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DEATH. The duality of life and death is one of the most important concepts in Mesoamerican thought. By observing what occurred over the course of the year, Mesoamericans recognized a season of rains when everything flourished, and a dry season when everything died. The life/death duality thus took form. We can see its presence in buildings such as the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, where part of the temple was dedicated to Tlaloc, the god of water and fertility, and the other part to the war god, Huitzilopochtli.

According to the beliefs of some Mesoamerican peoples, including the Nahuatl of Central Mexico, individuals could go to one of three places after death. Accompanying the sun in its daily journey was the destiny of warriors who died in combat or sacrifice, or of women who died during childbirth, since it was considered that the birth process was also a battle, and these women were thought to be warriors who accompanied the sun from midday westward to sunset. After four years, the de-

ceased warriors would become birds with beautiful plumage that drank the nectar of flowers. Those who died in relation to water—from drowning, thirst, or being struck by lightning—would go to Tlalocan, the water god's paradise, where summer was eternal and plants were always green. Those who died in any other manner had to journey through a series of dangerous places until reaching Mictlan, the ninth level of the underworld, where they would find the deity couple Mictlantecuhltli and Mictecacihuatl, who were represented as skeletons. There was also a fourth place called Chichicauhco, where young children who died would be nursed by a tree from whose leaves milk flowed. The destiny of pre-Hispanic people after death was determined by the manner in which they died. In contrast, Christian belief, introduced into Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century, was governed by a moral concept: if one behaves well, one will go to Heaven and enjoy eternal bliss; if one sins, one will suffer the flames of Hell.

[See also Day of the Dead and Todos Santos; Death Deities.]

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Translated from Spanish by Scott Sessions

DEATH DEITIES. Few divinities hold as prominent a place in the intricate Mesoamerican pantheon as do the gods of death. Ubiquitous in pre-Hispanic codices and sculpture, skeletal or partially defleshed images of these deities were already present in the art of the Formative period (1000 BCE–150 CE). The most outstanding examples include a small ceramic head from Tlatilco (state of México), a piece that magisterially synthesizes the life/death duality; a representation of God VIII of the Olmec, a being which Peter Joralemon has identified as the distant ancestor of Mictlantecuhltli in Nahuatl communities; and a famous relief from Izapa (Chiapas), depicting the entire body of this divinity.

With the exception of Teotihuacan, where representations of them are scarce, it was during the Classic period (150–900 CE) that underworld deities and their symbols acquired orthodox form and were profusely reproduced. Outstanding for their aesthetic quality are the sculptures of La Mixtequilla (Veracruz) and Soyaltepec (Oaxaca). In Maya art, skulls, mandibles, and cross bones are depicted everywhere. In the Postclassic period (1400–1521 CE), the image of God A (the denomination of this Maya god in the Schellhas classification), together with Gods B, D,

and E, would become one of the most frequent. No art, however, reveals such an obsession with the symbolism of death as that of the Mexica (Aztec). In an extraordinary manner, Mexica art insists on representing terrifying deities which speak of the fear of the believer and the importance of this cult.

Mictlantecuhtli ("Lord of the World of the Dead"), also known as Ixpuztec ("Broken Face"), Nextepehua ("Scatterer of Ashes"), and Tzontemoc ("He Who Lowers His Head"), was not the only death deity worshiped by the Mexica and their contemporaries. Although of lesser importance, beings such as Mictēcacihuatl, Acolnahuacatl, Acolmiztli, Chalmeatl, Yoaltecuhtli, Chalmeacihuatl, and Yoalcihuatl also belong to this complex.

The importance of Mictlantecuhtli in the daily life of Postclassic Nahuatl is confirmed in their calendar. In the 365-day cycle, he is present in the dual festival consisting of the Miccaihuitontli and Huey Miccaihuitl *veintenas*. In the 260-day cycle, Mictlantecuhtli appears as the sixth Lord of the Day, the fifth Lord of the Night, the patron of the day Dog, and the patron of the *trecena* beginning with the day 1 Flint Knife; his skull is the sign of the day Death.

The Death God also is the key component of the eternal life/death succession. In the *Codex Borgia*, Quetzalcoatl and Mictlantecuhtli are represented as opposing, comple-

mentary principles summarizing the basic cycle of the universe. This same role is revealed in the *Leyenda de los Soles* and the *Popol Vuh*, in mythic accounts where the death gods are confronted and outsmarted by Quetzalcoatl, in the first case, and by the Hero Twins, in the second.

Mictlantecuhtli exercised other functions that seem paradoxical, such as granting and fomenting life. For example, this deity appears as a protagonist in scenes referring to penetration, pregnancy, the cutting of the umbilical cord, and lactation. An explanation can be found in the regenerative power of bones as seeds, which is evident in the journey of Quetzalcoatl into the world of the dead to steal the bones from which human beings would be created, and also in the *Codex Vienna*, where the deities generating lineal descent—the goddesses of pulque and the personified *milpa*—possess skeletal traits.

But surpassing Mictlantecuhtli's generative abilities is his frightening character, which prevails in Mesoamerican cosmology. His partially defleshed image, with menacing claws, is often associated with animals such as the spider, centipede, scorpion, owl, and bat. The death god, first and foremost, is an insatiable devourer of the flesh and blood of humans. In pictographs, he appears as an active sacrificer armed with an ax or a flint knife, ready to extract the hearts of his victims. Moreover, his nose and tongue take the form of sharp knives. In Maya polychrome vases and codices, God A is depicted participating in executions, and God A' in sinister scenes of autodecapitation, violent death, and sacrifice. It is not strange that the lord of the world of the dead would inspire terror in the indigenous imagination. Perhaps for this reason, in plate 22 of the *Codex Dresden*, God A in two places has the skull sign (T1048), followed by the glyph *bi* (T585a), which together could be read as *xib(i)*. This word is close to the Yucatec term *xibil*, related to the idea of fear.

The images of Mictlantecuhtli and of God A have stereotyped features, with a few variables. Although skeletal representations of this deity are quite common, figures with partially defleshed bodies predominate; these are actually studies of cadavers in the process of decomposition. As a general norm, in place of the head they have a skull, often covered with curly black hair and flanked with large red ears. The ribs are visible, but the extremities usually retain their soft tissue. As in the case of other nocturnal, terrestrial, and underworld deities (such as Mictēcacihuatl, Coatlicue, the Cihuateteo, Itzpapalotl, and the rest of the Tzitzimime), ferocious claws take the place of hands and sometimes of feet. Bones are depicted with yellow spots with red dots, signs of osseous and bloody material. The accouterments of this deity are the turquoise crown, small flags, and "stellar eyes" on his head, adornments in the form of rosettes on his front and



Mictēcacihuatl, the goddess of the dead. Stone sculpture. (Height: 48 inches.) Courtesy of Museo Nacional de Antropología, México, D.F.

neck, circular earrings, stoles of white paper, a truss, and sandals.

A fundamental feature of images of the death god and other divinities associated with the lower half of the cosmos is the presence of a liver and gallbladder of exaggerated dimensions. According to Mesoamerican religious tradition, the *ihiyotl*, one of the three animistic entities of the human being, is lodged in both these organs. The liver, like all organs of the abdomen, is symbolically related to the underworld, constituting a semantic complex that integrates within the same logical structure the ideas of femininity, passion and carnal transgression, growth, excrement, trash, and death. From the liver, *ihiyotl* controls life, vigor, sexuality, and the digestive process.

This explains why some names of the god of death refer to putrefaction. For example, the Tarahumara give the Devil the name Huitaru ("He Who Is Excrement"), while the Lacandón and other contemporary Maya call him Cizin ("The Flatulent"). The pre-Hispanic origin of the latter appellation is clear in the glyphic complex T146.102:116, whose phonetic translation is *cizin(i)*. In consonance, Mesoamericans conceived of the underworld as a frightening place of torments, death, putrefaction, and terrible stench.

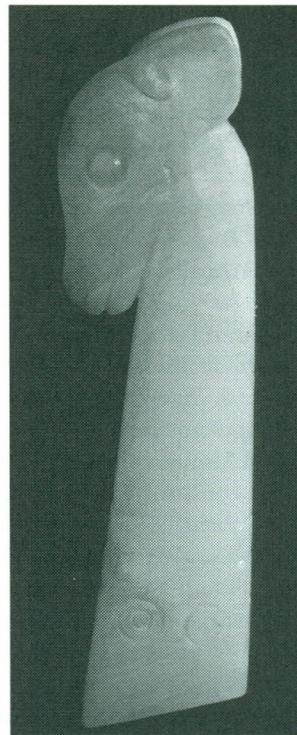
[See also Day of the Dead and Todos Santos; Death; Underworld.]

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DEER. The white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), one of the larger food animals and the bigger of two deer species present in Mesoamerica, was hunted from very



Mexica gods may take the form of a deer; in several codices, gods are sometimes depicted carrying a deer head scepter such as this one found at the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan. *Courtesy of Museo del Templo Mayor, México, D.F.*

early times. Deer might be driven into a large net and speared, caught with nooses or tree snares, or shot with arrows. Speared deer are depicted in Maya and Central Mexican codices; the *Maya Codex Madrid* shows deer in tree snares. Rites celebrated successful hunts, and deer-hunting is still accompanied by ritual in Mesoamerica. Modern hunters ask the underworld earth lords for permission to hunt. Some deer rites take place in caves.

Deer have long been offered in agricultural rites conducted by leaders responsible for the feeding and well-being of the people. In many places, the stag's antlers grow in the same annual cycle as do crops. Deer eat the farmer's crops, and the stag entangles foliage in its branch-like antlers. In modern Yucatán, a rain ritual at a time of severe drought begins with a deer hunt. Deer-hunting scenes on Late Classic Maya vases (600–900 CE) are clearly sacrificial rituals, and vegetation is shown in them. On these vases and in the *Dresden* and *Madrid Codices*, supernatural beings enact a ritual hunt. Some vases show deer being killed when their antlers are shed. Antlers are not easily removable until they are ready to detach from the pedicel base, from which blood then flows. The deer is thought to become young again when it has

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