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# Images Take Flight

Feather Art  
in Mexico and Europe  
1400–1700

HIRMER

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# Under the Sign of the Sun: Eagle Feathers, Skins, and Insignia in the Mexica World

Leonardo López Luján

## Eagle or Sun

The golden eagle or *Aquila chrysaetos* occupied a privileged place in the art of featherwork in Tenochtitlan. This high esteem may be explained not only by its majesty, its relative rarity, the enormous difficulties of its capture, and the exceptional beauty of its plumage, but also by its position as one of the most venerated creatures in the Mexica bestiary. It appears everywhere in mythical accounts and in iconography (Figs. 86–90), where time and again it expresses the leading role the eagle played in the indigenous imaginary. For example, in texts and images related to the migration of this group, the patron god Huitzilopochtli was transformed into an eagle to incite his followers to leave Aztlan. He guided them on their long journey to the Promised Land and furnished them with weapons that were to characterize their new form of existence.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, transformed into an eagle, Huitzilopochtli marked the end of the journey with his miraculous apparition on the date 2 House, equivalent to 1325, on a “crag and on top

of a large prickly pear . . . and at the foot of it an anthill, and . . . atop the prickly pear an eagle eating and tearing apart a snake.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus, this celestial, solar, warlike bird of prey, by coming together with the prickly pear that alludes to the house of Tlaloc (the rain god), gave rise to the double denomination of the future island city: Mexico-Tenochtitlan, in other words, the place of Mexi (another one of the appellations of the patron god) and *tenochtli* (stone prickly pear).<sup>3</sup> The complementary union of both figures also corresponded to the names of the two principal founders of the Mexica capital: Cuauhtlequetzqui and Tenoch. The first name reiterates the solar character of Huitzilopochtli-Mexi, because it means “he who raises the eagle’s fire”; while the second evokes the rain god and his aquatic domain.<sup>4</sup> In 1337, as a result of the secession of the Mexicas, the eagle became the emblem of the Tenochcas, the people of Tenochtitlan, and the jaguar—a telluric, nocturnal, also warlike creature—became that of the people of Tlatelolco.<sup>5</sup>

If we go back even further in mythical time, we will find the golden eagle again, now in the creation of the Fifth Sun at Teotihuacan. According to a well-known version, the bird of prey displayed his exceptional courage by throwing himself into the fire before the jaguar.<sup>6</sup> In this way the eagle emulates the acts of the humble Nanahuatzin, who with great valor cast himself first into the bonfire, becoming the Sun and thus winning out over the presumptuous Tecuciztecatl, who had no other choice than to become the Moon. This symbolic connection between the largest bird from the ancient territory of Mesoamerica and the most luminous star in the sky<sup>7</sup> is clear in a definition recorded in the Nahuatl text in the *Florentine Codex*: “The sun: the soaring eagle, the turquoise prince, the god.”<sup>8</sup> More specifically, in the same document the Sun at dawn is called Cuauhtlehuanitl or eagle that rises, and, in the afternoon, Cuauhtemoc or eagle that descends.<sup>9</sup> The metaphor also is expressed in material form, for example in several *cuauhxicalli* (eagle vessels) in the shape of the bird of prey that have been discovered in downtown Mexico City, respectively under the house of the Marquis del Apartado and the Centro Cultural de España (Fig. 87).<sup>10</sup> As is widely known, these stone vessels were intended to hold the hearts of sacrificial victims that served to feed the Sun and thus to perpetuate its daily movement.

### Earthly and Divine Insignia

Through a simple procedure based on synecdoche, the symbolic character of the largest bird in ancient Mexico was ascribed to its feathers. These were thus converted into referents *par excellence* of the sun, the sky, fire, and warriors. Their presence in the form of insignia characterized numerous divinities

that bore them, as well as their personifiers. One of the most well-known cases is the *cuauhpilolli* (eagle pendant), a distinctive element that hung horizontally on the head and that was composed of a pair of long feathers.<sup>11</sup> It was characteristic of the god of hunting Mixcoatl, the 400 *mimixcoah* warriors into which he divided, and warriors who died heroically on the battlefield. Another example is the *cuauhtzontli* (eagle hair), a headdress composed of a group of erect feathers that also emphasized the bellicose nature of divinities such as the sun god Tonatiuh and the earth goddess Cihuacoatl. Similarly, the feared *tzitzimime*, female supernaturals who descended periodically from the sky to attack people, wore a *citlalicue* (starry skirt), that is, a back device or apron made of jaguar skin, plumes of young golden eagles, braided leather, and shells of the *Oliva* genus. We should also mention the *cuauhpachiuuhqui chimalli* or shield covered with eagle feathers that Cihuacoatl used to defend herself in her manifestation as Ilamatecuhtli and Chantico, deity of the hearth fire.

However, the superlative expression of insignia crafted from golden eagle plumes was the uniform that completely covered the wearer's body and that represented this bird of prey. It was worn by some of the brave Mexica warriors known as *cuauhtli ocelotl* (eagle, jaguar).<sup>12</sup> According to Fray Diego Durán:

They were knights who were dedicated to soldiery. Flying like eagles in battle with invincible bravery and courage *par excellence*, they were called Eagles or Jaguars.

They were the men whom the sovereigns most loved and esteemed, the men who obtained most privileges and prerogatives. To them the kings granted most generous favors, adorning them with brilliant, splendid weapons





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Eagle warrior, in Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 2, fol. 20v, New Spain, ca. 1577, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence

and insignia. No decision in war could be reached without them; not even the monarchs could contradict their ordinances and commands, and soon confirmed them.

The Sun was their patron; they honored and served his temple with all the care and reverence in the world. That is why I call them the Knights of the Sun.<sup>13</sup>

As explicitly stated in this passage, eagle and jaguar warriors were strongly linked to the Sun and to its course. They worshipped it during the celebration of the *Nahui Ollin* (4 Movement).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, they participated actively in gladiatorial sacrifice in the *veintena* (twenty-day period) of *Tlacaxipehualiztli*,<sup>15</sup> a rite that staged the creation of the Fifth Sun at Teotihuacan and the primordial war waged by Tonatiuh against the 400 *mimixcoah*.<sup>16</sup> On the social level, the corporation of eagles and jaguars was composed exclusively of members of the nobility.<sup>17</sup> This was corroborated by Durán, who explicitly stated: “all those who made vows and entered this institution were illustrious and brave men, all sons of knights and lords, the common man being excluded, no matter how brave.”<sup>18</sup>

Fortunately, apart from these valuable textual descriptions, we have indisputable images of the *cuauhtli ocelotl*. They appear in several sixteenth-century documents from the

early viceregal period. In the *Azcatitlan, Florentine* (Fig. 88), and *Tlatelolco* codices and in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, these Mexica military men appear in dynamic bellicose and religious scenes.<sup>19</sup> Invariably they wear helmets and costumes that imitate the anatomy of the golden eagle and jaguar, while they also tend to be well armed.

It is intriguing that equivalent representations in Mexica sculpture are uncommon. In fact, beyond the celebrated eagle-man carved on the drum from Malinalco (see Fig. 1)<sup>20</sup> and the spectacular basalt head from Texcoco on display in the Mexica Hall in the Museo Nacional de Antropología,<sup>21</sup> only a few images are known.<sup>22</sup> Among these examples, the most impressive are the two ceramic sculptures discovered in the 1980s in the interior of the so-called House of Eagles, a religious building located directly north of the Templo Mayor (Fig. 90).<sup>23</sup> Both measure 171 cm (about 67 in.) in height by 120 cm (some 47 in.) in maximum width. They depict youthful figures in which one can see the face, hands, lower legs, and groin. They wear large helmets that schematically render the head of a bird of prey with prominent ridges, oval eyes, and an exaggeratedly large beak. The latter is completely open, showing a robust, hooked upper mandible, and a straight lower mandible. The costume completely covers the torso, hips, and thighs of the figures and synthetically imitates the body of a bird of prey. The wings, partially extended, have hook-like shapes at their tips that resemble barbules of flight feathers (*ahauitztli*).<sup>24</sup> There are a total of ten on each wing and they have rounded contours comparable to actual eagle feathers.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the flight feathers, artists represented the other feathers on the wings, pectoral feathers (*cuauhxilotl*),<sup>26</sup> and those on the feet by means of flat, tongue-shaped stucco tabs with rounded ends. A little below the knees of the figures, the costume takes on the



shape of two enormous feathered bird feet. These are wide and thick; they have three toes of different sizes, and, in the back, the hallux or the first bird toe. The costume is complemented by a pair of sandals covered in a fine layer of stucco; they have heels and are knotted at the ankle with long ties.

The costumes described here imitate the anatomical characteristics of birds of the *Accipitridae* family. In fact, it is likely that the sculptors used the golden eagle as their model. Many of the features of this species are present: oval eyes, prominent supraorbital ridges, massive neck well differentiated from the body, powerful beak with hooked upper mandible and flat lower mandible, wide wingspan, smooth plumage, feathered tarsi, and thick, sturdy anisodactyl feet.<sup>27</sup>

It is worth pointing out that although some authors have no doubt identifying the sculptures in the House of the Eagles as *cuauhtli*,<sup>28</sup> these sculptures might also represent their souls converted into birds as a result of death in warfare.<sup>29</sup> According to Mexica worldview, the souls of those who died in battle embarked upon an eighty-day journey to Tonatiuh Ilhuicac, the place where they served the Sun for four years; their principal mission was to accompany this star to the zenith.<sup>30</sup> Another possibility is that the sculptures are images of Huitzilopochtli as a solar divinity.<sup>31</sup> Following this logic, his bird attributes and his unique body position would represent the star precisely at the moment he was about to take flight, as a metaphor for dawn.

### Feathers and Skins

Although the golden eagle is not a species endemic to the Basin of Mexico,<sup>32</sup> by all indications Tenochtitlan held a monopoly on the creation of *cuauhtli-ocelotl* uniforms.<sup>33</sup> It is significant

that the eagle warrior suit is not among the wide variety of uniforms—including those of the jaguar knight—demanded in tribute by the Mexicas from their provinces. In reality, the capital of the empire only imported live eagles and they did so both by trade and tribute,<sup>34</sup> in the latter case from the north provinces of Xilotepec and Oxitipan.<sup>35</sup> It is paradoxical that Xilotepec had to pay tribute in military uniforms at the same time, but that none of them were in the form of the bird of prey.

This fact may perhaps be explained as a consequence of the control of production on the part of the *amantecas* or Mexica featherworkers, who must have always had eagle feathers at their disposal from eagles kept in captivity in the so-called *Totocalli* or House of Birds (Figs. 91 and 92). According to Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, this was a room that formed part of the palace complex of Moctezuma. However, it was not simply the place where eagles were kept in cages, but rather featherworkers in the service of the *tlatoani* (emperor) worked there:

*Totocalli*: there mayordomos kept all the various birds—eagles, red spoonbills, trupials, yellow parrots, parakeets, large parrots, pheasants. And there all the various artisans did their work: the gold and silver-smiths, the copper-smiths, the featherworkers, painters, stonecutters, workers in green stone mosaic, carvers of wood.<sup>36</sup>

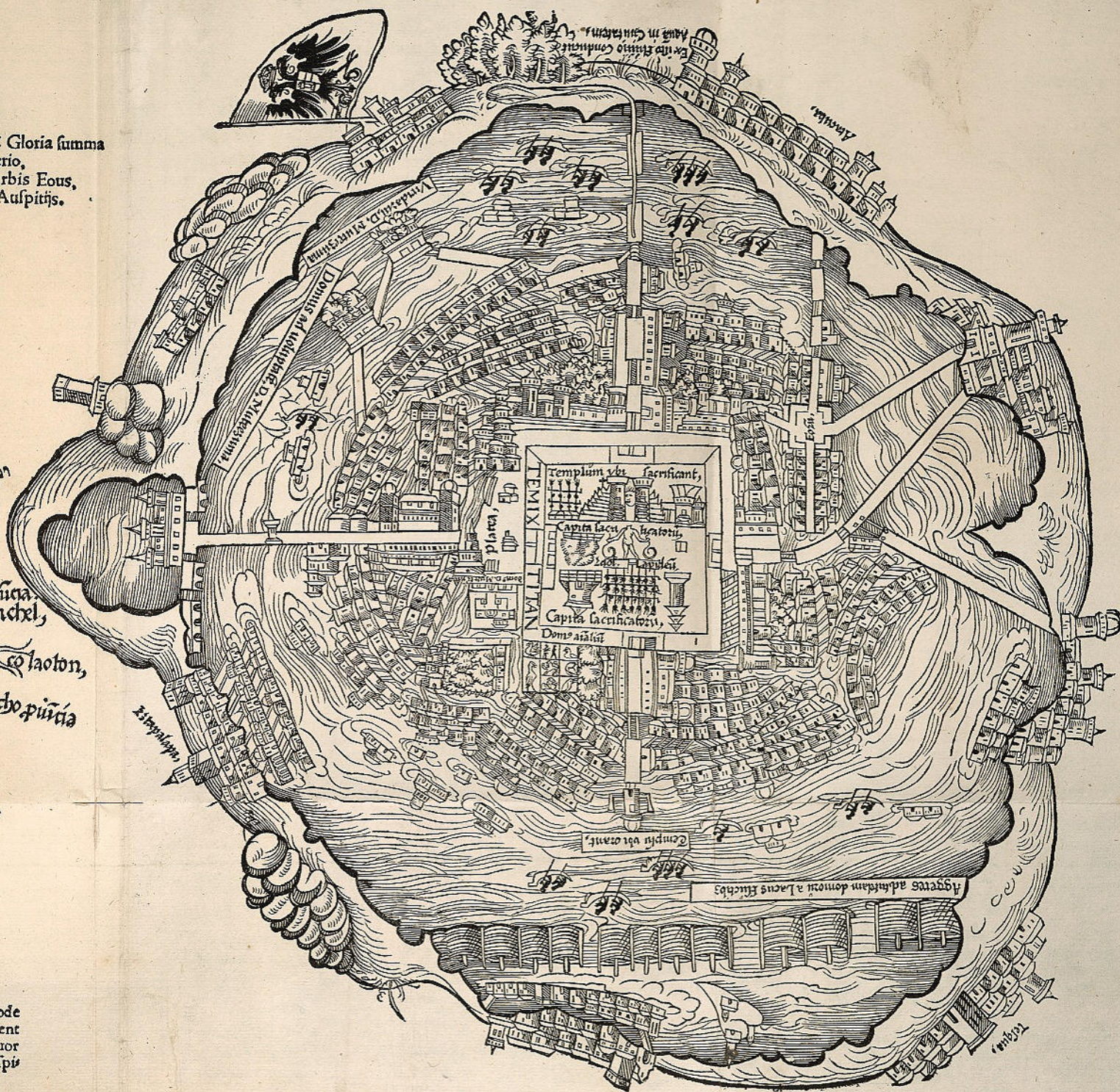
In the *Totocalli*, the *amantecas* obtained feathers without killing the animals, as described by conqueror Bernal Díaz del Castillo: “[f]rom all these birds they plucked the feathers when the time was right to do so, and the feathers grew again.”<sup>37</sup> The magnitude of production was such that a veritable legion of servants was necessary to maintain this aviary:



prestans, & Gloria summa  
 faris Imperio,  
 is nunc Orbis Eous,  
 panditur Auspitijs.

promissa  
 amichel,  
 co laoton,  
 Camacho puiicia  
 Ra la palma  
 obledas

et leucas duode  
 ncti continent  
 leuca quatuor  
 i qui hic coſpis



The emperor had three hundred men whose sole employment is to take care of these birds; and there are others whose only business is to attend to the birds that are in bad health . . . and every cage contained a bird of prey, of all the species found in Spain, from the kestrel to the eagle, and many unknown there. . . . To all these birds fowls were daily given for food, and nothing else.<sup>38</sup>

There is sufficient archaeological evidence to propose that several of the golden eagles recovered from ten offerings at the Templo Mayor (Fig. 93) and three from the House of Eagles might have come from the *Totocalli*.<sup>39</sup> For example, a skeleton from Offering U that was analyzed by biologist Óscar J. Polaco not only was smaller in size than what one would expect for its age, but it also had an enormous abscess on the right foot, caused by an injury or disease. This abscess would have made it difficult for the bird to survive if not in captivity, which is probably why the Mexicas would have trapped it, treated it, and fed it prior to its death.

Also of great interest is the abundance of archaeological specimens that attest to taxidermic preparation. In Offerings U and X there were two eagles that were represented solely by skeletal elements from the skull, wings, feet, and tail, lacking all the bones from the central portion of the body. In addition, we recovered two fragments of proximal feather quills in Offering U, as well as the pygostyle and a tail vertebra in Offering X, remains that show that the people who deposited the offering buried the entire skin and its feather layer. Numerous signs of cutting were discovered on proximal ends of wing and feet bones, and incisions on the skull to extract the brain matter. In this regard it is worth reproducing a passage from Hernán Cortés's second letter to Charles V in which the



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Totocalli or House of Birds, detail from Map of Tenochtitlan, woodcut, in Hernán Cortés, *Praeclara Ferdinandi Cortesi de Nova maris Oceani Hyspania narratio . . .*, Nuremberg, 1524

conqueror cites the supply of this type of skins in the marketplace at Tlatelolco:

There is a street for game, where every variety of birds found in the country are sold, as fowls, partridges, quails, wild ducks, fly-catchers, widgeons, turtle-doves, pigeons, reedbirds, parrots, sparrows, eagles, hawks, owls, and kestrels; they sell likewise the skins of some birds of prey, with their feathers, head, beak, and claws.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, sixteenth-century sources indicate the bird skins were given as tribute to Tenochtitlan. According to the *Codex Mendoza*,<sup>41</sup> Soconusco sent 160 *xiuhtototl* (lovely cotinga) skins. Alvarado Tezozómoc adds that Ahuilizapan, Cuetlaxtla, Tepeaca, and Zempoala delivered *tlauhquechol* (roseate spoonbill), *xiuhtototl* (lovely cotinga), *tzinizcan* (mountain trogon), and *zacuan* (Montezuma oropendola) skins.<sup>42</sup> On occasions, the *tlatoani* gave these skins as gifts to his valiant warriors, who used them “to spread terror and fear in their enemies.”<sup>43</sup> The skins also served as funerary offerings to the corpse of the sovereign,<sup>44</sup> and to create handsome thrones (Fig. 89); one of them was the *ocelopetlatl*, *cuappetlatl*, composed of an eagle skin seat and a jaguar pelt back.<sup>45</sup>

*Offering 125*, stone box with sacrificial knives, remains of marine animals, two skeletons of golden eagles, and one wolf skeleton, Mexico, ca. 1486–1502, Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City

- 1 *Antigüedades de México: basadas en la recopilación de Lord Kingsborough*, vol. 2, Codex Boturini, Mexico City, Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 1964, p. 4; *Codex Mexicanus*, Paris, Société des Américanistes, 1952, fol. 22.
- 2 Hernando de Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica mexicana*, Madrid, Dastin, 2001, p. 54.
- 3 Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de tierra firme*, vol. 2, Mexico City, Porrúa, 1984, pp. 28–29; Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, vol. 2, Mexico City, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2000, p. 972; Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica*, p. 62. The etymology of *mexi* is uncertain.
- 4 Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Memorial breve acerca de la fundación de la ciudad de Culhuacan*, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), 1991, p. 133.
- 5 *Codex Azcatitlan*, Paris, Société des Américanistes, 1995, fol. 14; *Códice Techialoyan* García Granados, Toluca, El Colegio Mexiquense, 1992.
- 6 Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 2, pp. 694–696.
- 7 On this subject, see Alfonso Caso, *La religión de los aztecas*, Mexico City, Enciclopedia Ilustrada Mexicana, 1936, p. 22; Ángel María Garibay Kintana, *Veinte himnos sacros de los nahuas, recogidos por fray Bernardino de Sahagún*, Mexico City, UNAM, 1958, pp. 168, 245; Hermann Beyer, “El origen natural de algunos dioses mexicanos,” *El México Antiguo*, 10 (1965), pp. 305–308; Michel Graulich, *Mitos y rituales del México antiguo*, Madrid, Istmo, 1990, p. 102; Michel Gilonne, *La Civilisation aztèque et l’aigle royal: ethnologie et ornithologie*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1997, pp. 137–146; Mercedes de la Garza, “El águila real, símbolo del pueblo mexicano,” *Caravelle*, 76–77 (2001), pp. 105–118.
- 8 Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, pt. 8, book 7—*The Sun, the Moon, the Stars, and the Binding of the Years*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble, Santa Fe and Salt Lake City, The School of American Research/the University of Utah, 1982, p. 1.
- 9 Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 2, p. 524.
- 10 Elsa Hernández Pons, “La plataforma mexicana: las excavaciones de 1901 y los nuevos descubrimientos,” in *La antigua Casa del Marqués del Apartado. Arqueología e historia*, Mexico City, UNAM, 1997, pp. 45–71; Raúl Barrera Rodríguez and Gabino López Arenas, “Hallazgos en el recinto ceremonial de Tenochtitlan,” *Arqueología Mexicana*, 93 (2008), pp. 18–25.
- 11 Hermann Beyer, “El cuauhpilelli, la borla de pluma del dios Mixcoatl,” *El México Antiguo*, 10 (1965), pp. 313–325.
- 12 Eduard Seler, “Die Tierbilder der mexicanischen und der Maya-Handschriften,” in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach- und Altertumskunde*, vol. 6, Graz, Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1960, pp. 583, 586–587; Mercedes de la Garza, “El águila real.”
- 13 Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, vol. 1, p. 113. (English from Fray Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, trans. and ed. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1971, p. 197.)
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 105–109.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 16 Michel Graulich, “Tlacaxipehualiztli ou la fête aztèque de la moisson et de la guerre,” *Revista Española de Antropología Americana*, 12 (1982), pp. 230–239.
- 17 Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, pt. 7, book 6—*Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy*, 1969, p. 76 and book 7, p. 50; Nigel Davies, “The Mexica Military Hierarchy as Described by Sahagún,” in J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber (eds.), *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, Albany, State University of New York, 1988, p. 165.
- 18 Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, vol. 1, p. 105. (English from Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 186.)
- 19 *Códice Azcatitlan*, fol. 24; Sahagún, *Códice Florentino*, vol. 1, Mexico City, Secretaría de Gobernación, 1979, book 2, fol. 20v; *Códice Tlatelolco*, Mexico City, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1989, fol. 6; *Lienzo de Tlaxcalla*, Mexico City, Cartón y Papel, 1983, fol. 48.
- 20 Esther Pasztory, *Aztec Art*, New York, Abrams, p. 273.
- 21 Caso, *La religión*, pp. 27–29.
- 22 Felipe Solís, *Catálogo de la escultura mexicana del Museo de Santa Cecilia Acatitlan, Estado de México*, Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), 1976, p. 14; *idem*, “The Formal Pattern of Anthropomorphic Sculpture and Ideology of the Aztec State,” in Elizabeth H. Boone (ed.), *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico*, Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks, 1982, p. 92; Pasztory, *Aztec Art*, p. 241, plate 55; Colin McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British Museum*, London, The British Museum Press, 1994, p. 74.
- 23 Leonardo López Luján, *La Casa de las Águilas: un ejemplo de la arquitectura religiosa de Tenochtitlan*, vol. 1, Mexico City, INAH/Fondo de Cultura Económica (FCE), 2006, pp. 87–89.
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- 25 *Códice Borgia*, México, FCE, 1993, fol. 19.
- 26 Gilonne, *La Civilisation aztèque*, p. 115.
- 27 Ian Newton, Penny Olsen, and Tony Pyrzakowski (eds.), *Aves de presa*, Barcelona, Plaza & Janes, 1993, p. 48; Gilonne, *La Civilisation aztèque*, pp. 69, 128–133; Gerardo Ceballos and Laura Vázquez Valdelamar (eds.), *Las aves de México en peligro de extinción*, Mexico City, FCE/UNAM/Conabio, 2000, p. 117.
- 28 Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, “Los edificios aledaños al Templo Mayor de Tenochtitlan,” *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*, 17 (1984), pp. 15–21.
- 29 Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, “Huitzilopochtli’s Conquest: Aztec Ideology in the Archaeological Record,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 8, no. 1 (1998), p. 9.
- 30 Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 1, pp. 331–332; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, vol. 2, pp. 155, 287; Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología*, vol. 1, Mexico City, UNAM, 1980, pp. 361–370; Michel Graulich, “Afterlife in Ancient Mexican Thought,” in Bruno Illius and Matthias Laubscher (eds.), *Circumpacifica: Festschrift für Thomas S. Barthel*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 1990, pp. 169–170, 179–182.
- 31 Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, “El recinto de los Caballeros Águila,” *Artes de México*, 9 (1990), p. 34.
- 32 Ceballos and Vázquez, *Las aves de México*, p. 118.
- 33 Gilonne, *La Civilisation aztèque*, pp. 70, 87–89.
- 34 Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de relación*, Mexico City, Porrúa, 1994, p. 63.
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