able to learn that this child lived in optimal conditions of health and nutrition, unlike the malnourished infants sacrificed to Tlaloc in Offering 48.

Taphonomic analysis revealed numerous traces of cutting on both sides of the rib cage, as well as perimortem fractures produced by this same action. These marks were concentrated on the inner sternal third of the third, fourth, and fifth ribs, where cuts were repeatedly made from inside the thorax with a very sharp obsidian

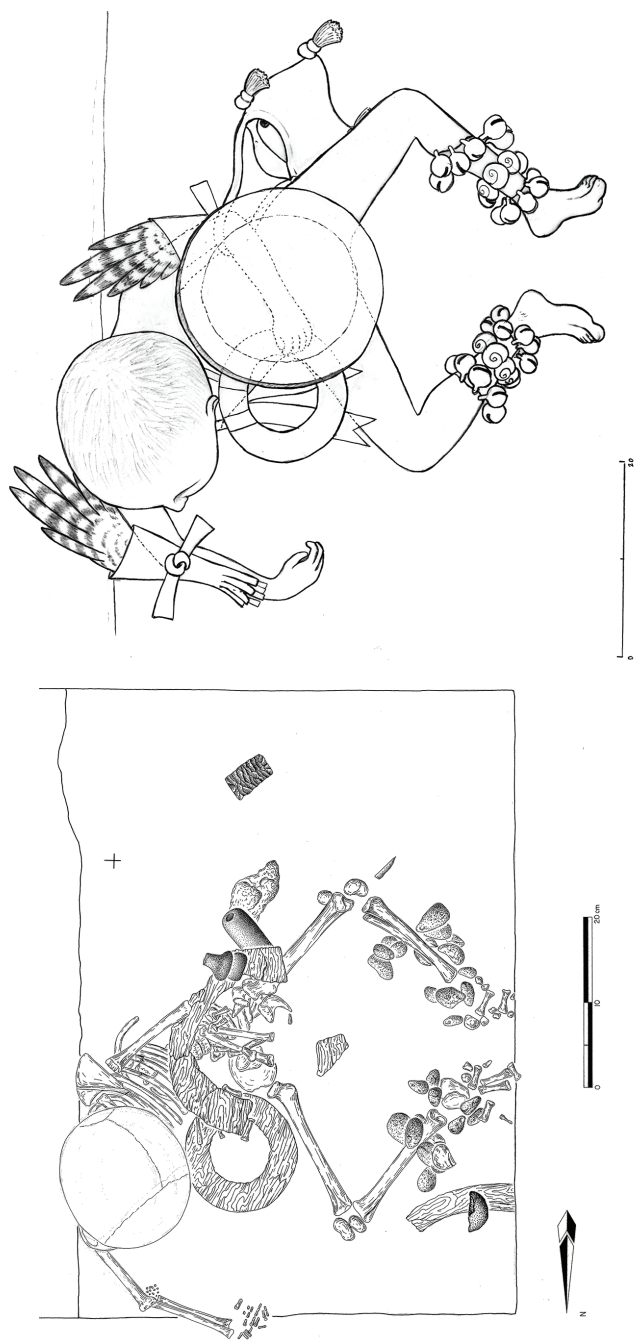


Figure 2.4. (a) Complete skeleton of the child found in Offering III (drawing by F. Carrizosa, courtesy of the Templo Mayor Project). (b) Hypothetical reconstruction of the child found in Offering III (drawing by G. Pereira, courtesy of the Templo Mayor Project).

instrument. This led us to conclude that the child was sacrificed by extracting his or her tiny heart. We are convinced that the sacrificers entered the thorax from the abdominal cavity, cutting the muscular tissues of the diaphragm.

Historical documents tell us that not all child sacrifices were associated with aquatic and fertility deities (Graulich 2005, 208–10). In some cases, the lives of children were offered in honor of Quetzalcoatl or Huitzilopochtli right before armed confrontations. Their hearts were extracted in order to learn the outcome of a battle in advance, as narrated, for instance, by chronicler Francisco López de Gómara (1954, 115) and in the *Relación de Coatepec y su partido* (Acuña 1985, 164).

The written sources also mention an interesting connection between the Mexica patron deity and his own image as a child. This is evident, for example, in Diego Durán's *Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar* where he describes the Pachtonltli festival, in which the coming of Huitzilopochtli as a child was celebrated. According to the Dominican friar, the faithful awaited his arrival, which was indicated by a tiny footprint that miraculously appeared on a lump of corn dough (Durán 1984 1:277–78, 287–88):

At seven o'clock in the evening the natives placed a gourd filled with dough in the upper part of the temple and watched over it. Carefully, vigilantly they visited it from time to time until they found a child's footprint . . . on the dough. Then the trumpets and conch shells sounded, and there was great rejoicing over the advent of the divine Huitzilopochtli.

Another child connection with Huitzilopochtli is found in the Nahuatl version of the myth of his birth in the Florentine Codex, where one of his attributes relates him with an infant (Sahagún 1979 4:3r; 2000, 300–302). The text literally says: "his face was painted with his child's excrement," undoubtedly alluding to the horizontal stripes on his face whose colors alternate between ocher and blue. Remember that unweaned, breastfeeding infants defecate a liquid that is light ocher in color, very similar to that of the patron deity's face in Mexica iconography.

Getting back to Offering 111, three indications in the archaeological context suggest that the sacrificed child was a Huitzilopochtli impersonator (figure 2.4b). The first is the wooden ring found on the child's chest. The Mexica called this pectoral *anahuatl* and it appears in their codices as one of Huitzilopochtli's attributes, as Nicholson (1988, 244–47) and Boone (1989, 6) have noted. The second indication involves the anklets strung with bells and sea snails—another attribute seen in several pictographic depictions of this deity. The third consists of the two sharp-shinned hawk wings associated with the child's shoulders. Huitzilopochtli appears wearing such wings in the *Primeros memoriales* (Sahagún 1993, 261r). This leads me to suspect that the youngster had been dressed as a bird whose plumage bore the

colors of the solar god. In fact, the sharp-shinned hawk's dorsal feathers are bluish-gray, while its ventral feathers have horizontal ochre stripes.

In sum, we may conclude that the cadaver found in Offering 111 belongs to a healthy five-year-old who died at the Templo Mayor from an abdominal cardioectomy, sacrificed at the time of an enlargement of the massive structure, perhaps to predict the outcome of a battle, and was dressed as Huitzilopochtli.

ANOTHER HUITZILOPOCHTLI IMPERSONATOR

The second deposit was discovered in June 2017 while excavating at the bottom of the Phase VI platform, which dates to the time of Ahuitzotl, who reigned from 1486 to 1502. This deposit is named Offering 176 and was found aligned to the Huitzilopochtli shrine (López Luján et al. 2018).

Inside a cylindrical stone box, we found another child skeleton, also placed in a seated position, with its body facing west and the head northward (figure 2.3). Based on dental examination, it was determined that this individual was older, about nine years of age. But because this is a recent discovery, we do not have a DNA analysis to ascertain the sex, or strontium and oxygen isotopes to establish local origin, or taphonomy to determine the cause of death. What we do know is that this child also had been dressed as the solar deity, because the skeleton was associated with the bones from the wing of a roadside hawk (*Rupornis magnirostris*), a wooden ring pectoral, and anklets strung with sea snails and copper bells.

In addition, the child held an adult femur as a scepter with the date 2-Reed carved on one of its ends. In terms of meaning, the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (Garibay Kintana 1965, 43; Graulich 2002, 2–4), a fundamental document on Nahua cosmology and history, is particularly revealing. It specifically notes that Huitzilopochtli was born and fought his siblings to save his mother in a 2-Reed year. In other words, this femur, carried by a young Huitzilopochtli impersonator directly alludes to the Coatepec Myth.

THE FIGURATION OF COYOLXAUHQUI

Let us turn now to the third ritual deposit, Offering 167, discovered in September 2015, 2 meters below the level of the street (López Luján 2020; Pedraza Rubio, López Luján, and Fuentes Hoyos 2017, 44–50). It was deposited in the constructive nucleus of the Phase VI platform, which also dates from Ahuitzotl's reign. It is a circular cavity, 80 centimeters in diameter and 36 centimeters deep (figure 2.3). Most of the offerings found in this confined space were aligned with the solar ecliptic, and their proximal extreme pointed toward the sunset. This suggests that the

priest buried them while kneeling before the main façade of the pyramid, gazing up toward Huitzilopochtli's shrine.

The bottom of the cavity had a thin layer of apparently ocean sand, upon which were placed, one by one, 27 knives, 17 projectile points, 6 tiny *tzotzopaztli* (a weaver's flint machete or batten), 5 greenstone beads, 192 greenstone flakes, a small *atlatl* or throwing stick adorned with a *Turbinella angulata* sea snail from the Atlantic and a *Pinctada mazatlanica* shell from the Pacific, as well as 11 Pacific *Oliva julieta* sea snail earrings, 8 copper bells, 8 more made of gold, and 12 gold insignias. Topping off the deposit was a rattlesnake of the *Crotalus* genus, along with copal, carbon, and wood fragments. After the oblation was complete, the priest or his assistants poured a mortar of lime, sand, and *tezontle* gravel directly on the offerings, irremissibly imprisoning them when the mixture solidified.

Although we still have not managed to decipher the logic governing the spatial distribution of this set of offerings, we know that most of them were systematically arranged in the cavity and surrounded by copper bells and sea snails. The utter dominance of artifacts symbolically associated with sacrifice and war is quite striking. On the one hand, we have flint knives and, on the other, multiple miniature representations of an arrow, throwing stick, and *tzotzopaztli*. Remember that this weaver's machete or batten in Central Mexican iconography is the female weapon par excellence (McCafferty and McCafferty 2019). In fact, scenes abound in codices such as the Magliabechiano (*Codex Magliabechiano* 1996, 45r), Telleriano-Remensis (*Codex Telleriano-Remensis* 1995, 6r, 22v), and Primeros memoriales (Sahagún 1993, 253r, 264r), or on sculptures such as the neo-Toltec effigy from Pasaje Catedral (López Luján and López Austin 2009, 403–4) and the Tizoc Stone, where women warriors threateningly brandish the *tzotzopaztli*. In most of these cases, they can be identified with the war goddess Cihuacoatl.

But in addition to these beautiful stone and shell creations associated with sacrifice and war, there were artifacts made of gold that offer us the best clues for uncovering the mysterious meaning of Offering 167 (figure 2.5). The first clue is the presence of four pairs of *omicallo*, or crossed long bones, a pan-Mesoamerican symbol for death (Ruz 1968, 37–39; López Luján 2006, 1:126–27). The second involves the two pairs of beautiful earrings that incorporated a circle, two trapezoids, and a triangle (López Luján and González 2014, 33–34). These ornaments are characteristic of captives about to be sacrificed, the souls of dead warriors, the Cihuateteo (heroic women who perish during the battle of childbirth), Chantico (the warrior goddess of the hearth fire), and, especially, the belligerent Coyolxauhqui. Since they were exhumed from the bottom of a building also called Coatepetl, I am inclined to associate them with the lunar goddess, supported by the proximity of the four earrings with their pairs of gold bells, which, in my judgment, reiterate their connection to



Figure 2.5. Four representations of human hearts made of gold sheet (photo by M. Islas, courtesy of the Templo Mayor Project).

Coyolxauhqui, a name that may be translated *ad litteram* as “she with bells painted on her face” (according to Alfredo López Austin).

The third and final clue highlighted here is the existence of four representations of human hearts. I still doubt that these exceptional pieces allude to the hearts of Coyolxauhqui and her astral brothers, which, according to the *Crónica Mexicayotl* (Alvarado Tezozómoc 1949, 33–34) version of the myth, were devoured by Huitzilopochtli. This act has been interpreted by Miguel León-Portilla (1978, 22–23) as the appropriation of the vital energy of the nocturnal beings, the adversaries of the sun.

Significantly, one of the gold hearts clearly had been deformed in the hands of the priest who buried it. Perhaps this was meant to signify that Coyolxauhqui was “perverse,” as might be inferred from the metamorphic meaning of the words *yol-lochico* and *yollonecuil*, which may literally be translated, respectively, as “crooked heart” and “bent heart,” a coronary condition expressly alluding to perversity

(Burkhart 1989, 177; León-Portilla 2004, 93–103). Another possible explanation is that the priest tried to magically “offend” the lunar goddess, as evident from the metaphorical sense of the verb *teyolitlacoa*, whose literal translation is “to damage someone’s heart,” as Louise Burkhart (1989, 28–29; León-Portilla 2004, 93–103) has shown. In sum, this action may have symbolized either the perverse or malevolent character of the goddess who tried to kill her own mother, or the aggrieved or dishonored condition of that goddess after the confrontation with her brother. In this way, Coyolxauhqui appeared as a victimizer who became a victim.

A few days before submitting this manuscript to the editor, we discovered another ritual deposit 3 meters below Offering 167, which also belongs to Phase VI of the Templo Mayor and is now designated as Offering 181. Although its exploration and registration are still in progress, and the corresponding analysis has not begun, it is important to report that its principal element is the skull of a woman about thirty-five years of age, under which were found the jaw bone and first cervical vertebrae. Based on the preceding discussion, it is highly suggestive that, at the bottom of the pyramid, aligned with the Huitzilopochtli shrine, the head of a mature woman who was unquestionably beheaded has appeared.

CONCLUSIONS

I would like to conclude this chapter by venturing a “reading” of this last archaeological context as if it were a text. In order to make sense of each ritual element and the ceremony as a whole, imagine, for a moment, a hypothetical priest situated at the foot of so-called Coatepetl. More than five hundred years ago, as an enlargement of the empire’s most important religious structure reaches completion, he kneels on the platform facing Huitzilopochtli’s shrine. With aromatic copal smoke, he honors the deity who rules the world from the top of the Great Temple, while offering in Nahuatl a prayer, a song, and perhaps a solemn plea. Very close to the effigy of a vanquished Coyolxauhqui, he performs the oblation that through drama and offerings will evoke the mythic battle. He places the lunar goddess’s bells and earrings along with the feminine weapons into the cavity. Then he envelops these insignias with symbols of war, sacrifice, and death, and viciously twists the hearts of the luminous nocturnal beings. Following a strict liturgy, he zealously repeats the cosmogonic actions of Huitzilopochtli himself, recalling that primordial moment when the moon and the stars disappeared to the west of the Sacred Mountain, as the sun assumed its throne at the highest reaches of the firmament.

REFERENCES

- Acuña, René. 1985. "Relación de Coatepec y su Partido." In *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI: México*, vol. 1, edited by René Acuña, 125–78. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Alvarado Tezozómoc, Fernando. 1949. *Crónica Mexicáyotl*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México / Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- Alvarado Tezozómoc, Fernando. 2001. *Crónica Mexicana*. Madrid: Dastin.
- Boone, Elizabeth H. 1989. *Incarnations of the Aztec Supernatural: The Image of Huitzilopochtli in Mexico and Europe*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.
- Boone, Elizabeth H. 1999. "The 'Coatlicues' at the Templo Mayor." *Ancient Mesoamerica* 10 (2): 189–202.
- Burkhart, Louise M. 1989. *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Carrasco, David. 1999. *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization*. Boston: Beacon.
- Caso, Alfonso. 1953. *El pueblo del Sol*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Codex Magliabechiano*. 1996. Edited by Ferdinand Anders and Maarten Jansen. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica / Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt.
- Codex Telleriano-Remensis: Ritual, Divination, and History in a Pictorial Aztec Manuscript*. 1995. Edited by Eloise Quiñones-Keber. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Dehouve, Danièle. 2009. "El lenguaje ritual de los mexicas: Hacia un método de análisis." In *Image and Ritual in the Aztec World*, edited by Silvy Peperstraete, 19–33. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports.
- Durán, Fray Diego. 1984. *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de tierra firme*. 2 vols. Mexico City: Porrúa.
- Garibay Kintana, Ángel María. 1958. *Veinte himnos sacros de los nahuas*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Garibay Kintana, Ángel María. 1965. "Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas." In *Teogonía e historia de los mexicanos: Tres opúsculos del siglo XVI*, edited by Ángel María Garibay Kintana, 21–90. Mexico City: Porrúa.
- González Torres de Lesur, Yólotl. 1968. "El dios Huitzilopochtli en la peregrinación mexicana de Aztlan a Tula." *Anales del INAH* 19: 175–90.
- Graulich, Michel. 1990. *Mitos y rituales del México antiguo*. Madrid: Istmo.
- Graulich, Michel. 2002. "Tezcatlipoca-Omacatl, el comensal imprevisible." *Cuicuilco* 25: 1–9.
- Graulich, Michel. 2005. *Le sacrifice humain chez les aztèques*. Paris: Fayard.
- Gurría Lacroix, Jorge. 1978. "Andrés de Tapia y la Coatlicue." *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 13: 23–34.

- León-Portilla, Miguel. 1978. *México-Tenochtitlan: Su espacio y tiempo sagrados*. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- León-Portilla, Miguel. 2004. "Significados del corazón en el México prehispánico." *Archivos de Cardiología de México* 74 (2): 93–103.
- López Austin, Alfredo, and Leonardo López Luján. 2009. *Monte sagrado—Templo Mayor: El cerro y la pirámide en la tradición religiosa mesoamericana*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México / Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- López de Gómara, Francisco. 1954. *Historia general de las Indias*. Barcelona: Iberia.
- López Luján, Leonardo. 1982. "Neues aus der alten Welt, Mexiko." *Das Altertum* 28: 126–27.
- López Luján, Leonardo. 2005. *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- López Luján, Leonardo. 2006. *La Casa de las Águilas: Un ejemplo de la arquitectura religiosa de Tenochtitlan*. 2 vols. Mexico City: Harvard University / Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- López Luján, Leonardo. 2012. "Coatlicue." In *Escultura monumental mexicana*, edited by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Leonardo López Luján, 115–229. Mexico City: Fundación Conmemoraciones 2010, Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- López Luján, Leonardo. 2015. "The Great Temple Project: In Search of the Sacred Precinct of Mexico-Tenochtitlan." In *2015 Shanghai Archaeology Forum: Awarded Projects*, 296–313. Shanghai: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- López Luján, Leonardo. 2017. "El Proyecto Templo Mayor (1991–2017): Recuento de cinco lustros de actividades." In *Templo Mayor: Revolución y estabilidad*, edited by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Patricia Ledesma Bouchan, 35–57. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- López Luján, Leonardo. 2018. "Cuando la gente 'se uno-aconejó': La gran sequía de 1454 en la Cuenca de México." *Arqueología Mexicana* 149: 36–45.
- López Luján, Leonardo. 2019. "Al pie del Templo Mayor: Excavaciones arqueológicas en torno al monolito de la diosa Tlaltecuhltli y el Cuauhxiccalco." In *Al pie del Templo Mayor de Tenochtitlan: Estudios en honor a Eduardo Matos Moctezuma*, edited by Leonardo López Luján and Ximena Chávez Balderas, vol. 2, 37–86. Mexico City: El Colegio Nacional.
- López Luján, Leonardo. 2020. "Miguel León-Portilla and Archaeology." *Ancient Mesoamerica* 31 (1): 1–6.
- López Luján, Leonardo, Ximena Chávez, Norma Valentín, and Aurora Montúfar. 2010. "Huitzilopochtli y el sacrificio de niños en el Templo Mayor de Tenochtitlan." In *El sacrificio en la tradición religiosa mesoamericana*, edited by Leonardo López Luján

- and Guilhem Olivier, 367–94. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia / Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- López Luján, Leonardo, and Ángel González López. 2014. “Tierra, agua y fuego al pie del Templo Mayor de Tenochtitlan: Un conjunto de bajorrelieves de la época de Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina.” *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 47: 7–51.
- López Luján, Leonardo, and Alfredo López Austin. 2009. “The Mexica in Tula and Tula in Mexico-Tenochtitlan.” In *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, edited by William L. Fash et al., 384–422. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections.
- López Luján, Leonardo, et al. 2018. “Proyecto Templo Mayor: Informe de la Octava Temporada (fase 2017–2018).” Unpublished technical report. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- Matos Moctezuma, Eduardo. 1982. “El Templo Mayor: Economía e ideología.” In *El Templo Mayor: Excavaciones y estudios*, edited by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, 109–18. Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- Matos Moctezuma, Eduardo. 1986. *Vida y muerte en el Templo Mayor*. Mexico City: Océano.
- Matos Moctezuma, Eduardo. 1987. “Symbolism of the Templo Mayor.” In *The Aztec Templo Mayor*, edited by Elizabeth H. Boone, 185–209. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections.
- Matos Moctezuma, Eduardo. 1991. “Las seis Coyolxauhqui: Variaciones sobre un mismo tema.” *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 21: 15–30.
- Matos Moctezuma, Eduardo. 2003. “Templo Mayor: History and Interpretation.” In *Moctezuma’s Mexico: Visions of the Aztec World*, edited by David Carrasco and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, 3–98. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.
- McCafferty, Geoffrey G., and Sharisse D. McCafferty. 2019. “Weapons of Resistance: The Material Symbolics of Postclassic Mexican Spinning and Weaving.” *Latin American Antiquity* 30 (4): 707–23.
- Milbrath, Susan. 1997. “Decapitated Lunar Goddesses in Aztec Art, Myth, and Ritual.” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 8: 185–206.
- Nicholson, Henry B. 1985. “The New Tenochtitlan Templo Mayor Coyolxauhqui-Chantico Monument.” *Indiana* 10: 77–98.
- Nicholson, Henry B. 1988. “The Iconography of the Deity Representations in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Primeros Memoriales*: Huitzilopochtli and Chalchiuhtlicue.” In *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún, Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, edited by Jorge Klor de Alva and Eloise Quiñones-Keber, 244–47. Albany: State University of New York.

- Paso y Troncoso, Francisco. 1979. *Descripción, historia y exposición del Códice Borbónico*. Mexico City: Siglo veintiuno.
- Pedraza Rubio, Gerardo, Leonardo López Luján, and Nicolás Fuentes Hoyos. 2017. "Huesos cruzados y corazones torcidos: Una ofrenda con insignias de oro al pie del Templo Mayor de Tenochtitlan." *Arqueología Mexicana* 144: 44–50.
- Read, Kay. 1998. *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ruz Lhuillier, Alberto. 1968. *Costumbres funerarias de los antiguos mayas*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Sahagún, Bernardino de. 1979. *Códice Florentino: Manuscrito 218–20 de la Colección Palatina de la Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana*. 3 vols. Mexico City: Archivo General de la Nación.
- Sahagún, Bernardino de. 1993. *Primeros memoriales*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press / Patrimonio Nacional / Real Academia de la Historia.
- Sahagún, Bernardino de. 2000. *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*. 3 vols. Edited by Alfredo López Austin and Josefina García Quintana. Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes.
- Schwaller, John F. 2019. *Aztec History in the Rituals of Panquetzaliztli*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Seler, Eduard. 1992. "Excavations at the Site of the Principal Temple in Mexico." In *Collected Works in Mesoamerican Linguistics and Archaeology*, vol. 3, 114–93. Culver City–Lancaster: Labyrinthos.
- Seler, Eduard. 1993. "Some Remarks on the Natural Bases of Mexican Myths." In *Collected Works in Mesoamerican Linguistics and Archaeology*, vol. 4, 157–62. Culver City–Lancaster: Labyrinthos.
- Seler, Eduard. 1996. "Uitzilopochtli, the Talking Hummingbird." In *Collected Works in Mesoamerican Linguistics and Archaeology*, vol. 5, 93–99. Culver City–Lancaster: Labyrinthos.