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Flexibility and conformity in Postclassic Nahua rituals

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A PhD is an enormous challenge that has at times felt endless and all-consuming to me. In this respect, I owe much to those close to me for encouraging me, advising me, listening to me and putting up with me: Georgina, Sam, Steph, Sarah, Jade and Erica. Stefanos was, very luckily, not put off by my first-date explanations of human sacrifice; his unstinting support has been crucial in completing this work. Lastly, and most importantly, I thank M who supports me unflinchingly, wholeheartedly and in every way possible.

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ABSTRACT

The Postclassic (pre-conquest) Nahua often performed displays of religious devotion. Usually involving stripping victims of their skin, flesh and internal organs, these public, state-sanctioned rites have been understood as astonishing, even exceptional, for their brutality. As a consequence, scholars have focused on human sacrifice at the steps of the Templo Mayor; ritual away from the imperial capital Tenochtitlan has remained very poorly understood. Where attempts have been made to understand regional practices, scholars have generally assumed binary distinctions between central versus periphery or state versus local. Existing studies fail to appreciate Nahua ritual as fluid and dynamic, instead casting ceremonial behaviour across space as unrelated and fundamentally oppositional.

Integrating the ethnohistorical and archaeological records, this thesis takes understandings of Nahua ritual in new directions by examining the relationship between the public arena, the sacred landscape and domestic spheres. Crucially, this thesis argues that rituals were sensitive to circumstantial pressures and personal imperatives, across hierarchies, space and time. In so doing, this study suggests a more fluid model for understanding Nahua ritual than binary distinctions can allow.

A lack of appreciation for variation or agency in ritual performance has perpetuated the understanding that the Nahua were trapped in a cycle of ferocious ritualism which left little room for critical thought. Using alphabetic, pictorial and archaeological evidence for a rounded perspective, this thesis examines the intersection between official structures and personal agency to question the notion that all Nahuas unthinkingly repeated human sacrifice and other

ritual bloodshed. This study argues that the household was a crucial arena for the normalisation of the blood debt which permitted the acceptance of mass public human sacrifice. This thesis finds that, within the Nahuatl's symbiotic worldview, activities of the temple, mountain and household rituals were mutually supporting. Moreover, it is shown that the Nahuas chose to adapt their rituals throughout the years, to suit individual preferences and environmental circumstances. Taken as a whole, my findings suggest that the Nahuas sought to control their daily existence by adapting rituals to assuage violent and impulsive supernatural forces.

Key themes: ritual; ceremonies; personal versus official spaces; centre versus periphery; agency; conformity; power; flexibility; change; control

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- Codex Mendoza* *The Codex Mendoza*, eds, Frances. F. Berdan and Patricia. R. Anawalt (California, 1992)
- Codex Telleriano-Remensis* *Codex Telleriano-Remensis: Ritual, Divination, and History in a Pictorial Aztec Manuscript*, ed. Eloise Quiñones-Keber (Austin, 1995)

NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Primary sources

The Nahuas spoke the Uto-Aztecan language Nahuatl. For this study I have consulted a number of primary source texts which were originally written in this language or in Spanish, the language of the missionaries who came to convert them. My own Nahuatl studies have confirmed the opinions of sixteenth-century mendicant friar Diego Durán who wrote that this beautiful language was so rich in metaphors ‘that there is scarcely anyone who understands them unless they are studied and discussed very intently’.¹ Its allegory and agglutination mean that there are myriad possible interpretations for a single phrase. Nahuatl’s extreme complexity has meant that I have sometimes relied on Spanish and/or English translations for my interpretations. When I have used these translations, I have always returned to the original to scrutinise interpretations. In some cases, I have disagreed with the spirit or substance of a translation; I have noted this in the footnotes and offered an alternative.

Terminology

This study compares ritual activity between the Nahua and their neighbours south of the Valley of the Mexico, the Nahuatl-speaking Tlahuica. Nomenclature is a particularly difficult topic among scholars of Postclassic central Mexico. I use the term ‘Mexica’ to refer to the inhabitants of the twin city Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco. ‘Tenochca’ refers to those inhabitants of Tenochtitlan specifically. ‘Nahua’ refers broadly to those Nahuatl-speaking groups living in the Valley of Mexico in the century before Spanish conquest, with whom the Mexica shared a

¹ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 195.

cultural heritage. When speaking about the territory which the Mexica and their allies dominated, I use the term ‘Triple Alliance Empire’. I deliberately eschew the use of ‘Aztec’ or ‘Aztec Empire’. Broad terms, they obscure the nuances which I seek to uncover. Besides, ‘Aztec’ was not a name the inhabitants of Postclassic central Mexico would have recognised. As a term invented by a European scholar in the eighteenth-century,² its use here would contradict my aim to understand Nahua ritual, as far as is possible, on its own terms. ‘Aztec’ is, however, an enduringly popular term among scholars, and as such it does appear in my thesis in citations.³

Despite the devastation of conquest and colonisation, around a million Nahua people continue to celebrate their culture and practice their language in Mexico today. They do so in the face of structural prejudice and racism. I emphasise here that my thesis is drawn from historical and archaeological sources and so relates to the Nahua people who lived in the years before the Spanish conquest. More specifically, I discuss the culture as it existed between 1430, when the Mexica of Tenochtitlan began to expand to control an empire, and 1519, when the Spanish invaded their island capital. In order to avoid constantly referring to these people as ‘pre-Hispanic’, as this would inevitably define them against their persecutors, I choose the archaeological term ‘Postclassic’ which has been used to refer to the period 1430-1519. Unless it is specified otherwise, when using ‘Nahua’ on its own, I mean to refer to this time period.

² The term ‘Aztec’ refers to Aztlan (‘The Place of Whiteness’), somewhere north of the Valley of Mexico. This was from where the Mexica were said to have paused on their long migration. ‘Aztec’ was first used in Francisco J. Clavigero, *Historia antigua de México y su conquista* (Mexico, 1844). Prescott’s study solidified its use in scholarly texts: W. H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico and History of the Conquest of Peru* (New York, 1843).

³ Terminology is a particularly tricky issue for scholars of the Nahua and other Mesoamerican peoples. There are, therefore, many explications of the issues of terminology. Among the clearest and most helpful are: Frances F. Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. xvii-xviii; Caroline Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood: Gender, Lifecycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture* (Basingstoke, 2011), pp. xii-xiv.

I am mindful to use Nahuatl terms where relevant and appropriate; there is a full glossary. I choose to do this particularly when a translation fails to convey the complexity encapsulated in the original term. For example, *altepetl* is often translated as ‘city-state’ or ‘city’. While this is an acceptable interpretation, this translation does not respect the intricacies of the original Nahuatl which is a *difrasismo* — *in atl, in tepetl* (‘the water, the mountain’) — and refers to the essential characteristics of such a settlement’s landscape. Another word, *tlahtoani* is often translated, not unreasonably, as ‘ruler’. However, such a term does little to convey the spirit of the original which means ‘he who speaks’.⁴

One of my ritual case studies, Xiuhmolpilli, provides an instructive example of the importance of using original terminology. Xiuhmolpilli was celebrated at the end of a calendar cycle and involved, as we shall see, activity in the home, temple and landscape. One of the public activities involved the sparking of a new fire. As such, some Anglophone scholars have referred to this festival as the ‘New Fire Ceremony’. Yet, the Nahuatl name did not reference renewal of fire, but the concept of binding years (deriving from *xihuitl*, meaning ‘year’ and *ilpia*, meaning ‘to bind, to tie up’). Referencing the fire exclusively, therefore, obscures the range of participation involved in this festival. I see no reason to forgo the original Nahuatl terminology and I refer to this festival, and others, by their original names throughout this analysis.

⁴ While technically a gender-neutral term, evidence suggests that *tlahtoani* referred to a man as the term *cihuatlahtoani* (‘woman-speaker’) existed to specify a female ruler. James Lockhart, *Nahuatl as Written* (Stanford, 2001), p. 55; Susan Schroeder, *Chimalpahin and the Kingdoms of Chalco* (Tucson, 1991), p. 82 and 183-85. Interestingly, the emphasis on a ruler’s verbal performance seems to have been widespread in Mesoamerica. The equivalent Mayan word for ‘ruler’ is *ajaw* which means ‘he who shouts’: Takeshi Inomata, ‘Plazas, Performers, and Spectators: Political Theaters of the Classic Maya’, *Current Anthropology*, 47.5 (2006), p. 818; Stephen Houston and David Stuart, ‘Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings: Divinity and Rulership among the Classic Maya’, *Antiquity*, 70 (1996), p. 295.

Using original terms raises questions about orthography. Nahuatl continues to be spoken in many parts of Mexico today and its spelling has evolved since it was first set down in Latin script in the early colonial period. There is, in a way, no ‘authentic’ pre-Hispanic Nahuatl spelling as it was not an alphabetic language before the Spanish conquest. For reasons of consistency and accuracy, I favour classical Nahuatl orthography (e.g. *tlahtoani*, rather than *tlatoani* and Motecuhzoma rather than Moctezuma) which, in my opinion, remains faithful to correct pronunciation of the glottal stop.⁵

Lastly, this study uses a diverse range of sources, most of which are manuscripts created by, or in conjunction with, the indigenous population of central Mexico. Many of the ‘original’ names for these manuscripts have been lost. Since their production, they have been named after ‘Western’ elite collectors, scholars and institutions (e.g. *Codex Laud*, after Archbishop Laud, who obtained the manuscript in 1636).⁶ These awkward misnomers divorce the documents from their provenance as manuscripts detailing life and times of indigenous people of central Mexico. The development of post-colonial studies has led to serious investigations into indigenous perspectives during and after the conquest of Mexico. Documents have been used more sensitively with regard to their indigenous content.⁷ Within this field, attempts have been made to assign more appropriate ‘indigenous’ names to these manuscripts. For example, Maarten Jansen has proposed that *Codex Laud* now be referred to instead as ‘Codex Mictlan’

⁵ Frances Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (Norman, 1992), pp. xii, 266. Also Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology*, p. xx.

⁶ Maarten Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, ‘Renaming the Mexican Codices’, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 15 (2004), p. 270.

⁷ The ‘New Philology’ stands out as one of the more important strands of this field. This term refers to historical, ethnohistorical and linguistic scholarship which uses native-language sources. This research is associated with James Lockhart and his students. Among them, Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, Robert Haskett and John Sullivan have been particularly influential. Frances Berdan, Louise Burkhart and Susan Kellogg have also been important in this field but were not Lockhart’s students. See Matthew Restall, ‘A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History’, *Latin American Research Review*, 38.1 (2003), pp. 113-34.

or 'Book of Death', recognizing that its first section depicts the death deities.⁸ While I am highly sympathetic and sensitive to these ideas, I suggest that the initiative of Jansen and others is sufficiently experimental and underdeveloped to preclude widespread knowledge of the changes of names, even among scholars. I, therefore, choose to use the 'traditional' names of the codices, the widespread acceptance of which avoids any the inevitable confusion which might be created when using new, alternative, names.

⁸ Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, 'Renaming the Mexican Codices', p. 270.

GLOSSARY

<i>altepetl</i>	(pl. <i>altepemeh</i>)	city-state
<i>calmecac</i>		‘House of Tears’, boys’ priestly and elite school
<i>calpolli</i>		basic unit of territorial organization; a neighbourhood
<i>cuicalli</i>		‘House of Song’, the school of ritual song and dance for both sexes
<i>mociuaquetzqueh</i>		women who died in childbirth
<i>huehuetatolli</i>		‘speeches of the elders’, ritual orations
<i>ixiptlatl</i>	(pl. <i>ixiptlah</i>)	deity representation
<i>pochtecatl</i>	(pl. <i>pochteca</i>)	travelling merchants
<i>tonalamatl</i>		‘book of days’, a pictorial fortune-telling device
<i>telpochcalli</i>		‘House of Youths’, boys’ warrior/ commoner school
<i>tlacuilo</i>	(pl. <i>tlacuiloqueh</i>)	painter-scribe
<i>temalacatl</i>		sacrificial stone or altar
<i>temazcalli</i>		sweatbath
<i>tlatoani</i>	(pl. <i>tlatoqueh</i>)	ruler, ‘the person who speaks’

INTRODUCTION

The Mexica of Tenochtitlan were the principal political force in Postclassic Central Mexico when the Spanish invaded in 1519 C.E. Controlling a vast, yet disparate, hegemonic empire from their island city, the Mexica elite drew regular and substantial tax and tribute from over 500 subject and allied *altepemeh* (city-states) within 38 administrative provinces [see maps 1 and 2]. They ruled the largest territorial state in Mesoamerica with an almost incredible economy of force;⁹ without a standing army, they neither installed puppet rulers nor embarked on infrastructure projects. Instead, they capitalised on an existing system of conquest, diplomacy and tribute to hold their polity together in a fragile, shifting union. Regular human and natural resources were drawn in from the provinces to sustain Tenochtitlan's swollen population, which by the time of the Spanish conquest had reached around a quarter of a million.¹⁰ To ensure this regular tribute, the Mexica relied on intimidating largely autonomous local rulers and nobles in loyalty and submission by means of violent displays of human sacrifice and diplomacy.¹¹

⁹ Deborah L. Nichols, 'The Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State', in Julia A. Hendon and Rosemary A. Joyce (eds), *Mesoamerican Archaeology* (Oxford, 2004), p. 265. For more details on imperial 'economy of force', see Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, 1988).

¹⁰ See: Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah, *Essays on Population History: Mexico and the Caribbean*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, 1971); Rudolph A. Zambardino, 'Mexico's Population in the Sixteenth Century: Demographic Anomaly or Mathematical Illusion?', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 11 (1980), pp. 1-27; Caroline Dodds Pennock, "'A Remarkably Patterned Life": Domestic and Public in the Aztec Household City', *Gender & History*, 23.3 (2011), pp. 529-46, esp. p. 529. Archaeologist Susan Evans has suggested that even a comparatively conservative figure of 50,000 seems 'inflated', see Susan T. Evans, 'How Many People Lived in Tenochtitlan?' in her *Ancient Mexico and Central America: Archaeology and Culture History* (London, 2013), p. 549.

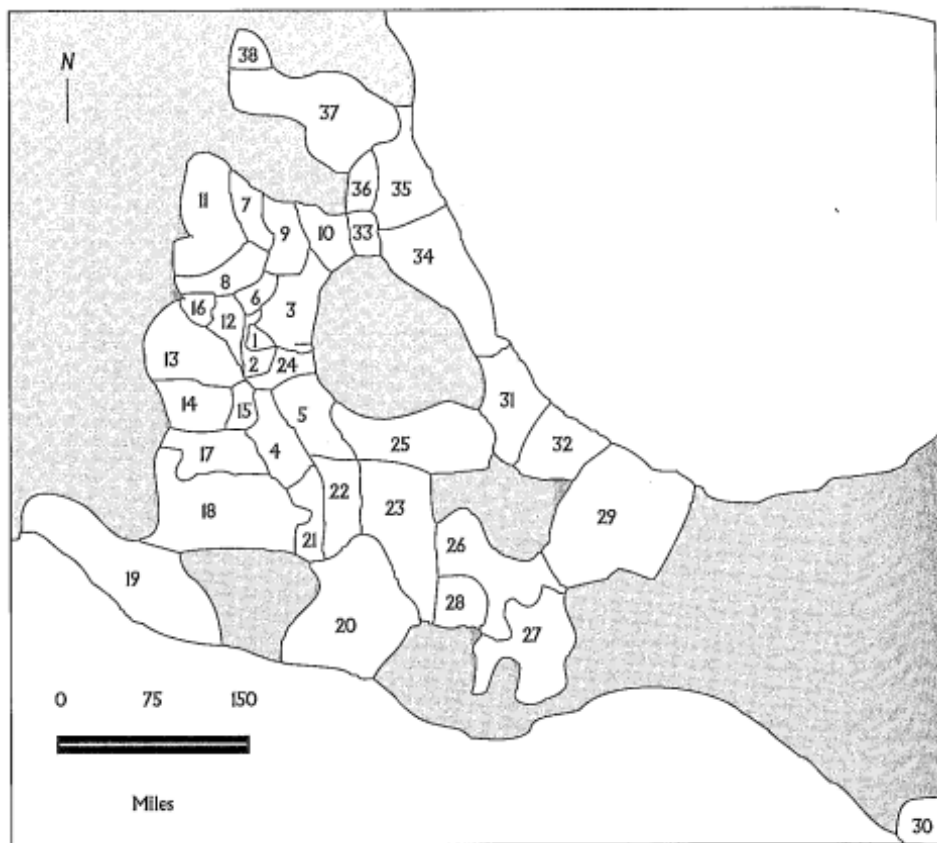
¹¹ For many years, the Mexica were measured by the standards of the Roman empire and their imperial credentials were found wanting. See, for example: Robert H. Barlow, *The Extent of the Empire of the Culhua Mexica* (Berkeley, 1949); Robert H. Barlow, 'Algunas consideraciones sobre el término "Imperio Azteca" in Jesús Monjarás-Ruiz, Elena Limón, and María de la Cruz Paillés H. (eds), *Obras de Robert H. Barlow* (Mexico City and Puebla, 1990), pp. 213-219; Charles Gibson, 'Structure of the Aztec Empire' in Robert Wauchope, Gordon F. Elkhholm and Ignacio Bernal (eds), *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Austin, 1971), pp. 376-394. This is an outmoded understanding of the Mexica and it is not one I intend to focus on in my thesis. For more on the



Map 1: The Triple Alliance Empire in 1519.

The red contours denote areas under hegemonic control. The two areas outlined in black were unconquered
Drawn by Harriet Smart

scholarly debate regarding their imperial status, see: Frances Berdan and Michael E. Smith, 'Archaeology and the Aztec Empire', *World Archaeology*, 23.3 (1992), pp. 353–367; Frances Berdan and Michael E. Smith, 'Introduction', to Frances F. Berdan, Richard E. Blanton, Elizabeth Hill Boone, Mary G. Hodge, Michael E. Smith and Emily Umberger (eds), *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (Washington, D.C., 1996), pp. 1-9. My thesis assumes that the Mexica controlled a hegemonic empire based on tribute and reciprocity.



PROVINCES

- | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Tlateloico | 14. Ocuñan | 27. Coyolapan |
| 2. Petlácalco | 15. Malinalco | 28. Tlachquauco |
| 3. Acolhuacan | 16. Zocotitlan | 29. Tochtepec |
| 4. Cuauhnahuac | 17. Tlachco | 30. Xoconochco |
| 5. Huaztepec | 18. Tepecuaculco | 31. Cuauhtochco |
| 6. Cuauhuitlan | 19. Cihuatlan | 33. Tlapacoyan |
| 7. Azocopan | 20. Tlapan | 34. Tlatlahquitepec |
| 8. Atotonilco de Pedraza | 21. Tlalcocauhuitlan | 35. Tochpan |
| 9. Hueypohtlan | 22. Culauhteopan | 36. Atlán |
| 10. Atotonilco el Grande | 23. Yohualtepec | 37. Tzicoac |
| 11. Zilotepc | 24. Chalco | 38. Oxtitlan |
| 12. Cuahuacan | 25. Tepeyacac | |
| 13. Toluca | 26. Coahuxtlahuacan | |

Map 2: Provinces of the Triple Alliance Empire in 1519
 Hassig, *Time, History and Belief*, p. 78.

What role did religion and ideology play in this coercive economic system? Scholars have made wild, unsubstantiated claims about the importance of religion to the Mexica's imperial strategies.¹² At one end of the spectrum, alphabetic sources have been read so uncritically that the Mexica's notorious human-sacrificial cult was taken as a key aspect of their imperial ideology. Henry Nicholson suggested that the extent to which deities were venerated was directly proportionate to the political success of the people they patronised. He wrote in his influential paper that: 'The extent and importance of their cults waxed and waned as a function of the political fortunes of the socio-political entities with which they were associated. The best known, most dramatic case [of this] was the rapid spread of the Huitzilopochtli cult as a result of the meteoric political rise of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.'¹³ At the other end of the spectrum, the Mexica's strategies have been regarded as purely political and economic; for scholars such as Ross Hassig, religion was a convenient justification. In this understanding, the Mexica's impressive militarism arose from political and practical necessity: 'To the Aztecs, warfare was a practical matter and was pursued in that fashion.'¹⁴ Conrad and Demarest argued that the 'maladaptive sacrificial cult' was counterproductive to imperial aims as it resulted in the 'deaths of thousands of food producers'.¹⁵ They have suggested that the Mexica were forced to develop institutions such as the 'Flowery Wars' in order to satisfy the 'obsession with mass sacrifice'.¹⁶

The starting point for this thesis was to evaluate these extremes. How far did the Mexica seek to promote their own cult among the provinces? What evidence is there that the provinces

¹² There have been more nuanced interpretations of religion among the Triple Alliance Empire, however. Elizabeth Brumfiel's archaeological and anthropological approach is a particularly notable exception, for example. I will discuss Brumfiel's contributions in greater depth in the methodological section.

¹³ Nicholson, 'Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico', p. 409

¹⁴ Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, p. 11.

¹⁵ Conrad and Demarest, *Religion and Empire*, p. 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

received, or accepted, these practices, willingly or otherwise? The overarching purpose of my study is to interrogate these oppositional distinctions and offer a more nuanced account of ritual among the Nahuas. A key aspect of this has been to establish in what ways Nahua ritual might have varied across time and space. This requires an interdisciplinary methodology which combines alphabetic with pictorial and archaeological evidence. While evaluating the notion of a state cult, my approach moves away from the traditional scholarly emphasis on elite, public display in favour of assessing the under-studied practices of local *altepemeh* and non-elites. Were rituals performed in different ways in different spaces? To what extent were public and private rituals sensitive to environmental changes? Hitherto, most studies have cast Nahua ritual as a static cycle of repetitive rituals. Might these ceremonies have been adaptable to the priorities of the moment? By shifting the focus out towards the provinces and into the homes of ordinary people, I seek to fill a major gap in our understanding of Postclassic Nahua ritual practices. This thesis aims to present a more nuanced discussion of Nahua religious customs.

Nahua culture was devastated by the impact of the Spanish conquest and the violence of the ensuing colonial period. This has overarching implications for my study and sources, which will be explained in depth in the methodological section. Suffice it to say here that the texts on which we rely were created after the Spanish conquest. This means that, unfortunately, there can be no named people in this story apart from a handful of rulers and nobles. However, the lack of individuals should not stand in the way of painting a varied and realistic picture of Nahua life. Nor is it desirable to pick out certain people and extrapolate their experiences as representative. Indeed, as Burkhart commented, ‘To single out the pre-Conquest “Aztec” as its quintessential representative is to perpetuate the ahistorical bias’.¹⁷ Rather, I intend to uncover how people conducted their rituals in order to detect variations, agency and choice. I refer to these historical subjects as ‘commoners’, ‘folk’ or ‘non-elites’. These terms are used in a

¹⁷ Burkhart, *Slippery Earth*, p. 6.

general sense to mean ordinary men, women and children who did not have formal state-sanctioned, political power. They were not rulers or noble families residing in secluded enclosures. Rather, the ritual experiences and choices I analyse here were, for the most part, those of the many ordinary people who lived away from temple precinct or palace.

Aims and objectives

This study presents a more nuanced interpretation of the purposes, choreography and meaning of certain rituals in the Valley of Mexico during the time of the Mexica (1430-1521). Other scholars, especially those reliant principally on the documentary record, are careful to position their research of Mexica culture as it was on ‘the eve of the Spanish conquest’. This is a justified caveat when using alphabetic sources because they were written in the decades after the conquest as records of what the elite informants could remember of pre-Hispanic times. However, while I am careful not to overstate the scope of my study, my interdisciplinary methodology allows me to reach further and wider than those scholars who use only the alphabetic record which was produced in a certain place at a moment in time. Archaeological evidence, for example, is a particularly important part of the methodology. The documentary record concerning the Postclassic Nahuas was mostly compiled in the decades after the Spanish conquest. In this way, there is a sense that it caught a dynamic society in time and recast it as an inert and singular culture. Material culture can supplement the temporal limitations of a documentary record and allow me to reach further back in time. In this way, I can produce more considered answers to thorny questions regarding the reach and purpose of rituals in this part of Mesoamerica. As I will explain, my interdisciplinary approach allows me to pursue the argument that Nahua ritual practices were far more varied and flexible across time, space and peoples than has thus far been appreciated.

Studies of Nahua ritual have shifted in recent years away from identification of rituals and deities towards theoretical and conceptual studies which deal with rituals' social, political and cultural implications. Pioneers such as Alfonso Caso or H. B. Nicholson focused on the relationship between ritual, principal deities and the Mesoamerican calendar.¹⁸ They were attempting to pin down how the pre-Hispanic calendar worked in relation to European time-keeping. Elsewhere, scholars such as Johanna Broda, Doris Heyden, David Carrasco and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma began to discuss the relationship between ritual, cosmivision and worldview, particularly after the excavation of the Templo Mayor from the 1980s onwards.¹⁹ More recently, studies have taken a more theoretical turn, interrogating the rituals' performance and their internal choreography with cultural history.²⁰

Studies very rarely pause to offer a definition, perhaps because of these activities' temporary and performative nature. Ritual lives through incense, speeches and obscure actions. Seldom is the action encoded in writing or pictures. In this respect, the Nahua case seems relatively rare in that we have pages of writing about how rituals were performed. Rather than offering fixed definitions, scholars have often preferred to write instead about ritual function. What do rituals do? In general, rituals create a sense of solidarity, communality and unity between participants who are experiencing the same activity.²¹ However, as I will discuss in

¹⁸ Johanna Broda, 'Tlacaxipehualiztli: A Reconstruction of an Aztec Calendar Festival from Sixteenth-Century Sources', *Revista española de antropología americana*, 5 (1970), pp. 197-217; Caso, *Los calendarios prehispánicos, passim*; Henry B. Nicholson 'Religion in pre-Hispanic Central Mexico', *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 10 (Austin, 1971), pp. 395-446.

¹⁹ Johanna Broda, 'Astronomy, Cosmovision, and Ideology in Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica', in Anthony Aveni and Gary Urton (eds), *Ethnoastronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the Andean Tropics* (New York, 1989), pp. 81-110; Heyden, 'The Dryness before the Rains'; Broda, Carrasco and Matos Moctezuma (eds), *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, Center and Periphery*.

²⁰ David Carrasco, 'Give me Some Skin: The Charisma of the Aztec Warrior', *History of Religions*, 35.1 (1995), pp. 1-26; Clendinnen, *Aztecs*.

²¹ David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, 1988); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973); Jonathan Z. Smith, 'The Bare Facts of Ritual', *History of Religions*, 20.15 (1980), pp. 112-27; Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969).

the final chapter, it seems to me that rituals can also *exclude*.²² Not everyone can participate in a drama in the same way; much less can everyone understand a ritual's esoteric symbolism. If a ritual is to unify, by definition, someone is left out unless they are explicitly invited to join. In order properly to participate in a ritual, therefore, a person needs to be initiated into its meanings. Anyone can stand by and watch but a ritual needs context and knowledge to have value.²³

Edward Muir provides a useful definition that ritual 'is basically a social activity that is repetitive, standardized, a model or a mirror, and its meaning is inherently ambiguous'.²⁴ While this is a useful starting point, I am mindful not to include the prescription that a ritual be inherently 'repetitive' as this contravenes my central argument that, for the Nahuas, rituals were flexible and responsive to the requirements of the moment. I define ritual as symbolic, stylised acts which are purposefully performed in a context which the participants consider sacred.²⁵

Key scholarly influences

Several scholars from history, art history, archaeology and anthropology have influenced my approach and shaped my argument. In terms of understanding the flexibility of rituals, the work of art historian Catherine DiCesare has undoubtedly been a primary inspiration. DiCesare

²² Clendinnen has also pointed out rituals 'capacity to isolate, clarify and dramatically present key experiences lifted out of the wearying muddle and chronic abrasions of "ordinary" life'. See Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 239.

²³ David Cannadine and Simon Price, 'Introduction: Divine Right of Kings', to their *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 1-19; Clifford Geertz, 'Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power', in his *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), pp. 121-46.

²⁴ Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, p. 6.

²⁵ Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 1-11 has a very good introduction to definitions and purposes of ritual.

was the first scholar to recognise fully that the institutional ceremonial cycle was adaptable. Until that point, scholars had largely been content to accept the cycle described by the early colonial friars as canonical. They took each ‘monthly’ ceremony as a fixed unit of time which followed each other in a strict sequence, much like the Western calendar. DiCesare altered this understanding. In her seminal monograph on Ochpaniztli, based on the exceptional pictorial *Codex Borbonicus*, she argued that these ‘cyclical *veintena* festivals responded to varying historical, local, and temporal contingencies’.²⁶ Latterly, she has applied her approach to the springtime festival Huey Tozoztli, to demonstrate that this festival was also clearly adaptable to the priorities of the moment.²⁷ Her research motivated me to consider in what ways other festivals might have been adaptable. However, my project did not set out merely to point out in what ways ritual could be adapted; I intend to take DiCesare’s approach one step further. If it was indeed the case that ritual could be altered according to the whim of the performer or the political considerations of the ruler, then what might that say about Nahua political and religious culture more generally?

The work of cultural historians such as Inga Clendinnen and Caroline Dodds Pennock have been hugely influential to the approach of this thesis. In considering the flexibility of rituals, it will be important to appreciate the Nahuas as a humane, sophisticated and restrained people who were fully capable of loving, nurturing relationships. Clendinnen and Dodds Pennock are important to the approach of this thesis as they provide the basis by which to understand the Nahuas in this way. While popular imagination and some twentieth-century scholarship on this culture cast them as a terrifying people whose religion was predicated on unnatural violence, these scholars treated the Nahuas as compassionate, rational people who, rather than being ‘naturally’ bloodthirsty, had to be brought to understand their fate in the world.

²⁶ DiCesare, *Sweeping the Way*, *passim*.

²⁷ DiCesare, ‘Tlaloc Rites’, p. 703.

This is an important starting point for the thesis to build on. If we accept that the Nahuas were a refined, albeit on occasions startlingly violent, people when investigating their ritual, then we can bring ourselves a step closer to a fuller understanding of their religious practices. Appreciating that the Nahuas perceived human sacrifice and ritual bloodshed as necessary parts of their existence means that we can understand how they might have manipulated it for their own ends.

A crucial aspect of this thesis is that the analysis is rooted in historical time. I am building significantly on the approaches of Clendinnen and Dodds Pennock by taking their approaches and rooting my analysis of Nahua ritual in historical time. In linking ritual to historical events, my work bridges the gap between these important cultural historians and the analyses of ritual material culture undertaken by archaeologists such as Elizabeth Brumfiel and Emily Umberger, for example.²⁸ Umberger was one of the first archaeologists to examine monumental architecture and sculptures in their historical context.²⁹ This was a pathbreaking approach in Nahua studies as, until that point, these objects had been analysed purely as monumental pieces of art. It was important to place them in the context of the Nahuas history as many of the pieces reflected or depicted important events such as temple dedications or imperial conquests. As I have discussed, prior to the work of DiCesare, studies were content to operate within Nahua notions of cyclical time. This is, of course, in many ways, a desirable approach as it is sensitive to the manner in which the Nahuas recorded and conceived of events which shaped their lives. However, this method runs the risk of recasting separate events as perpetual and unchanging and can fail to recognise change over time. While my work is

²⁸ For cultural histories of the Nahuas (or Aztecs, as both these scholars term them), see: Clendinnen, *Aztecs* and Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*. Some of the most important archaeological studies concerning Nahua religion have assessed its relationship with imperial strategies and responses, see: Brumfiel, 'Huitzilopochtli's Conquest'; Brumfiel, 'Figurines and the Aztec State'.

²⁹ Emily Umberger, 'Aztec Sculptures, Hieroglyphs and History', Ph.D. Thesis (Columbia University, 1981).

embedded within Nahua notions of cyclical time, I also position my analysis in certain years or time periods. Relating rituals to historical circumstances gives meaning to variations in rituals across space or time, allowing us to perceive both deep continuities and specific contingencies.

From the field of archaeology, Michael E. Smith has been particularly important to this research. He has been a pioneer of ‘household archaeology’ in Mexico: the excavation of dwellings and non-elite architecture.³⁰ His excavations in 1980s’ Morelos (the Aztec-empire provinces of Cuauhnahuac and Huaxtepec) revolutionised our understanding of Nahua commoner lives.³¹ As will be discussed in more detail in my section on methodology, Smith’s unpublished excavation reports form much of the basis of the archaeological evidence for the latter chapters.

Other archaeologists’ fieldwork has been somewhat patchy and sporadic, with the majority focused on individual towns residing in and around the natural boundaries of the Basin. Excavating in the 1930s, George Vaillant was a pioneer at many of these sites.³² Other particularly important examples of archaeological fieldwork in the region are Susan T. Evans’ excavations at Cihuatepan in the Teotihuacan Valley,³³ and Christina Elson’s work on the elite residence at Chiconautla.³⁴ Many of these excavations are extremely valuable for their

³⁰ For an engaging and concise explanation situation of his household analysis within broader scholarly trends, see Michael E. Smith, *At Home with the Aztecs* (London, 2016), pp. 9-13.

³¹ For example: Michael E. Smith, ‘Excavations of Aztec Urban Houses at Yauhtepec, Morelos’, *Latin American Antiquity* 10.2 (1999), pp. 133-50; Michael E. Smith, *Archaeological Research at Aztec-Period Rural Sites in Morelos, Mexico* (Pittsburgh, 1992).

³² George C. Vaillant, *Excavations at Zacatenco*, Anthropological Papers, Vol. 32, Part 1 (New York); George C. Vaillant, *Excavations at Ticoman*, Anthropological Papers, Vol. 32, Part 2 (New York); George C. Vaillant, ‘A Correlation of Archaeological and Historical Sequences in the Valley of Mexico’, *American Anthropologist*, 40 (1938), pp. 535-73; George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise and Fall of the Aztec Nation* (Garden City, 1941).

³³ Susan T. Evans, *Excavations at Cihuatepan, an Aztec Village in the Teotihuacan Valley*, Publications in Anthropology, 36 (Nashville, 1998).

³⁴ Christina M. Elson, ‘An Aztec Palace at Chiconautla, Mexico’, *Latin American Antiquity*, 10 (1999), pp. 151-67.

diligent recording and detail, but their parochial focus has resulted in perpetuating the binary oppositions between ‘state and local’ and/or ‘centre and periphery’, terms which fail to recognise or engage with the complex nuances within or between these categories. For example, Elson and Smith have investigated the archaeological traces of one of my major ritual case studies, Xiuhmolpilli (the ‘Binding of the Years’ ceremony). They evaluate the textual evidence and material remains and conclude that ‘The forms of Aztec ritual were worked out through a dialectic between traditional local and household practices, on one hand, and innovative imperial policies, on the other’.³⁵ Failing to detect that these texts were created by elite indigenous men to suit the sensibilities of the European missionaries means that Elson and Smith take the early colonial sources at face value, failing to interrogate these texts’ internal assumptions or recognise that these elites might have overstated their own influence and the might of their empire. Although an important contribution to the field, Elson and Smith’s analysis obscures any hints at intra-local differences because they employ oppositional categories. As I will demonstrate in the third and fourth chapters, these binary distinctions are inappropriate for the study of Nahua rituals. Can we really say that all ‘traditional local and household practices’ were the same across this vast empire? Would rituals of the home and village not have differed depending on their location, proximity to a public temple or resident authorities?

Elizabeth Brumfiel was an important advocate of combining textual with archaeological evidence to form bridging arguments — so-called middle range theory — and her work is particularly influential to this study as she was one of the few scholars to explore the dynamics of imperial expansion and its effects on the provinces via the archaeological record.³⁶ With a particular focus on political motivations, Brumfiel’s fieldwork sought to

³⁵ Christina M. Elson and M. E. Smith, ‘Archaeological Deposits from the Aztec New Fire Ceremony’, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 12 (2001), p. 172.

³⁶ Brumfiel, ‘Huitzilopochtli’s Conquest’, *passim*.

investigate the effect of the empire on the economies of *altepemeh* and settlements in the Basin of Mexico. She sought to investigate the effectiveness of Mexica ideology in subjugating other groups by assessing how these groups received and embraced this ideology.³⁷ Brumfiel was a pioneering anthropological and archaeological scholar of the Triple Alliance Empire, whose bottom-up perspective, with a focus on gender and power strategies, gives invaluable insights. However, while innovative, her conclusions remained speculative because of a lack of data from systematic excavation. With the benefit of unpublished archaeological reports, I seek to interrogate Brumfiel's speculative conclusion that: 'Human sacrifice and the glorification of warriors were more muted in hinterland towns than in the Aztec capital'.³⁸

Thesis outline

The argument pursued in this thesis is that the post-classic Nahuas, as a humane people, could adapt their ritual protocols and performances to suit their own tastes, political requirements, ecological pressures and local imperatives. Rituals were flexible, but Nahuas could also conform to what was expected of them. I demonstrate this argument with a series of four case studies, with supporting introduction, methodology and conclusion sections.

The first chapter, 'Sources, perspectives and methodology' provides a detailed introduction to the alphabetic, pictorial and archaeological sources which I will be using

³⁷ Nichols, 'Rethinking Huitzilopochtli', p. 158. For Brumfiel's approach to religion and state ideology see: Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, 'Aztec Hearts and Minds: Religion and the State in the Aztec Empire', in Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D'Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison and Carla M. Sinopoli (eds), *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 283-310; Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, 'Figurines and the Aztec State: Testing the Effectiveness of Ideological Domination', in Rita P. Wright (ed.), *Gender and Archaeology: Essays in Research and Practice* (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 143-66; Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, 'Provincial Elites and the Limits of Dominant Ideology in the Aztec Empire', in Christina M. Elson and R. Alan Covey (eds), *Intermediate Elite Agency in Precolumbian States and Empires* (Tucson, 2006), pp. 166-74.

³⁸ Brumfiel, 'Aztec Hearts and Minds', p. 307.

throughout this thesis. It presents my integrated approach which combines analysis of these three types of sources. First, I will contextualise the early colonial chronicles and provide evidence to support my use of this problematic, but necessary, material. Apart from a brief explanation, I will not reiterate their well-known provenance. Rather, my purpose in this section is to foreground recurring problems so that I can provide a clear explanation of how pictorials and archaeological material can work in conjunction with the written word. In this section I examine the current state of archaeological fieldwork in central Mexico; this will make the significance of my case studies clear.

The second chapter, ‘Filth, Fire and Skins: Key Principles of Nahua religion’ analyses some key concepts which underpin the entire analysis, making clear my standpoint on contested topics such as the calendar cycles and the *tonalpouhqui* (a person who ‘read’ the calendar for commoners). This chapter examines European preconceptions of fixed, linear time — in conjunction with ‘fixed’ and ‘moveable’ religious feasts — and shows how they have clouded our understanding of a flexible ritual cycle. I will give detailed attention to the character of the *tonalpouhqui*. As the person who interpreted a calendar, he was a knowledgeable mediator between official religious structures and ordinary people. In this way, understanding their role is critical to my analysis.

Away from formal religious structures and actors, this second section also positions my work within current understandings of Nahua religiosity. Certainly, Nahua religious concepts are important throughout the thesis, but in this first section, I foreground a discussion of two notions, *ixiptlal* (pl. *ixiptlah*) and *tlazolli*, the debates over which exemplify the current understandings of Nahua religion. The process of *ixiptlal* — by which a human, animal or object could act as a substitute for a named deity — remains particularly contested and is, as I argue, misunderstood among scholars. *Tlazolli*, the final religious concept which I introduce in this first section, literally referred to rubbish, filth or trash and was something to be removed

from the house and from sacred spaces. As such, movement and control of *tlazolli* plays an important, recurring role in the rituals which we will be analysing and so I interrogate its implications for my study.

Analysing how many of these concepts worked in practice, the third chapter, ‘Variation in a Public Festival, Xiuhmolpilli’ uses the ‘Binding of Years’ ceremony as a case study to demonstrate that ordinary people could — by virtue of their actions and knowledge — be involved and active participants in public ritual. This chapter demonstrates that rituals were unrestricted to a temple or palace. Xiuhmolpilli began in the home — with women playing an important role — before pivoting around a sacred landscape to a mountain beyond the capital city and out into the empire. I argue that there was no single ‘representative’ moment of this ceremony. Instead, this was a ritual process where each phase was dependent on the last for meaning and purpose.

In this chapter I scrutinise evidence that the Xiuhmolpilli celebrated in 1507 was a unique festival, different to other previous celebrations of this dramatic ceremony. This is a major historiographical contribution as studies of this ceremony usually consider it to be ‘archetypal’. By contrast, I argue that this was an ancient festival which, by 1507, had grown in status, been shifted on a year and been displaced outside of Tenochtitlan to an extinct volcano. This transforms our understanding of rituals more broadly as these processes have generally been understood as occurring in a similar, unchanging fashion year after year, and ignore or downplay any hints at variation in the sources.

Using the springtime rainmaking festival Huey Tozoztli to investigate different ritual landscapes and stages, the fourth chapter challenges the dominance of the Templo Mayor as the archetypal, most representative ritual stage for ritual display. This chapter, ‘Constructed and Natural Landscapes in a Public Festival, Huey Tozoztli’, turns away from the action of the

constructed temples to focus on Tenochtitlan's neighbourhoods and the natural world. This case study suggests that temples and monoliths were certainly not considered more important ritual stages than the landscape.

In a usual solar year, Huey Tozoztli was the fourth of eighteen public ceremonies. However, I re-examine alphabetic, pictorial and archaeological evidence that the Huey Tozoztli of 1507 was celebrated in a different way to normal. This crucial evidence reveals that Nahua 'yearly' rituals were, as we saw Xiuhmolpilli to be, fluid, flexible and adaptable to the priorities of the moment.

Analysing household ceremonies, the penultimate, fifth chapter, 'Agency and Variation in Lifecycle Rituals', continues to explore flexibility and variation by demonstrating that Nahua commoners did not unthinkingly and repetitively perform domestic rituals. It is divided into two sections. The first section considers those ceremonies associated with birth and early life to examine how the human sacrificial cult and the activities of the domestic sphere were mutually supporting. This part argues that the activities of the home underpinned ritual killing while, perhaps, not forming an explicit part of these practices. The lack of personal or eyewitness accounts mean that it is extremely difficult to assess the degree to which an ordinary person might have gone along with, or participated in, this system. We cannot tell whether everyone bought into the idea that human sacrifice was a necessary part of their lives, but, this analysis will assess whether rituals laid the foundation for the public ritual choreography.

The second section of this chapter focuses in particular on the regional domestic ritual within the province of Cuauhnahuac, the home of the Tlahuica people. As the alphabetic and pictorial accounts are silent about the religious expression of provincial commoners, I draw heavily from the archaeological record to assess similarities and differences from the central human sacrificial cult. In this section, household structure is important in building a picture of

how ordinary people conducted their rituals, with specific reference to the *temazcalli* (sweat bath). Continuing in the tradition of Elizabeth Brumfiel and Lisa Overholtzer, among others, I analyse the figurine inventory to assess the degree to which these rural commoners accepted, or paid attention to, a ‘central’ cult to Huitzilopochtli. In this chapter, I suggest that very different rituals took place within the home and patio which were more important to individual families than temple-top sacrifice and ritual bloodshed.

The final chapter ‘A State versus Local Religion? Ritual in the Provinces’ analyses archaeological evidence to push the analysis even further into the underexplored provinces and their religious lives. We return to the Xiuhmolpilli case study. This time, for a different angle to test whether, indeed, ‘everyone’ in the empire participated in this festival in the way the noble elders informed the Spanish missionaries. Did all provincial elites and commoners smash and discard their pots, as they were apparently told to do by Tenochtitlan’s elite priests? This chapter explores whether, indeed, Mexica and Nahua religious behaviours fits into binary models of ‘centre versus periphery’ or ‘state versus local’. This analysis will reveal that there were far more dynamic, complex and mutually influencing interactions at play than can be reduced to these oppositional categories. We will see some fascinating differences in ritual practice between communities under Mexica political control. This will shed light on Mexica imperial strategies more broadly and will assess whether ideological control was even a preoccupation of the militaristic Mexica.

My concluding thoughts bring together my analysis of Nahua ritual to determine how rituals might have changed according to circumstantial pressures, such as drought, political imperatives, or been adapted to personal choice. Such an analysis contributes significantly to understandings of Nahua culture — and ritual in particular. The nature of the documentary sources has limited scholars to a discussion of a ‘society on the eve of conquest’, or scholars have tended to take the alphabetic sources as representation of the entire Postclassic period.

Moreover, in terms of religion, this has meant that the Nahuas are often seen as entranced by desperate, unrelenting ferocious ritualism. My study shows that many different people — *tlahtoani*, elite priest, mother or warrior — could make choices about their rituals within an overarching social structure which promoted violent, controlled behaviour.

Imperial, centralised control is a particularly important theme of my study. In addition to contributing to understandings of Nahua ritual at a personal, private level, I examine whether, and indeed, how, the Mexica elite sought to control their vassals ideologically from Tenochtitlan. By tracing the adherence to ‘state’ rituals via the alphabetic, pictorial and archaeological record, I piece together a far more nuanced picture of Nahua ritual practice across space, time and people.

Now that I have set the course for the aims, objectives and key influences of this thesis, the following will be an examination of Mexica and Nahua history and culture in more general terms, so as to underpin the complexity of the analysis.

Historical background

The Mexica of Tenochtitlan, or ‘Aztecs’, are renowned as terrifying people whose religion was predicated on violence.³⁹ When the Spanish trooped into the Valley of Mexico in 1519, the Mexica sat at the height of their political dominance and religious exuberance. However, this had not always been the case. The Mexica were, in fact, the last in a long line of people who had ruled over the Valley of Mexico. Their humble origins have often been

³⁹ This is the typical interpretation of these people in both scholarly literature and popular imagination. There are, of course, important exceptions to this dehumanising perspective. This thesis follows in the tradition of cultural historians such as Inga Clendinnen and Caroline Dodds Pennock who treat the ‘Aztecs’ as a humane, compassionate people. See: Clendinnen, *Aztecs*; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*.

obscured by the vast power and wealth which greeted the Spanish. In fact, the Mexica had only settled in the Valley of Mexico in 1325, some 200 years before the Spanish invasion. The Mexica were one of seven tribes who left a mythical, primal cave called Chicomoztoc ('Seven Caves') sometime in the eleventh century.⁴⁰ Their origins are recalled in this evocative image from the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* where we see the seven-lobed cave, each occupied by a different tribe [see figure 1].⁴¹ The Mexica were the last to journey southwards, settling on their way near another mythical location called Aztlan ('The Place of Whiteness'). Incidentally, this is where the name 'Aztecs' derives. Guided by their titular deity Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica eventually continued their migration.⁴²

⁴⁰ The other tribes were the Tapanecs, the Acolhua, Tlaxcalans, Chalca, Tlahuica and the Xochimilca who all travelled southwards, separately, and settled in the Valley of Mexico and were the Mexica's neighbours.

⁴¹ Durán, *History*, pp. 12-16.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 19.



Figure 1: Chicomoztoc, the seven-lobed cave
Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca

The early chapters of Diego Durán's *Historia* give the most comprehensive account of the Mexica's history before they settled in Tenochtitlan;⁴³ the following relation is based on this friar's text. In 1298, the Mexica had left Aztlan and were at the shores of Lake Tetzaco. In need of shelter, they were given the snake-infested marsh Tizaapan with the agreement of neighbouring *altepetl* Colhuacan. To the Colhua's surprise, the Mexica thrived in the hostile

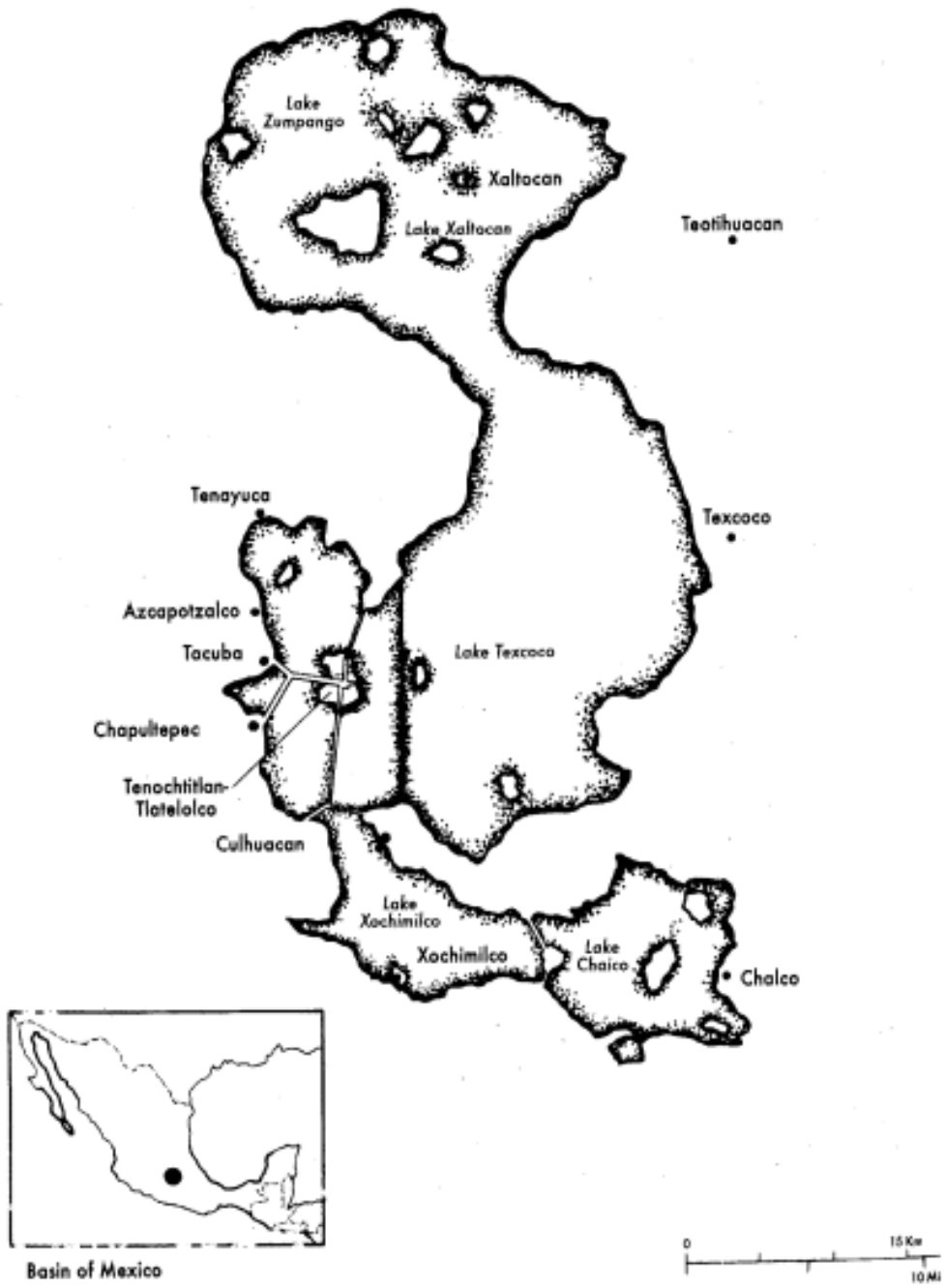
⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-39.

environment;⁴⁴ this was later proudly remembered as a marker of their resilience and resourcefulness. The Mexica established trading links with the Colhua; marriages were arranged between the two ethnic groups.⁴⁵ However, a dreadful misunderstanding led to the Mexica's expulsion from Tizaapan and their eventual settling on Lake Tetzoco. Huitzilopochtli urged the Mexica to find a Yaocihuatl ('Enemy Woman') and prepare to find their real settlement. The Mexica sought the daughter of Achitometl, Colhuacan's *tlahtoani*, for the ritual. On the grandiose pleas that his daughter would become a living deity and would venerate the Earth Mother Tonantzin ('Our Mother'), Achitometl sent his daughter to Tizaapan. When he attended the ceremony, Achitometl was confronted with the horrifying sight of a Mexica priest wearing his daughter's flayed skin. In anger, he fled the temple and demanded the Mexica's expulsion from Tizaapan.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.



Map 3: The Basin of Mexico
 López Lujan, *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor*, p. 44.

In around 1325 (accounts vary), the Mexica were under the jurisdiction of the Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco, whose seat lay on Lake Tetzaco's northwestern shore. In that year, they saw the infamous omen of the eagle on the *nopal* cactus and recognised that they should settle at this spot which would become the largest metropolis in Mesoamerica. The symbolism of this crucial event is depicted on *Codex Mendoza's* frontispiece [see figure 2] and is remembered today on Mexico's national flag. The Mexica marked this foundation by drilling a new fire. The glyph for the smoking fireboard — on which the new fire was started — is also noticeable on the bottom right-hand corner of the same *Codex Mendoza folio*.⁴⁷ The Mexica remained, however, under the subjugation of the Tepanecs until 1426 when the *tlahtoani* of Azcapotzalco died without a clear successor. Out of this political confusion, the Mexica seized their chance. In conjunction with their neighbours at Texcoco and Tlacopan, they formed a Triple Alliance.⁴⁸ In 1427, the Triple Alliance waged a successful war against the Tepanecs and rose to dominance.⁴⁹ The Triple Alliance then began to operate within the existing system of warfare, diplomacy and reciprocal tribute to expand within the Valley of Mexico and beyond. While it

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Hill Boone, 'Bringing Polity to Place: Aztec and Mixtec Foundation Rituals', in Costanza Vega (ed.), *Códices y documentos sobre México* (Mexico City, 2000), pp. 547-73. Rituals were an important part of the process of founding a new settlement. Hill Boone argues that Mixtec and Aztec foundation rituals, although represented quite differently in their respective codices, did not differ much. While the specifics could vary, a foundation ritual involved naming a place, a cult bundle, lighting a fire and building a type of temple.

⁴⁸ Some have argued that this tripartite imperial structure was a colonial invention. The interesting idea that the Triple Alliance did not exist — at least in the way that scholars assume — was first proposed by Charles Gibson after studying tribute payments: Gibson, 'Structure of the Aztec Empire', p. 389. Gillespie, with her assessment of Aztec historical traditions, investigates this notion further: Gillespie, 'The Aztec Triple Alliance', pp. 233-63. These scholars point to the fact that information relating to what became known as the Triple Alliance is only found in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century documents and are often linked with indigenous leaders petitioning Spanish authorities for more power and recognition. This seems a persuasive argument as many native leaders sought to emphasise their own exceptional power during the colonial period. It is plausible that the fixed, tripartite structure was — if not necessarily invented — overstated in the colonial record.

⁴⁹ As with the evidence that the Triple Alliance existed at all, the sources for the overthrow of Azcapotzalco are unclear. Tovar, for example, states that Tenochtitlan acted alone in this victory: Gillespie, 'The Aztec Triple Alliance', p. 251.

has been remembered as principally an 'Aztec' achievement, in reality each conquered *altepetl* was attributed to a member of the Triple Alliance.⁵⁰



Figure 2: Codex Mendoza frontispiece.

The smoking fireboard is the bottom right-hand corner of the folio, above the 2 Reed year glyph

⁵⁰ Some places, therefore, paid tribute to the Tetzocan *tlahtoani*, for example.

Acamapichtli	1372-1391
Huitzilhuitl	1391-1471
Chimalpopoca	1417-1427
<i>Overthrow of the Tepanecs</i>	<i>1428</i>
Itzcoatl	1427-1440
Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina	1440-1468
Axayacatl	1468-1481
Tizoc	1481-1486
Ahuitzotl	1486-1502
Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin	1502-1520
<i>Arrival of the Spanish</i>	<i>1519</i>
Cuitlahuac	1520
Cuauhtemoc	1520-1525

Table 1: Mexica tlahtoqueh

The rise and fall of the ‘Aztec Empire’ has been well-documented elsewhere, and it is not my intention or purpose to reproduce this narrative here.⁵¹ However, it will provide perspective for my study to draw out some turning points and major trends in Mexica imperial expansion. This explanation will be helpful in understanding the historical context in which

⁵¹ Frances Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (Fort Worth and London, 1982); Frances F. Berdan, Richard E. Blanton, Elizabeth Hill Boone, Mary G. Hodge, Michael E. Smith and Emily Umberger (eds), *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (Washington, D.C., 1996); Conrad and Demarest, *Religion and Empire, passim*; Nigel Davies, *The Aztecs: A History* (Norman, 1974), *passim*; Hassig, *Aztec Warfare, passim*; Michael E. Smith, ‘The Aztec Empire and the Mesoamerican World System’ in Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D’Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison and Carla M. Sinopoli (eds), *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 128-54.

many of the rituals, to be discussed later, were performed. Table 1 is a roll of Mexica *tlahtoqueh*. The first imperial *tlahtoani* Itzcoatl naturally concentrated his military efforts on the areas close to Tenochtitlan. Those areas close to present-day Mexico City have received comparatively more archaeological attention and therefore the bulk of my material evidence comes from these places. Major, sustained expansion really began from 1440 under Motecuzhoma Ilhuicamina (also known as Motecuzhoma I). This *tlahtoani* was the first to reach the Gulf coast and subjugate the Huastecs and Totonacs. In so doing, the Mexica gained access to more goods for trade. Among the most important prizes of this victory was access to precious maritime items such as conch shells. By 1486, during the reign of Ahuitzotl (relatively late, if we keep in mind that the Spanish only arrived 30 years after this in 1519), the Mexica had cemented their position as the senior partner of the Triple Alliance. From this moment, they add *huey* to the ruler's name: *huey tlahtoani*, meaning 'great ruler'. Ahuitzotl's rulership was characterised by major expansion to the north, east and south of Tenochtitlan. Before the European invasion interrupted his reign, Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (or Motecuhzoma II) was consolidating his predecessor's achievements and pushed further into present-day Oaxaca, Puebla and out to Veracruz on the Gulf coast.

History or myth?

The history of this wandering tribe is long, winding and, at times, confusing. As we have seen in this brief sketch, accounts can vary depending on the source. Different years or dates can be given for the same event. However, we can compound this picture still further. It is extremely important to note that colonial destruction was not the first incidence of book-burning in central Mexico. In 1431, the Mexica were establishing themselves as a more potent political force. As we saw previously, under *tlahtoani* Itzcoatl this phase saw the beginning of

expansion outside of the Basin of Mexico. Mexica forebears had carried oral and pictorial histories throughout their long migration. However, the rise to political power meant that the Mexica wished to rebrand themselves and so all previous records were destroyed:

The history of it was saved, but it was burned when Itzcoatl ruled in Mexico. A council of rulers of Mexico took place. They said: “It is not necessary for all the common people to know of the writings; government will be defamed, and this will only spread sorcery in the land; for it containeth many falsehoods”.⁵²

The state collated disparate historical traditions and created a homogeneous narrative which adhered to their imperial aims.⁵³

Using an interdisciplinary methodology, my study tests the claims of the alphabetic texts that the Mexica spread a human sacrificial cult along with extracting tribute from their vassals. As we have seen, many studies of Nahua ritual have taken their state-sponsored narrative uncritically and assumed that the human sacrificial cult was widespread among the Triple Alliance Empire. However, given that the Nahuas themselves confirm that they rewrote their own histories to present themselves in a certain light, how can we know whether Mexica history happened in the way we are brought to understand? How can we use any of these sources to access a reliable, ‘truthful’ version of the past? In order to use these historical accounts, we should understand that for the Nahuas, myth and history were inextricably linked; myth was the way in which they made sense of their past. Most important was their understanding of their place in the circles of time. Rather than conceiving of a linear, progressive history, they drew inspiration from the past and sought to influence their fate by envisaging the future. While for present-day historians this certainly presents a challenge, we should appreciate that this is but one *version* of their past which we are interrogating. As Caroline Dodds Pennock argues, ‘If we accept that the mythical narrative was as “real” to the

⁵² *Florentine Codex*, 10: 29: 191.

⁵³ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 90.

Aztecs as any “factual” history, then these stories exemplify, if not the reality, then certainly the ideals which underpinned Aztec society’.⁵⁴ Susan Gillespie is particularly convincing on the uses of Nahuatl histories in her influential, contested analysis of Mexica rulership and dynastic history. She writes that: ‘There are other “truths” to be found in these documents, and they deal less with “history” than with how the natives (and even the Spanish) conceived of and used the Aztec past to comprehend their present world’.⁵⁵ In other words, we can still use these records to understand something of Mexica life but any conclusions might have less to do with actual historical fact and more to do with how the Mexica wished to present themselves. My study confronts this tension between myth and history directly. Moreover, it interrogates the claims of both present-day scholars, and the Mexica themselves, that a human sacrificial cult went hand in hand with indirect hegemonic control.

Myth’s grip on Nahuatl history might have weakened with time. In other words, the more recent events are probably described more ‘accurately’. By contrast, events in the distant past — particularly prior to Itzcoatl’s reign — are shrouded in myth. The migration histories, for example, are so far back in time as to be completely inseparable from myth.⁵⁶ The ‘other truths’ described by Gillespie which Elizabeth Hill Boone finds in these migration accounts were that these tales served the Mexica to rebrand their barbarous past. She writes that ‘The migration story actually functions to transform the Mexica as a tribal group, by endowing them with spiritual power. It does this by stripping them to their purest strain and putting them through hazards, by testing their faith in Huitzilopochtli, and by developing Huitzilopochtli’s own strength. It thus makes them fit to assume the imperial role’.⁵⁷ So, in our discussions we must accept that, sometimes, we might only be able to glimpse at what might be ‘real’ in these

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

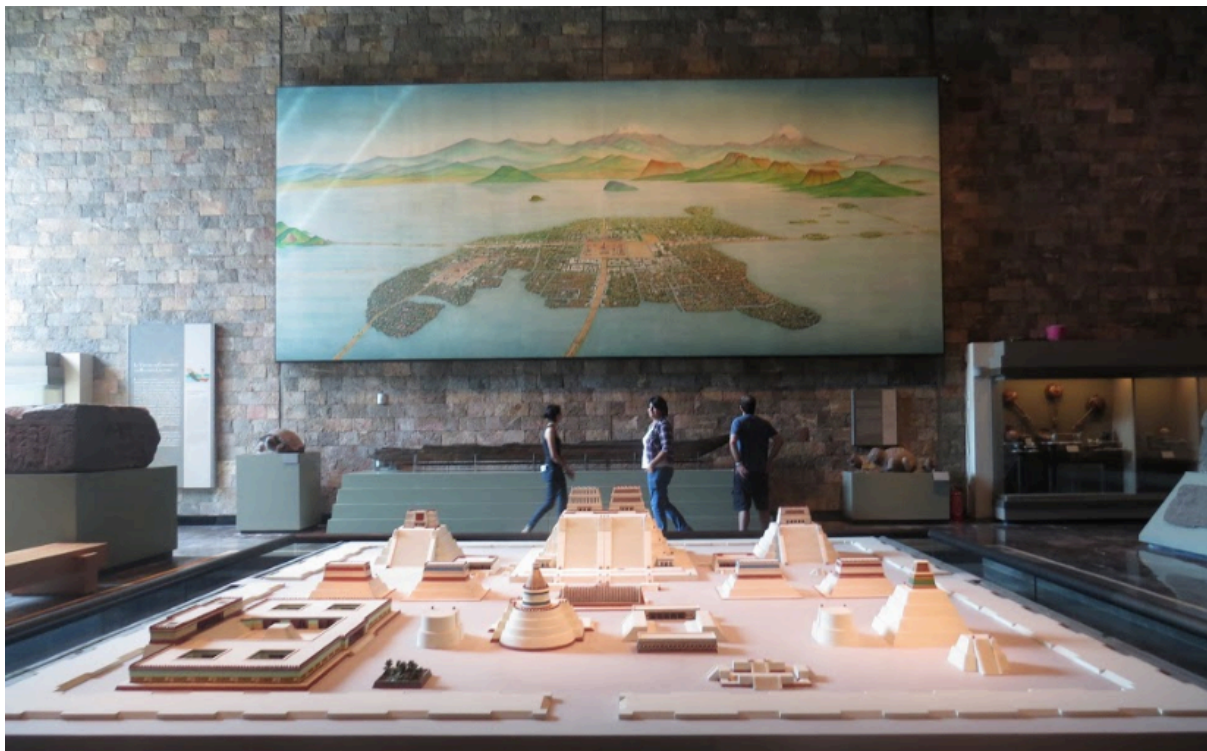
⁵⁵ Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings*, p. xxii.

⁵⁶ Michael E. Smith, ‘The Aztlan Migrations of the Nahuatl Chronicles: Myth or History?’, *Ethnohistory*, 31.3 (1984), pp. 153-186.

⁵⁷ Hill Boone, ‘Migration Histories as Ritual Performance’, p. 143.

histories. However, this certainly does not discount their usefulness for accessing Mexica customs. In fact, it would seem to strengthen them for this purpose. The Mexica rewrote their history expressly with the purpose to collect together disparate narratives, customs and ideals. In this way, when reading their histories, we see what they considered most important about their culture and way of life. While it may be, as I will discuss later, overly stylised and synthesised, these sources can certainly help us to detect Mexica ideals and priorities. Of course, my study aims to unpick this stylised version of their ritual activities. It is, as I will explain, with a combination of pictorials, alphabetic texts and archaeological evidence that can bring us even closer to an accurate interpretation of events in the Valley of Mexico under the Mexica.

Tenochtitlan



*Figure 3: Mexico-Tenochtitlan exhibition, Museo de Antropología, Mexico City.
Photograph: Harriet Smart.*

This sparkling island city of Tenochtitlan looms large in our analysis. Tenochtitlan was the most important urban settlement in central Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest. As such, the overwhelming majority of our information on Nahua culture derives from Tenochtitlan and its elite. The painting by Miguel Covarrubias of Tenochtitlan which is on display in the Mexico-Tenochtitlan exhibit at Mexico City's famous Museo de Antropología [see figure 3] displays the sophisticated, ordered urban settlement which lay in the middle of Lake Tetzaco. The soaring mountain range of the Sierra Nevada, encompassing snow-capped volcanoes Popocatepetl ('Smoking Mountain') and Itztaccihuatl ('White Woman') are clearly visible in the distance of Covarrubias' painting. Tenochtitlan was connected to the mainland by a thin strip of causeway. Its population might have numbered as many as a quarter of a million; these people squeezed onto 13 square kilometres of land reclaimed from Lake Tetzaco.⁵⁸ Indeed Tenochtitlan had more inhabitants than either of the port cities of Seville or Lisbon and so would have been the largest city that any of the conquistadors had seen.⁵⁹

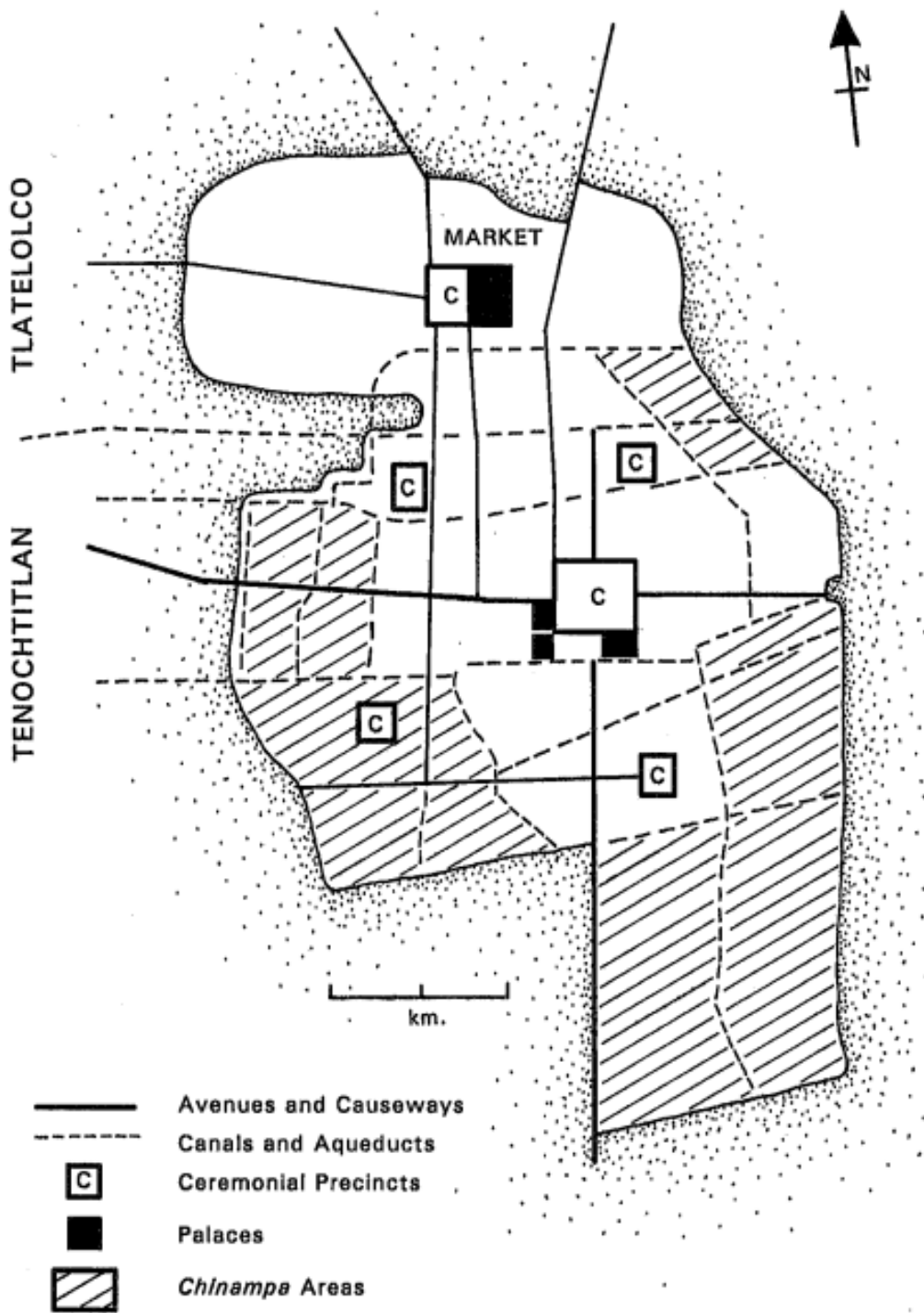
Tenochtitlan certainly dominates understandings of all aspects of ancient Nahua culture and society. This is because, as it was the capital of colonial New Spain, it is over-represented in the historical source base. This has serious implications for our understanding of Nahua religious practices. Because of the nature of the early colonial documentary sources, and the importance placed on the excavation of the Templo Mayor, many studies interpret the public religion of Tenochtitlan as if it applied to the entire empire. Similarly, the city's dominance in both the historical and archaeological record meant that for many years it was taken as a representative central Mexican urban centre.⁶⁰ Michael E. Smith's important book *Aztec City-*

⁵⁸ As I have indicated, there is significant scholarly debate surrounding Tenochtitlan's population. It is difficult to ascertain a 'true' because of the almost total lack of archaeological fieldwork undertaken at the domestic level underneath present-day Mexico City. Reasonable estimates seem to vary between a quarter to three quarters of a million.

⁵⁹ Richard L. Kagan, *Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493-1793* (New Haven, 2000).

⁶⁰ Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 3.

State Capitals persuasively dislodged this interpretation and showed that Tenochtitlan far outstripped any of its Mesoamerican counterparts. This begs the question: how far were the ritual practices of other cities shaped by their territorial organisation and population? Did differences in household structure, for example, mean that rituals performed there were different to temple dramas?



Map 4: Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco
 Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 185.

The Templo Mayor

Four main roads led into the city from the causeways, and at the centre of these sat a ceremonial precinct with the notorious Templo Mayor as its heart [see map 4]. Its infamous steps occupied the eastern flank of this plaza and faced west, as did all central Mexican temples, with the exception of those to wind deity, Quetzalcoatl which faced east to greet the rising sun. Sitting in the heart of Tenochtitlan's enclosed ceremonial precinct, the Templo Mayor was the physical manifestation of the Mexica's human sacrificial cult to their patron deity Huitzilopochtli. However, this deity did not sit alone at the apex. He was joined by Tlaloc, the pan-Mesoamerican, ancient agriculture deity. In this way, the temple exemplified the unification of artificial and natural entities.⁶¹

The pyramid's steps were regularly soaked with the blood of human victims who were brought to nourish the gods with their sacrifice. The Templo Mayor was a powerful, visual symbol of Mexica political reach and religious ideology. Moreover, the physical conjunction of Huitzilopochtli, patron of war and human sacrifice, and Tlaloc, deity of agriculture and fertility, exemplified Mexica cosmovision, society, economy and rulership. This single structure embodied totally the Mexica worldview. The Mexica's greatest temple brought

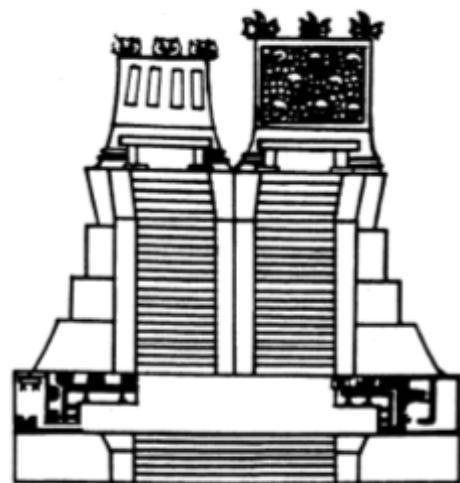


Figure 4: The Templo Mayor, Codex Ixtlilxochitl
López Luján, *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor*, p. 49.
Drawing by José Luis García

⁶¹ Tlaloc's position within the Nahuatl pantheon has often been reduced simply being a 'rain god'. While, of course, this deity's relationship to agriculture and fertility meant an association with rain, his domain was more expansive. He was a nature deity with close connections to the mountain cult. Tlaloc iconography featured heavily in the architecture and art of the great pre-Aztec city of Teotihuacan ('the place where men became gods'). See: Pasztory, 'Iconography of the Teotihuacan Tlaloc', pp. 10-20; Cecelia Klein, 'Who was Tlaloc?', *Journal of Latin American Lore*, 6.2 (1980), pp. 155-204; Broda, 'Templo Mayor as Ritual Space', p. 71.

together the antagonistic, but ultimately productive, interplay between life and sacrificial death, fertility and warfare, in a fixed material union.

Beyond its symbolic value as an imposing structure and site of human sacrifice, the Templo Mayor served as an eternal reminder to Mexica nobles and vassal *tlahtoqueh* (pl. of *tlahtoani*) of their subordination to sun. They lived at the whim of capricious and fickle deities who, needing almost constant sanguinary nourishment, could destroy them with a moment's notice. The temple rose above any other of the city's structures to dominate the skyline. Only noble families were permitted multi-storey residences and most ordinary people were crammed into the city in simple, single level dwellings which centred around a patio, joining them to other families. This meant that, at any given moment, the Templo Mayor was immediately recognisable as the grandest — most important — monument of the city. The rituals to which it played host were highly visible and confronted all. It was built in several stages with each successive *tlahtoani* embellishing and extending its form [see Table 2]. There was a lavish formal dedication in the year 8 Reed (1487) under Motecuhzoma II's predecessor Ahuitzotl (although construction had begun under his brother Tizoc).⁶²

⁶² Kay Read, 'Sacred Commoners: The Motion of Cosmic Powers in Mexica Rulership, *History of Religions*, 34.1 (1994), p. 41

Stage	Year Glyph	<i>Tlahtoani</i>
I		
II	2 Tochtli (1390)	Acamapichtli Huitzilhuitl Chimalpopoca
III	4 Acatl (1421)	Itzcoatl
IV	1 Tochtli (1454)	Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina
IVb	3 Calli (1469)	Axayacatl
V		Tizoc
VI	8 Acatl?	Ahuitzotl
VII		Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin

*Table 2: The construction stages of the Templo Mayor*⁶³

In the same way as Tenochtitlan has commanded much scholarly attention, so has its magnificent temple in understandings of the Nahuas' ritual practices. Deborah Nichols points out that post-independence Mexican nationalism has played an important role in keeping the focus squarely on ideological monumental architecture.⁶⁴ As is clear from the national flag, the 'Aztecs' have played a crucial role in the nation-building of the Mexican state since 1821. The role these mighty pre-Hispanic conquerors play in national imagination means that any findings which glorify, or illuminate, their efforts garner much attention. It has generally been implied or assumed that human sacrifice was the pinnacle of their religious devotion. The bloody and public ritual dramas have occupied many scholars in their attempts to understand Nahua ways of life. This section will explore the key scholarly debates and positions which have shaped understandings of Nahua and Mexica ritual practices. Most importantly, the extraordinary emphasis on the Templo Mayor has certainly absorbed generations of scholars. I will explain

⁶³ López Luján, *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor*, pp. 49-54.

⁶⁴ Nichols, 'Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State', p. 281.

how, even as we attempt to move away from this temple, scholars remain fixated on its importance and tend to use it as an anchor to explain ‘peripheral’ communities and their practices. We remain wedded to the idea that the Templo Mayor was the archetypal Nahua religious monument. This study will demonstrate that the Templo Mayor was an exceptional religious centre. Exploring the most important scholarly debates in the field will allow me to explain how my approach can liberate understandings of Nahua religion from binary distinctions or sweeping generalisations.

The Templo Mayor has captivated the modern imagination as a glorious, immovable monument to religion and power. In February 1978, the sensational discovery of the Coyolxauhqui monolith [see figure 5] led to the excavation of the site and the ongoing Proyecto Templo Mayor.⁶⁵ Coyolxauhqui was, according to legend, a sister of Mexica titular deity Huitzilopochtli. Their mother was Coatlicue, a powerful deity manifest in Earth Mother complexes such as Toci and Cihuacoatl. The legend was that, during their migration, the Mexica were part of a larger migrating group called the Huitznahua who, disobeyed Huitzilopochtli, settled at a place called Coatepec (‘Snake-Mountain’).⁶⁶ Huitzilopochtli was born on this mountain, springing from Coatlicue’s womb, he decapitated his sister Coyolxauhqui and dismembered her body, casting her off the mountain. The discovery of the dismembered goddess at the base of the temple strongly suggested that the Templo Mayor itself was constructed as a physical representation of Coatepec.⁶⁷ This understanding was reinforced by the use of the temple for human sacrificial display, a key part of which was the casting of the victim’s body down the steep steps.

⁶⁵ Discoveries had been made before this time and the Museo de Tenochtitlan project had already been organised. For an overview of the development and work of the Proyecto Templo Mayor, see Matos Moctezuma, ‘Templo Mayor: History and Interpretation’, pp. 20-25.

⁶⁶ Matos Moctezuma, ‘The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan: History and Interpretation’, pp. 47-55.

⁶⁷ The Coyolxauhqui monolith has faded over time and the original bright colours have almost completely disappeared from view. The colours in the figure displayed are those which are projected onto the faded monolith in the Museo del Templo Mayor exhibition.

Since the establishment of the Proyecto Templo Mayor, important discoveries have been made which have fleshed out our understanding of the Mexica. One of the most important scholarly advancements has been the evidence that the Templo Mayor was built as a glorious *axis mundi*, an earthly representative centre of the Mexica's cosmological principles. This particular topic is one I take up in the second chapter exploring sacred landscapes. However, the Templo Mayor as an *axis mundi* underpins much of my analysis and therefore I will examine the literature on this topic here.



Figure 5: Coyolxauhqui Monolith
Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City, Mexico
Photograph: Harriet Smart

The notion that the Templo Mayor was the Mexica *axis mundi* was first established by scholars involved in the excavation of the ceremonial precinct.⁶⁸ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma — first director of the excavations — argued that their archaeological work ‘proves that the Templo Mayor was the economic, political and symbolic center of the entire empire’.⁶⁹ These scholars interpreted the Mexica’s greatest temple as an exemplary centre akin to Clifford Geertz’s understanding of the Balinese theatre state, ‘a microcosm of supernatural order — “an image of... the universe on a smaller scale” — and the material embodiment of political order. It is not just the nucleus, the engine, or the pivot of the state, it *is* the state’.⁷⁰ In this understanding, the structure of the Templo Mayor embodied completely — physically and metaphorically — the Mexica’s Triple Alliance Empire. It is now accepted among scholars that the Templo Mayor was the official ‘navel’ of the Mexica world, embodying and displaying their state cult with its complex form and style.⁷¹ The Mexica’s mythical history was patterned all over their impressive temple and, most importantly, it played host to many aspects of the Mexica’s ‘monthly’ public ceremonies, known as *veintenas* (from the Spanish *veinte* meaning ‘twenty’). A *veintena* comprised twenty days and was similar to the notion of a month. The original Nahuatl word for this section of time remains unknown and these periods are not clearly understood. I follow the scholarly convention of referring to these 20-day periods as *veintenas* in this analysis in the absence of a Nahuatl alternative.

⁶⁸ Johanna Broda, David Carrasco and archaeologists Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Leonardo López Luján have been major proponents of the Templo Mayor as an *axis mundi*. See: Carrasco, ‘Introduction’, in Johanna Broda, David Carrasco and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (eds), *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery in the Aztec World* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 1-14; Carrasco, ‘Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor’, pp. 124-62; Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, *Life and Death in the Templo Mayor*, trans. Bernardo R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano (Niwt, 1995); Johanna Broda, ‘Templo Mayor as Ritual Space’, in *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan*, pp. 61-123.

⁶⁹ Carrasco, ‘Introduction’, to *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery*, p. 5. See also Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, *Life and Death in the Templo Mayor*, p. 23 for two explanatory images.

⁷⁰ Clifford Geertz, ‘Political Definition: The Sources of Order’, in his *Negara: the Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, 1980), p. 13. Emphasis in the original.

⁷¹ Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology*, p. 3.



Figure 6: The Templo Mayor ruins with the colonial Catedral Metropolitana in the background
Photograph: Harriet Smart

The Templo Mayor's imposing façades were constructed to convey how this ethnic group understood their place in their world: 'the Templo Mayor is seen as synthesis of Aztec cosmovision'.⁷² As a concept, 'cosmovision' explained how 'cultures combine their cosmological notions relating to time and space into a structural and systematic whole'.⁷³ We might be tempted to reduce this to 'worldview'. However, rather than theoretical or passive, cosmovision was a practical way of physically making sense of the world. For the Mexica, cosmovision meant a cosmos which was composed of many planes: in most sources it is displayed as having 13 heavens and nine underworlds in addition to the space occupied by the

⁷² Carrasco, 'Introduction', to *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery*, p. 8. For brief explanations of cosmovision, see also: Carrasco, 'Introduction', to *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery*, p. 6; Johanna Broda, 'Processions and Aztec State Rituals in the Landscape of the Valley of Mexico', *Occasional Papers in Anthropology*, 33 (2016), p. 179-80. 'Cosmovision' is a loanword from Spanish which is now commonly used by Anglophone scholars.

⁷³ Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica* (Long Grove, 2014), p. 69. See also William L. Barnes, 'Aztec Art, Time and Cosmovisión', in Deborah L. Nichols and Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 585-93.

living.⁷⁴ Matos Moctezuma argued that the Templo Mayor was the material expression of this cosmology; the great temple sat at the epicentre of the Mexica cosmos, occupying the intersection of the horizontal and vertical axes which governed their view of the world. The platform in front of the twin temples to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc represented the Mexica's earthly plane, the stairways signified the superior heavenly levels to be ascended and the dual-temple structure dedicated to these deities connoted the mytho-historical place of duality.⁷⁵ The twin temples together express the beginning of the passage undertaken by sacrificial victims who journeyed from the living realm to the afterlife, as the *Florentine Codex* specified that 'the first step in traveling to Mictlan consists of crossing two hills that clash with each other'.⁷⁶ The Templo Mayor was, therefore, a structure which embodied and displayed the Mexica's cosmovision in a practical way.

Carrasco suggests that: 'It is difficult to overestimate the paramount role of the Templo Mayor in the ceremonial and social life of the Aztec empire'.⁷⁷ Carrasco's statement implies that this monument was an active, recognisable centre of religious expression and social activity for all the people in this political territory. It is undoubtable that the Templo Mayor was the centre of Tenochtitlan. This enormous pyramid clearly soared high above any surrounding buildings and its extraordinary importance as a synthesis of cosmovision is indisputable. However, the fact that it sat at the centre of the city does not corroborate automatically that it was the centre of an empire. This study will seek to explore in what way the Mexica's vassals might have received or perceived the importance of this temple. How can they have understood the high-level symbolism of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc? Would they

⁷⁴ Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, p. 86.

⁷⁵ Matos Moctezuma, 'The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan: History and Interpretation', p. 58. See also pp. 26-27 and 47-58 in the same article and Carrasco, 'Introduction', to *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery*, p. 8.

⁷⁶ Matos, 'The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan: History and Interpretation', p. 57.

⁷⁷ Carrasco, 'Myth, Cosmic Terror and the Templo Mayor', p. 138.

probably not have considered their own deities more important than this distant monolith? With these questions in mind, I will explore whether the Templo Mayor really was the most important, active centre of religious expression for all Nahuas falling under the Mexica's sway. Statements such as that of Carrasco do not take into account the mentalities or priorities of commoners in Tenochtitlan, or those people living away from the imperial core. These are urgent questions because the Mexica's rural subjects were not a minority in their state's population. Quite the reverse, over half the population actually lived away from the capital in cities, towns and villages.⁷⁸ We should not assume that the urban population of Tenochtitlan practised an 'archetypal' Nahuatl religion which was replicated elsewhere. A key aim of this thesis is to explore the connections between urban and rural. An important strand of investigation is whether, for example, these local towns and villages had their own, independent practices.

In order to turn the gaze away from the Mexica, this study explores the experiences of the Nahuatl-speaking Tlahuica people of Cuauhnahuac and Huaxtepec provinces. These were provinces which were incorporated relatively early in the Mexica imperial project and lay just outside of the Basin of Mexico, fairly close to the imperial core. My research suggests that, the Tlahuica's own temples played a more important role in their religious experiences than the imperial capital's great ceremonial centre of the Templo Mayor. It seems unlikely that a Tlahuica farmer would have even been in Tenochtitlan in the first place, much less have appreciated its central temple's theoretical symbolism of clashing hills representing the passage to Mictlan (the underworld). The comprehensive system of education in Tenochtitlan meant that Mexica people, rich and poor, would probably have understood far more than the average Tlahuica. Smith points out in his discussion of urban form, high-level meanings 'tend to be

⁷⁸ Nichols, 'The Rural and Urban Landscapes', p. 265.

esoteric, understood by only a small minority within any urban culture'.⁷⁹ However, this statement does not necessarily apply smoothly to Tenochtitlan which had a comprehensive public education system for both girls and boys. The Mexica developed a complex system of public education. Broadly speaking, at puberty boys entered either the commoner warrior (*telpochcalli*) or the elite priestly (*calmecac*) school.⁸⁰ Care was taken to ensure that all people, not matter how lowly, were aware of their society's principles. It is extremely difficult to assess how far ordinary Mexica engaged or understood their complex religious system. Brumfiel has argued that ordinary folk would have recognised that theirs was a subordinate position within a religious system built on human sacrifice which was operated by an elite, warrior-based class. She argued, 'Human sacrifice atop the Great Temple did not attempt to engage the commitment of the lower class; rather, it was intended to confront commoners with the fact of their own subordination'.⁸¹

Turning our focus away from the Templo Mayor's ideological dominance and considering the experiences of provincial communities and peoples reconfigures the understanding of 'centre' versus 'periphery'. The Templo Mayor's impressive symbolism provides evidence that the Mexica *wanted* their Templo Mayor to be considered the centre of the world. However, this does not automatically mean provincial people understood or appreciated these meanings. As Smith explains, 'A re-examination of archaeological data from

⁷⁹ Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 10.

⁸⁰ The exact distinction between each institution remains obscure. Moreover, knowledge of girls' education remains poorly understood given that the colonial chroniclers did not recognise its value. See: Durán, *Book of the Gods*, pp. 113-15; Edward Calnek, 'The *Calmecac* and *Telpochcalli* in Pre-Conquest Tenochtitlan', in José Jorge Klor de Alva, Henry Bigger Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber (eds), *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún* (Austin, 1988), pp. 169-77; Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, pp. 128-32; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, pp. 73-78.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Brumfiel, Huitzilopochtli's Conquest: Aztec Ideology in the Archaeological Record', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 8 (1998), p. 10. See also: Elizabeth DeMarrais, Luis Jaime Castillo and Timothy Earle, 'Ideology, Materialization, and Power Strategies', *Current Anthropology*, 37.1 (1996), pp. 15-31; A. Gilman, 'Comments on "Ideology, Materialization, and Power Strategies"', *Current Anthropology*, 37.2 (1996), p. 57.

Aztec city-state capitals, however, shows that in fact Tenochtitlan was quite different and that religion and ritual in other Aztec cities need to be examined in their own light'.⁸² This study aims to fill this gap in the scholarship by exploring whether, if we accept that Tenochtitlan was an exceptional city, might not its practices also have been exceptional? My research will re-examine the documentary record evidence, combining it with pictorial and unpublished archaeological reports, to show that the relationship between 'peripheral' communities and the imperial centre were far more complex than has so far been appreciated. Moreover, I will demonstrate that we cannot speak of a 'local' version of a central, 'high' Mexica culture. Ancient traditions pre-existed the rise of the Mexica in the Valley of Mexico and endured after regions were incorporated into the Triple Alliance Empire.

Centre versus periphery

The assumption that the Templo Mayor was the Mexica *axis mundi* has relied on binary distinctions. In Carrasco's understanding, 'the Templo Mayor as an axis mundi can be understood historically through an application of the categories of "center" and "periphery" to the ritual objects found at excavation and the historical chronicles that describe the antagonistic relationships that existed between Tenochtitlan and the tributary communities in the empire'.⁸³ Until the late 1980s the 'periphery' was a scholarly term which cast the empire as a monolithic entity. As knowledge at the time was heavily skewed towards Tenochtitlan, everything else was considered 'peripheral'. The edited volume *To Change Place: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes* was a landmark publication in rethinking these terms. *To Change Place* aimed to transform understandings Postclassic ceremonial landscapes, 'to shift the perspective in Aztec

⁸² Michael E. Smith, 'Aztecs', in Timothy Insoll (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion* (Oxford, 2011), p. 557.

⁸³ Carrasco, 'Introduction', to *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery*, p. 9.

studies and look at Tenochtitlan, the Templo Mayor, and the consolidation of the Mexica worldview from the perspective of the periphery, from the points of view of places such as Texcoco, Tlatelolco, Mt. Tlaloc, Tlaxcala and the ceremonial centers in between'.⁸⁴ This seemingly fresh perspective analysed how public rituals could transform the ceremonial landscape within and around Tenochtitlan.⁸⁵ While the approach taken by *To Change Place* was productive, the assumption that the 'periphery' of the Aztec Empire constituted Tetzcoco, Tlatelolco, Mount Tlaloc and Tlaxcala is deeply problematic and in need of urgent revision if we are to uncover the religious experiences of ordinary Nahuas living under the sway of the Aztec Empire in any depth. Tlatelolco was physically attached to Tenochtitlan — its twin city on the island — and it housed the capital's bustling marketplace.⁸⁶ Tetzcoco was one of Tenochtitlan's political partners in their Triple Alliance, while Tlaxcala was an enemy state which bordered the Mexica imperial core. Mount Tlaloc was 'peripheral' in some ways as an enormous mountain with ritual architecture. Conceiving of the 'periphery' as a handful of influential urban and religious centres in close proximity to the imperial core is to completely disregard the ritual significance of religious structures in more distant areas [see map 5]. The understanding of these scholars was heavily skewed in favour of the perspective of the (elites of) Tenochtitlan and the imperial core and what these people might have considered peripheral. Of course, the religious experiences of Tenochtitlan's population were not irrelevant to our understanding of ritual in central Mexico. At over half a million people, with one of the most significant temples in Mesoamerica inside its boundaries, Tenochtitlan is culturally, socially and demographically important. However, at present, scholarship has not yet fully appreciated

⁸⁴ Carrasco, 'Introduction: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes', p. xvii.

⁸⁵ See, among others: Carrasco, 'The Sacrifice of Tezcatlipoca', pp. 31-57; Doris Heyden, 'The Dryness before the Rains: Toxcatl and Tezcatlipoca', in David Carrasco (ed.), *To Change Place: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes* (Niwot, 1991), pp. 188-202.

⁸⁶ Tlatelolco had an enormous marketplace where commoners could acquire items from all over the Triple Alliance empire. It is estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 people might have attended the market each day: Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico*, pp. 26-28.

the range of belief and practice which existed outside of Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco or Tlatelolco. By contrast, my work considers the importance of the wider ritual landscape and the significance of ceremonial centres away from the imperial core. Beyond unpublished archaeological reports, very little is currently known about public and domestic rituals away from areas close to Tenochtitlan. My findings will illuminate this poorly understood world and will demonstrate while merely ‘peripheral’ is not an adequate term to explain how those people would have conceived of their practices.



Map 5: The Basin of Mexico, with some of these 'peripheral' settlements labelled Elson, 'An Aztec Palace at Chiconautla', p. 152.

I

SOURCES, PERSPECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

‘It will be a great source of satisfaction, because with much less effort than it costs me here, those who may so desire will be able to know many of the ancient practices and all the language of this Mexican people in a brief time’.

Bernardino de Sahagún
Florentine Codex, Introductions and Indices, 1: 47.

This thesis analyses alphabetic, pictorial and archaeological evidence in the interpretation of Postclassic Nahua ceremonial life. The Spanish invasion and conquest devastated the indigenous Nahua culture it encountered.⁸⁷ Europeans inflicted untold physical, emotional and spiritual violence upon the native populations in order to convert them to Christianity. Their aim was to obliterate pre-Hispanic culture and ways of being, and to replace them with their own practices. Of particularly urgent concern to the missionaries were diabolical practices such as human sacrifice and sun worship. Almost all physical traces of written narrative in pictographic form were put to the torch in an effort to obliterate their way of life and replace it with European ideas of civility.

⁸⁷ Intense scholarly and popular debate rages over the precise level of destruction brought about by the Spanish conquest. In demographic terms, some have estimated population reductions of up to 90 per cent resulting from disease, violence and depression (among other factors). Psychological, emotional and cultural effects are far harder to quantify or assess. See: Matthew Restall, ‘The Indians are Coming to an End: The Myths of Native Desolation’, in his *Seven myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York, 2003), pp. 100-130, 181-7; Steve J. Stern, ‘Paradigms of Conquest: History, Historiography, and Politics’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 24 (1992), pp. 1-34; Stephanie Wood, ‘Rereading the Invasion: Uncovering Indigenous Voices’, in her *Transcending Conquest: Nahua Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico* (Norman, 2003), pp. 3-22, 151-7. There are many scholarly accounts of the Mexican conquest. For an ‘indigenous’ perspective, see Miguel León-Portilla, *The Broken Spears: the Aztec account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston, 1962). For a very detailed study see Hugh Thomas, *The Conquest of Mexico* (London, 1994). For a more succinct account see Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest* (London, 1994).

The paucity of surviving pre-Hispanic written narrative means that the words of Christian men form the foundation of my interpretations of Nahua ritual. Despite this, pre-Hispanic sources are certainly not ignored here. Quite the reverse, they form an important part of my methodology which seeks to integrate the colonial written record with the physical traces of the pre-Hispanic past: namely their painted codices and other material culture. The act of using colonial sources to understand a pre-colonial past is clearly problematic and throws up a number of tricky issues. In this section I foreground a comprehensive discussion of these problems as they relate to this study, considering pictorial, alphabetic and archaeological material.⁸⁸ Where I refer to ‘textual’ sources, I am referring broadly to both alphabetic and pictorial manuscripts in opposition to ‘material’/archaeological sources. After I have outlined these issues, I will explain how my integrated methodology will bring us closer to understanding Nahua ritual on its own terms.

Pictorial

Pre-Hispanic

The Postclassic Nahuas recorded and transmitted their history, ideas and principles by means of pictorial, oral and aural tradition.⁸⁹ Historical, genealogical, administrative information was artfully set down in painted ‘books’ (which we now refer to as ‘codices’) by

⁸⁸ I focus here on those issues which relate to my own work on Nahua ritual specifically. Others have written more comprehensively about the issues of using colonial-created evidence for a pre-colonial past, see for example: Inga Clendinnen, ‘A Question of Sources’ in her *Aztecs*, pp. 277-93; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, pp. 3-10; Caroline Dodds Pennock, ‘Insights from the “Ancient Word”: The Use of Colonial Sources in the Study of Aztec Society’, in Ricardo Roque and Kim Wagner (eds), *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History* (Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 115–33. For a good overview of different types of source, see: Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, pp. 5-15.

⁸⁹ The Postclassic Nahuas’ lack of an alphabet was taken by the friars as an indication of their lack of civility. For an introduction to the pictorial codices and a discussion of alphabetic writing as a determiner of civilized society, see Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin, 2000), esp. chapters 2 and 3.

skilled *tlacuiloqueh* (painter-scribes).⁹⁰ Although the Spanish referred to them as books, in reality they were fashioned from a single strip of paper, folded over in concertina and bound in animal hide [see figure 7].⁹¹

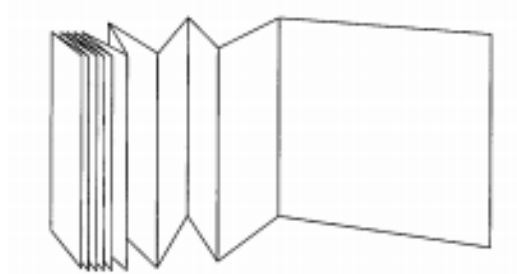


Figure 7: Physical Structure of a Screenfold Codex
Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 18.

Moreover, they were not ‘read’ straightforwardly. Their content would likely mean different things to different people and had to be interpreted by skilled and knowledgeable priests. Their histories were therefore performed aloud as incantations, discourses and prayers, a priest likely being required to ‘sing the paintings’.⁹² Figure 8 shows a folio of the *Codex Borgia*, a pre-Hispanic pictorial codex, which would have been read right to left and interpreted by a ‘knowledgeable’ person.⁹³

⁹⁰ *Tlacuiloqueh* is the plural of *tlacuilo*. In the early colonial period, this was translated by friar Alonso de Molina into Spanish as *escribano o pintor* (writer or painter). These people created the painted books.

⁹¹ It has traditionally been concluded that most codices were covered in deer skin. For example, Alfonso Caso’s microscopic analysis suggested that *Codex Colombino* was covered in pronghorn deer. See Alfonso Caso, *Interpretación del Códice Colombino* (Mexico City, 1996), p. 101-12 quoted in Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*, p. 23. However recent non-invasive investigation of *Codex Laud* has shown the manuscript to have been bound in the hide of a jaguar’s head. See Ludo Snijders, ‘The *Codex Añute* Palimpsest’, paper presented at the Bodleian Library, *Mesoamerican Manuscripts: New Scientific Approaches and Interpretations* (1 June 2016), <http://livestream.com/oxuni/MesoamericanManuscripts> [accessed 20 June 2016]. For an introduction to the physicality of the codices see Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*, pp. 23-24.

⁹² Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (Norman, 1961), p. 64; Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings*, p. xxvi.

⁹³ I am grateful to Felicia López who very generously shared her original Vatican Library *Codex Borgia* scans with me.



Figure 8: Codex Borgia, fol. 7.

The conquerors and first missionaries perceived these manuscripts to contain ‘false and deceitful’ content,⁹⁴ which threatened their mission to convert the New World populations to Christianity. Because of this fear, innumerable painted books were confiscated and burned in the very early colonial period. However, by the end of the sixteenth century, the mission was faltering. There had been a European presence in New Spain for some 60 years when, in 1579, Diego Durán lamented the thoughtless destruction of information:

⁹⁴ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 395.

All was set down painstakingly and carefully by the most competent historians, who by means of these paintings recorded extensive chronicles regarding the men of the past. These writings would have enlightened us considerably had not ignorant zeal destroyed them. Ignorant men ordered them burned, believing them idols, while actually they were history books worthy of being preserved instead of being burned in to oblivion... they left us in darkness.⁹⁵

There had been missionaries who began to record information about their neophytes' customs. However, much of this early material was discarded or confiscated and we can never know the exact quality or quantity of the crucial information which was lost.⁹⁶ In addition to wilful destruction, many pre-Hispanic manuscripts were dispatched, along with early colonial creations, to Europe as New World marvels.⁹⁷ Apart from their worth as curios, the colonisers recognised the historical and administrative value of the manuscripts; in 1530, King of Spain Charles V (r. 1519-56) requested that Spanish governors collect indigenous records to evaluate appropriate tribute requirements.⁹⁸ Incidentally, Charles' request and Durán's lament highlight that the Spanish considered indigenous records to be reliable and useful.

As a result of this violent destruction, intervention and appropriation, the extant corpus of pre-Hispanic written narrative from central Mexico is highly restricted. Indeed, only nine manuscripts remain from central Mexico. No incontrovertibly pre-conquest documentary sources remain from the Triple Alliance imperial capital of Tenochtitlan itself.⁹⁹ Of this corpus, five 'undoubtedly Precolumbian'¹⁰⁰ codices — *Borgia*, *Cospi*, *Fejérváry-Meyer*, *Laud* and

⁹⁵ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 396.

⁹⁶ Baudot, *History and Utopia*, esp. chapter. 9.

⁹⁷ Many pre-Hispanic and very early pictorial and alphabetic colonial codices are located in the great libraries of Europe. For example, the *Codex Borgia* resides in the Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana at the Vatican. *Codex Borbonicus* is housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

⁹⁸ Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*, p. 12.

⁹⁹ Note that the total number of pre-Hispanic Mexican manuscripts is 13. The four pre-Hispanic Maya divinatory codices (Dresden, Madrid, Paris and Grolier) pertain to a different cultural tradition.

¹⁰⁰ Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 5.

Vaticanus B (the so-called ‘Borgia Group’) — are painted in the Mixteca-Puebla style.¹⁰¹ Because of the ambiguous nature of these divinatory almanacs — they very rarely include references to specific places, people or times — their provenance has proved extremely problematic to ascertain, and research on these enigmatic manuscripts is constantly evolving.¹⁰² For example, it has been suggested that *Codex Laud* was, in fact, created in the Tehuacan Valley (a strategic Nahuatl region bordering the Mixtec) and not in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley, Basin of Mexico or even the Gulf Coast, as had previously been proposed.¹⁰³ Four Mixtec genealogical histories — *Codices Vindobonensis (Vienna)*, *Zouche-Nuttall*, *Bodley* and *Colombino-Becker* — complete the aforementioned set of nine extant pre-Hispanic manuscripts from present-day central Mexico.

Colonial

Although the introduction of the written alphabet means that the Spanish conquest can be pinpointed as a watershed moment in the history of writing in Mesoamerica, it is important to note that the pre-Hispanic pictorial and oral traditions were adapted and maintained into the colonial period. In fact, conventions were particularly conservative as: ‘The Early Colonial emphasis on copying led to the preservation of old forms: when pre-Conquest prototypes existed, the Early Colonial artists repeated them faithfully and consistently’.¹⁰⁴ Many very early codices, such as the *Borbonicus*, were created so accurately using traditional methods

¹⁰¹ Note that the reverse of *Codex Porfirio Díaz* and *Aubin No.20* are sometimes included in the ‘Borgia Group’. See Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 5.

¹⁰² For a good summary of the debates concerning provenance, see Boone, *Cycles of Time*, pp. 211-20.

¹⁰³ See María Isabel Álvarez Icaza, ‘The Codex Laud: Materiality and the Problem of its Provenance’, paper delivered at the Bodleian Library, *Mesoamerican Manuscripts: New Scientific Approaches and Interpretations* (31 May 2016), <http://livestream.com/oxuni/MesoamericanManuscripts> [accessed 20 June 2016].

¹⁰⁴ Brown, ‘European Influences’, p. 347.

that for many years they were considered to be of pre-Hispanic origin.¹⁰⁵ Another example, the Mixtec *Codex Selden*, details the dynastic history of the town of Jaltepec (a tributary city-state of the Aztec empire). It was painted in around 1560, forty years after Spanish conquest, in entirely pre-Hispanic form and style.¹⁰⁶ In this way, while the introduction of European forms of writing was certainly an important moment, pre-colonial cultural practices clearly endured well into the colonial period, sometimes almost unaffected. Two pictorial codices created during the colonial period, *Codices Borbonicus* and *Mendoza* are particularly influential to this study and I will discuss them here.

Codex Borbonicus

Codex Borbonicus is a colonial-era screenfold created in the pre-conquest style. It is divided into three sections: a *tonalamatl*, the 52-year cycle and the *veintena* ceremonies. While for many years it was considered a late pre-Hispanic document, it has been convincingly proven that this manuscript is a very early colonial product ‘painted almost fully in the native style’.¹⁰⁷ It has been attributed to the colonial period largely because of the space left on its folios for Spanish annotation.

This codex is particularly useful for my study because its content relates to the ritual activity of two specific years: 1 Tochtli (1506) and 2 Acatl (1507).¹⁰⁸ Codices very rarely, if ever, tie their ritual activity to a year in linear time, a fact which makes *Codex Borbonicus* of exceptional importance to my study which seeks to uncover often-hidden variation and flexibility in Nahuatl ritual practice across space and time. The rituals of *Codex Borbonicus* were

¹⁰⁵ Caso, *Los calendarios prehispánicos*, pp. 103-12; Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, ‘Renaming the Mexican Codices’, pp. 267-71.

¹⁰⁷ Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ DiCesare, ‘Tlaloc Rites’, p. 688.

often considered authoritative models by which to measure the ‘veracity’ of other descriptive accounts.¹⁰⁹ However, recent work has found that *Codex Borbonicus* depicts not ‘generic rituals but... ceremonies whose fundamental power was harnessed to meet the specific needs of contemporary populations’.¹¹⁰ Catherine DiCesare has reanalysed the codex’s internal evidence and concluded that ‘annual, cyclical celebrations of the *veintena* cycle also operated within a distinctively linear temporality, accommodating local, ethnic and historical imperatives’.¹¹¹ Importantly, she undermines the position of *Codex Borbonicus* as the authoritative model by historicising its content. She argues that *Codex Borbonicus* depicts not ‘generic rituals but... ceremonies whose fundamental power was harnessed to meet the specific needs of contemporary populations’.¹¹² It can therefore be used as an important counterpoint to alphabetic sources which tend to generalise and conflate celebrations of the same ritual in different years. The year 2 Acatl (1507) is especially relevant as it displays the calendar ceremony, Xiuhmolpilli, in pictorial form. This was, probably, an exceptional ceremony in the Mexica consciousness as it only occurred once every 52 years. Other ceremonies occurred much more regularly: the *veintena* celebrations were ‘monthly’ celebrations which took place every solar year, for example. Rather than following the agricultural cycle, as did the *veintenas*, Xiuhmolpilli was a ‘man-made’ festival which ostensibly had little foundation or purpose in the natural world. It bound two artificial distinctions of time together. The specific celebration of Xiuhmolpilli which *Codex Borbonicus* depicts was the last, and arguably most elaborate, of the ‘binding of years’ festivals to have been celebrated before the Spanish invasion of 1519 [see figure 9].¹¹³ Xiuhmolpilli is one of the major festival case studies explored in this thesis,

¹⁰⁹ DiCesare, *Sweeping the Way*, pp. 12, 125.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Following the 52-year cycle, the next Xiuhmolpilli should have been celebrated in 1559, 38 years after Spanish conquest.

and the pages of *Codex Borbonicus* contain one of the most recognisable pictorial depictions of this crucial festival.

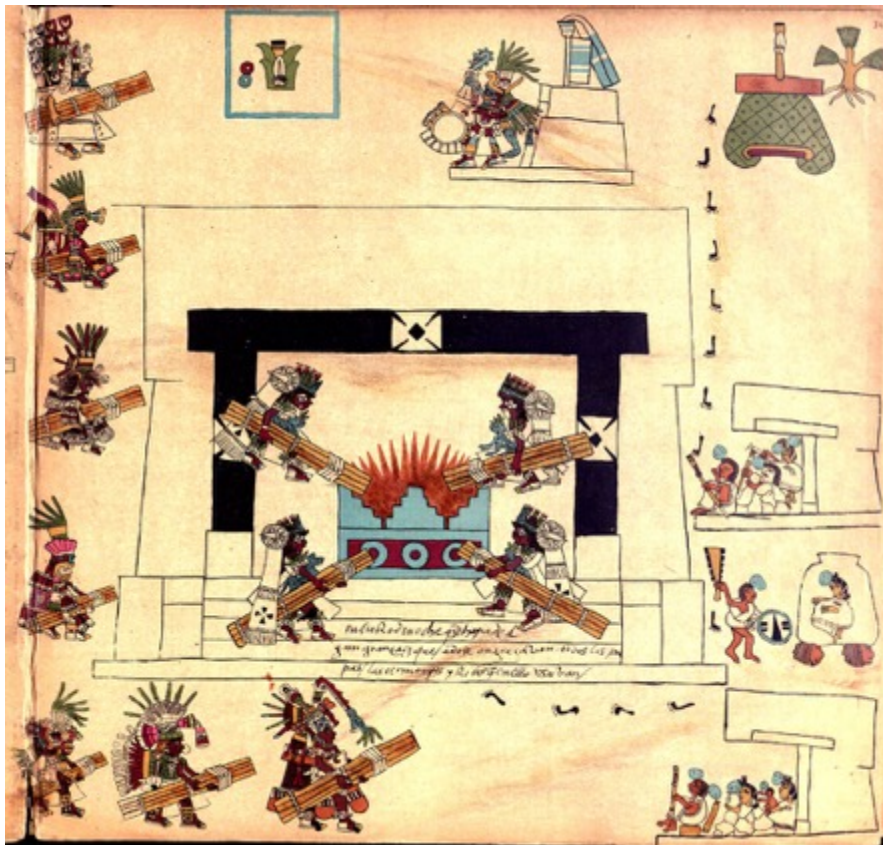


Figure 9: *Codex Borbonicus*, fol. 34.

Codex Borbonicus is part of a small corpus of early colonial pictorial documents painted in what Elizabeth Hill Boone terms the ‘Aztec tradition’.¹¹⁴ The striking resemblance between the codex’s style and format and the monumental iconography of Tenochtitlan led scholars to assume it was painted in the imperial capital.¹¹⁵ However, H. B. Nicholson has analysed the *veintena* section of the codex and found that those deities and rituals which were more ‘relevant

¹¹⁴ The other earlier colonial manuscripts which are described as ‘Aztec’ are: the *Tonalamatl Aubin*, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, *Codex Tudela*, *Codex Vaticanus A/Ríos* (which is a later copy of the *Telleriano-Remensis*).

¹¹⁵ Donald Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period: The Metropolitan School* (New Haven, 1959), p. 87; Caso, *Los calendarios prehispánicos*, pp. 43-45.

to the southern lake region rather than on Huitzilopochtli' are emphasised in the manuscript.¹¹⁶ On the basis of this, he makes a persuasive case that this important codex was, in fact, from Ixtapalapa or Culhuacan.¹¹⁷ Given that a public phase of the 1507 Xiuhmolpilli was celebrated at a temple located at a mountain-top pyramid in the latter city-state, this geographical perspective will be significant to my study.

Codex Mendoza

Most of the other pictorial documents at our disposal — the aforementioned *Codex Borgia* or *Codex Borbonicus*, for example — are enigmatic representations of religious customs. *Codex Mendoza* is a unique pictorial source in this sense. This undoubtedly colonial manuscript is in three parts: the first depicts military conquests by *tlahtoani*, the second records the tribute exacted from subjugated *altepemeh* and the final section, intriguingly, shows the raising of children in the capital, Tenochtitlan.¹¹⁸ Its importance for my study, especially the latter sections on daily life and private ritualism, cannot be overstated. *Codex Mendoza* was traditionally understood to have been created around 1542 in colonial Mexico City at the request of Viceroy Mendoza, to be sent to Spain in order to explain the native populations of

¹¹⁶ Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 212.

¹¹⁷ H. B. Nicholson, 'The Provenience of the *Codex Borbonicus*: An Hypothesis', in J. Kathryn Josserand and Karen Dakin (eds), *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Honor of Thelma D. Sullivan* (Oxford, 1988).

¹¹⁸ Scholars originally assumed that part two of *Codex Mendoza* recorded all tribute delivered to the Triple Alliance cities (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan). Rather, Berdan has shown that its tribute lists are exclusively what was paid to Tenochtitlan: Frances Berdan, 'The Imperial Tribute Roll of the *Codex Mendoza*', in *The Codex Mendoza*, vol. 1, pp. 63-64.

the pre-Hispanic city.¹¹⁹ It never reached its destination; it was commandeered en route and taken to France. It now sits as one of the treasures of the Bodleian Library in Oxford.¹²⁰

While the same *tlacuilo* appears to have been responsible for illustrating all three sections of the codex, the 15 folios of the third section represent an almost completely different genre. It represents the life of ordinary Mexica men and women from birth and childhood, to careers and death. Figure 10 shows very clearly that these traditions are represented in a structured, ‘generic’ way. By this I mean that the representations are devoid of personal choice or individual variation, and thus depict what was considered to be the ‘norm’. For example, its folios demonstrate that it was acceptable for a five-year-old’s daily ration to be one tortilla. While its usefulness for insights into choice or decision-making is limited, the third section of *Codex Mendoza* offers an extremely rare gateway into the private world of Mexica. Close integration of textual and archaeological sources will allow me to reconstruct some of the ways that the Mexica lived their lives, and some of the strategies they employed to mitigate the uncertainty and danger which characterised their path through life. These perspectives will be analysed in this study’s final chapter which examines private, non-elite ritualism. In this way, part three of *Codex Mendoza* is enduringly useful for the study of ordinary lives in Tenochtitlan and is a particularly important source for my study.

¹¹⁹ For a brief account of *Codex Mendoza*’s provenance, see Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, pp. 8-9.

¹²⁰ The Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, hold an important collection of five pre-Hispanic Mexican codices. In their collections are *Codex Mendoza*, of Mexica origin and *Codices Laud*, *Bodley*, *Selden* and the *Selden Roll*, which are of Mixtec provenance.



Figure 10: Early informal education of boys and girls
 Codex Mendoza, fol. 58r. (F. F. Berdan and P. R. Anawalt)

The ethnographic focus of *Codex Mendoza*'s third section has perplexed scholars because it does not seem to relate to the content or style of the earlier two sections. It was generally accepted that part three was a rushed after-thought undertaken on the orders of the Spanish (hence its name). Traditional scholarly understandings were that part three of *Codex Mendoza* was a 'novel, postconquest creation with no known prehispanic prototype'.¹²¹ Joanne Harwood's doctoral research brought to light the fact that these folios, in fact, continued pre-Conquest ritual writing traditions. Harwood's re-assessment of the codex's internal evidence has shown that these painted folios were the result of indigenous-led project created by a highly skilled *tlacuilo* in Mexico City, perhaps with the assistance of knowledgeable elders.¹²² Rather than a clumsy addition, 'Part Three' follows 'ancient traditions of knowledge found in what we generally classify as pre-Cortesian "ritual books" and draws on those traditions in format, style and content'.¹²³ Harwood's research demonstrates that the third part of *Codex Mendoza* continues within pre-Hispanic recording traditions. The style was modified to a European format: it was arranged as a book read from left to right, rather than the type of continuous screenfold which Nahua priests had consulted before the conquest. Most importantly, the codex's content was adapted to suit the European conquerors' sensibilities and requirements.¹²⁴ This aspect has beguiled scholars to detect European influence in its creation and ignore its indigenous origins. Attempts to adapt the codex to Old-World tastes meant that the rituals of this section were concealed or downplayed. The provenance of *Codex Mendoza* remains, in some respects, uncertain. However, Harwood argued persuasively that this codex was an indigenous-led project. This strengthens its position and makes it a crucially important source for my study. It is especially important to the final chapter which leaves behind the public

¹²¹ Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt, 'Introduction', *The Essential Codex Mendoza* (California, 1997), p. xii.

¹²² Joanne Harwood, 'Disguising Ritual: A Re-assessment of Part 3 of the *Codex Mendoza*', Ph.D. thesis (University of Essex, 2002), p. 54.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

ceremonial precincts, temples and shrines to enter the atmospheric world of ordinary, everyday ritual.

Other colonial pictorial sources are significant to specific sections of this thesis. For instance, I analyse *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* in the first chapter as it provides some intriguing evidence of ritual flexibility for the celebration of Xiuhmolpilli, the Binding of Years ceremony. I will introduce these sources when their provenance and format are most relevant. Let us now move on to discuss colonial alphabetic texts, the primary source base for my study.

Alphabetic

The conquistadors and missionaries in New Spain wrought untold physical and psychological devastation upon the local indigenous people and their culture. In deliberate attempts to obliterate the cultural beliefs and practices of people they perceived to be in the grip of godless barbarity, the colonisers destroyed invaluable, innumerable pages which detailed Nahua history, knowledge and beliefs. Although the surviving pictorial sources I have introduced are significant to this study of Nahua ceremonial practice, their restricted number and ambiguous provenance prevent them from forming the basis of it. In order to understand pre-Hispanic Nahua ritual and religious behaviour in a profound way, it is necessary to return to the documents written during the colonial period. These sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chronicles were the work of those mendicant friars who came to New Spain in the years after conquest with the purpose of converting the indigenous populations to Christianity, and who wrote down their investigations and observances to better understand their neophytes.

The evangelising project began in earnest with the arrival of 12 Franciscans in 1524. After an initial period of the mass destruction of pre-Hispanic records, the friars soon became aware that they needed to understand their neophytes' practices in order to bolster their mission.

In order to do so, they needed to document them. Thus, from the 1530s onwards, chronicler-friars such as Bernardino de Sahagún, Motolinía and Diego Durán, among others, began to record pre-conquest customs and history with the purpose of informing their mission. They were among the first Europeans to witness and describe Nahua rituals. Whether by design or not, these men exceeded the task of merely collating information directly relating to conversion and some of their number, particularly Sahagún, bequeathed impressive ethnographic studies which detailed many aspects of Nahua culture, including daily life, education, customs and attitudes. As the quote which opened this section attests, the friars took their work very seriously and, in addition to consulting elite male indigenous informants, drew on other, possibly pre-Hispanic, records for their chronicles. The much-lamented destruction of pre-colonial written narrative means that we cannot know definitively their type or number, but we suppose that there were many more documents than exist today. *Crónica X* is a particularly notable manuscript. Now lost, Durán had ‘translated and used [it] as the basis for his last work, *The History of the Indies*’.¹²⁵ Throughout this work, Durán referred to *Crónica X* as the ‘Historia’.¹²⁶ However, by the time the friars embarked on their chronicling projects in the mid-sixteenth century, unquantifiable important sources had been destroyed, lost and hidden, as Durán bemoaned.

The corpus of early colonial writing is unusually rich, far surpassing that for the Inka civilization, for example. While there are many noteworthy examples, the most important for my purposes are: Bernardino de Sahagún’s monumental *Florentine Codex*; Diego Durán’s *The Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar* and Motolinía’s *The History of the*

¹²⁵ Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden, ‘Fray Diego Durán: His Life and Works’, in Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, ed. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman, 1971), p. 37.

¹²⁶ Note Durán did not use ‘*Crónica X*’ in the earlier *Book of the Gods and Rites* or *Ancient Calendar*, apparently consulting pre-Columbian codices. See Horcasitas and Heyden, ‘Fray Diego Durán: His Life and Works’, in Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 37.

Indians of New Spain. These works are core to this thesis and thus merit introduction before discussing the key methodological issues which I must negotiate in this study in order to elicit information on pre-Hispanic Nahua ritual.

Sahagún's Florentine Codex

The peerless 12-volume opus which we call the *Florentine Codex* resulted from extensive anthropological fieldwork conducted and directed by Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún (c. 1499-1590).¹²⁷ These volumes contain 1,200 folios and 2,468 illustrations which were compiled by the Franciscan over the course of several years. The dedication of the so-called 'Father of Anthropology' produced a detailed study of the daily life, cultural practices and religious beliefs of the Postclassic people in Nahuatl with concurrent Spanish translation. Chief among the colonial ethnographic texts, the *Florentine Codex's* scale and scope designate it as 'one of the most remarkable accounts of a non-Western culture ever composed'.¹²⁸ The pages of the *Florentine Codex* are generally organised into dual columns of Nahuatl on the right with Spanish translation on the left [see figure 11]. It is important to note that the Nahuatl sections are not always translated into Spanish. In general, un-translated sections contain information which Sahagún deemed either too morally corrupting or too mundane to be worthy of translation. However, even after decades of editing, Sahagún retained these passages, which demonstrates that he was, paradoxically, keen to preserve aspects of their culture.

¹²⁷ So-called as the manuscript is housed in Florence, Italy at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana. It is also known as the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*; in English, the *General History of the Things of New Spain*.

¹²⁸ H. B. Nicholson, 'Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: A Spanish Missionary in New Spain, 1529-1590', in Eloise Quiñones Keber (ed.), *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún* (Boulder, 2002), p. 34.

The creation of the *Florentine Codex* required many years of painstaking research to produce during the mid-sixteenth century in colonial Mexico. Although we cannot be sure of the exact dates of production, 1536 is often pinpointed as a starting point for this work. This was the year in which Sahagún began to teach at the Tlatelolco school where he recruited his assistants. However, Sahagún had arrived in New Spain in 1529 and it seems logical that his research would have been informed, at least in part, by earlier experiences. However, his serious anthropological endeavour began in the 1540s and continued until his death in 1590.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Although the precise date remains uncertain, Sahagún began instruction of the ‘trilinguals’ in Latin, Nahuatl and Spanish at the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco from 1536 (15 years after conquest). For more on Sahagún’s methodology and his important contribution to anthropology, see for example Miguel León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún: First Anthropologist* (Norman, 1999) and Munro S. Edmonson (ed.), *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún* (Albuquerque, 1974).

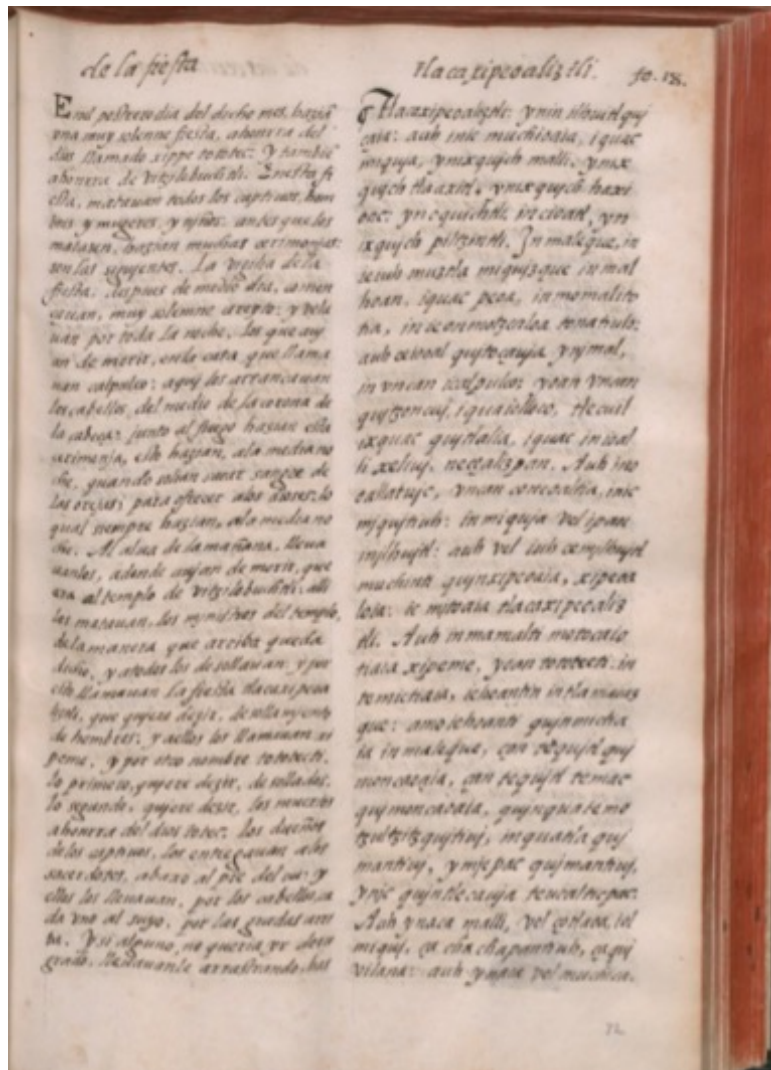


Figure 11: Tlacaxipehualiztli,
Florentine Codex, book 2, fol. 18.

Considered ‘the precursor of modern anthropological field technique’,¹³⁰ Sahagún’s methodology involved directing wide-ranging questions to noble Nahuatl elders and recording their responses. Students at Sahagún’s Colegio de Santa Cruz, Tlatelolco, became known as the ‘trilinguals’, fluent in Nahuatl, Spanish and Latin, aided Sahagún with his research.¹³¹ These informants were elite men who had been carefully selected for a special education at the

¹³⁰ León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún*, p. 3.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

Colegio. Their experiences were those of noble youngsters growing up inside the imperial capital, Tenochtitlan. These perspectives have implications for my study which seeks to turn the focus away from centralised religious practices. These privileged men moved in rarefied circles before the Spanish conquest and, therefore, probably knew much about the official, public ceremonies which were regulated by priests. This makes their contributions particularly important for the earlier chapters of my study which seeks to explore elite control, dynamic display and ritual participation in the state ceremony Xiuhmolpilli. By contrast, these men probably knew relatively little about commoner and/or household rituals. While it is simplistic to assume that these men were not concerned by such matters, the fact remains that they are unlikely to have had first-hand experience of ordinary people's household ritual activities and performances. We must, therefore, look elsewhere to flesh out this picture; a methodology which blends many different sources is necessary.

Although Sahagún is responsible for a number of important ethnographic and linguistic studies, he is most renowned for the *Florentine Codex*. The books of this work that most directly underpin my own research on Nahua ritual are the second ('The Ceremonies'), the fourth ('The Art of Divination'), the fifth ('The Omens') and the seventh ('The Sun, the Moon, the Stars and the Binding of the Years').¹³² 'The Ceremonies' is one of the longer books of the *Florentine Codex*. Sahagún wrote that this book 'treateth of the feasts and sacrifices by which these natives honored their gods in their state of infidelity'.¹³³ This book provides succinct overviews and detailed descriptions of, as the name suggests, religious ceremonies with particular focus on human sacrificial rituals within Tenochtitlan. Most importantly, it is structured around the eighteen *veintena* ceremonies with abridged and lengthy accounts stretching across many chapters. The *veintenas* were periods of twenty days which were

¹³² The full name of each *Florentine Codex* will be included for clarity upon its first mention. Thereafter, for reasons of space and readability, I will refer to the books by number only.

¹³³ *Florentine Codex*, 2: Introduction.

apparently sections of the 360-day solar year. Within this temporal structure, there was a different ceremony every twenty days which had its own particular patron deity, protagonists, victims and activities. ‘The Art of Divination’, the fourth book, is a shorter volume which explains the measurements of time and the process of prognostication. While it provides some detailed information on the day-signs, in reality this volume tells us little about how exactly the *tonalpouhqui* (‘reader of days’) went about his profession. Its vague nature likely speaks to the fact that Sahagún’s informants themselves might not have known how this secretive practice operated. Those readers of days who did survive the conquest were, in their vanquished state, unlikely to reveal the intricacies of their superstitious art. Moreover, these informants lived and worked close to their Christian instructors. They were undergoing a process of religious conversion and would have probably been increasingly reluctant to reveal information that their Spanish overlords would have considered heretical. As Louise Burkhart rightly points out, ‘Even if the Indians were encouraged to be honest, they soon understood what their interlocutors thought about some of their most cherished traditions’.¹³⁴

The book describing the omens is particularly useful for the ritual activity of the home and private spaces as it describes how people venerated, and feared, the domestic space. In my account of ritual activity across space and time, these rare insights are particularly valuable. The sixth book on ‘Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy’ is perhaps the most renowned in the field of cultural history and will have its own more detailed introduction. However, this weighty tome — with its prescriptions for proper living and correct conduct — is particularly important to birth and naming ceremonies which I discuss in the final chapter. Lastly, the comparatively short ‘The Sun, the Moon, the Stars and the Binding of the Years’ book focuses on astrology and the calendar cycle. Its lengthy and authoritative description of Xiuhmolpilli make it

¹³⁴ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 7.

extremely important to my earlier chapters, where this ceremony is the principal case study for my analysis of ‘official’ public ritual spectacle.

One of the most important components of the entire *Florentine Codex* are the *huehuetlahtolli* (‘Speeches of the Elders’, or ‘Ancient Word’). Found in the sixth book, these are formal dialogues which seem to have been learned by rote and recited at important moments, such as the birth of a baby or the marriage of a young couple. In their oral and aural culture — which lacked alphabetic writing — eloquence was highly prized. This aspect of their culture is notable in the epithet for a ruler: *tlahtoani*, meaning ‘he who speaks’.¹³⁵ This ability was not just prized for those holding public office, but was expected for all ordinary folk too.¹³⁶ The *huehuetlahtolli* were not just lofty orations delivered from a lectern. Quite the opposite, many of these speeches were delivered by ordinary people themselves, right inside the home. Some of the most evocative passages in these speeches are when a mother warns her daughter about proper behaviour or when parents entreat their pregnant daughter-in-law.¹³⁷ Formal discourse was an important feature of their private ritual.¹³⁸ These lengthy orations — delivered by both men and women — were used to prescribe ideal conduct. While portraying an idealised version of life, they also seem to speak of what was considered ‘normal’ or usual. In general, the alphabetic sources penned by mendicant friars tend to speak of individual ideals and collective identities. Gathering their material over many years and across different communities, the friars asked people what was considered usual, acceptable or desirable in the time before the Spanish.

¹³⁵ Lockhart, *Nahuatl as Written*, p. 55; Susan Schroeder, *Chimalpahin and the Kingdoms of Chalco* (Tucson, 1991), p. 82 and 183-85.

¹³⁶ If we translate *huehuetlahtolli* as ‘speeches of the elders’ it appears that these virtues were characteristic of older, wiser people.

¹³⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 18: 93-98; *Florentine Codex*, 6: 24: 135-40.

¹³⁸ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 5.

The *huehuetlahtolli* as ‘authentic’ sources for pre-Hispanic cultural history have been the subject of significant research and scholarly debate across the years.¹³⁹ While it would clearly be excessively optimistic to take the speeches as transcriptions of pre-Hispanic discourses,¹⁴⁰ ‘recent work has inclined to the view that the genre, if not in all cases the substance of the discourse, is of pre-Cortesian origin’.¹⁴¹ While I will be using the *huehuetlahtolli* as a way into lived experience, it is undeniable that these speeches are best suited to exploring the official values which were engendered by the Mexica state administration via the public system of education. As Mónica Ruiz Bañuls rightly points out, ‘these speeches were concerned with a constant preoccupation with dignity and proper conduct. They spoke of humility, generosity, politeness, openly condemning excess and passion’.¹⁴² The fact that the Nahuas felt the need to commend these virtues indicates that people might have, in reality, acted in the opposite way on occasions. Inspecting the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or aspirational behaviour can allow us to conjure up intriguing counterpoints of actual behaviour. In all ways, restraint and order are the central themes of these formal recommendations and these were highly prized virtues in Mexica culture. Previous scholarship has relied very heavily on the *huehuetlahtolli* as ‘a key means by which to access Aztec life’.¹⁴³ And certainly these speeches are useful in providing insights into social attitudes.

¹³⁹ For more on the *huehuetlahtolli* as a source for cultural history, see: Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 5 and p. 43; Dodds Pennock, ‘Insights from the “Ancient Word”’, pp. 118-19; Josefina García Quintana, ‘El huehuetlatolli — antigua palabra — como fuente para la historia sociocultural de los nahuas’, *Estudios de cultura náhuatl*, 12 (1976), pp. 61-71; Mónica Ruiz Bañuls, ‘Los *huehuetlatolli*: Modelos discursivos destinados a la enseñanza retórica en la tradición indígena’, *Castilla, estudios de literatura*, 4 (2013), pp. 270-81; Thelma Sullivan, ‘The Rhetorical Orations, or *Huehuetlatolli*, Collected by Sahagún’, in Munro S. Edmonson (ed.), *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún* (Albuquerque, 1974), pp. 79-109.

¹⁴⁰ Louise Burkhart, ‘Gender in Nahuatl Texts of the Early Colonial Period: Native “Tradition” and the Dialogue with Christianity’, in Cecelia F. Klein (ed.), *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America* (Washington, D.C., 2001), p. 87.

¹⁴¹ Dodds Pennock, ‘Insights from the “Ancient Word”’, p. 119.

¹⁴² Ruiz Bañuls, p. 271. My translation; the original Spanish is: ‘Dichos discursos preconizaban una constante preocupación por la dignidad y una conducta reserva, hablaban de humildad, generosidad, cortesía, censurando abiertamente la desmesura y la pasión’.

¹⁴³ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 43.

By means of the birth and other lifecycle speeches, we do glimpse some of ordinary Nahuas' personal concerns. In this regard, these ritual discourses will be particularly important to the final two chapters of my study which examine the experiences of childbirth and the rites of passage of early life.¹⁴⁴ The final chapter will combine these formalised speeches with pictorial and material culture analysis to demonstrate parental control over their child's early ritual experiences.

Durán's *The Book of the Gods and Rites* and *The Ancient Calendar*

This work by Dominican friar Diego Durán (c. 1537-88) is, as its name indicates, an account of Nahua gods, their associated ceremonies and other everyday celebrations, such as how birthdays were celebrated. In this way Durán's work provides a comprehensive, if perhaps static, description of Nahua religion and worldview as it was in the years leading up to the Spanish conquest. Most importantly, *The Book of the Gods and Rites* relates the lavish festivals and rites which punctuated the 260-day ritual calendar. *The Ancient Calendar*, a slightly later work finished in 1579,¹⁴⁵ explores the Nahua calculations and complex divisions of time. In this way it is an extremely important source for my study, a major ritual case study of which is Xiuhmolpilli, the festival closely associated with temporal transitions. Although less is known of Durán's methodology than that of his Franciscan counterpart, Sahagún, it is clear that he spent several years travelling New Spain, collecting information on the history and traditions

¹⁴⁴ See, for example: Edward E. Calnek, 'The Sahagún Texts as a Source of Sociological Information', in Munro Edmonson (ed.), *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún* (Albuquerque, 1974); Edward E. Calnek, 'The *Calmeacac* and the *Telpochcalli*', pp. 169-78; Susan Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700* (Norman, 1995), pp. 88-91; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, pp. 41-50. Although Clendinnen does not allude directly to the *huehuetlahtolli*, her analysis of birth rites is principally derived from the early colonial alphabetic sources. For her excellent introduction to and analysis of these alphabetic sources, see Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 277-93.

¹⁴⁵ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 383.

of the people. Durán's perspective is distinctive as he lived almost his entire life in the New Spain and was, it seems, bilingual in Nahuatl and Spanish (Sahagún, by contrast, arrived as a young man; although he seems to have mastered Nahuatl). Durán lived for most of his early life in Tetzaco, saying that it 'was there that my second teeth came out'.¹⁴⁶ In this way, 'As a child of both worlds, he felt he possessed a deeper perception of their cultures than any of the other scholars of New Spain'.¹⁴⁷

Durán's other work was the later *History of the Indies of New Spain* (1579-81) which is also an important source for my study. Durán's perspective was almost exclusively from the vantage point of Tenochtitlan.¹⁴⁸ We must be critical of his standpoint as he tends to promote Tenochtitlan's importance over its Triple Alliance partners and subject *altepemeh*. Durán had particular interest in presenting the Mexica as a 'true' civilisation with a European-style dynastic history. Thus, much of his chronicles relate to imperial issues and political decisions. We must be wary of his Mexica-centrism and his emphasis on a linear, progressive narrative towards imperial glory. The first chapters rely on his perspective to draw a picture of Mexica's central, official religion as a display of imperial might. The later sections integrate other sources — most notably archaeological remains — to critique this point of view.

Motolinía's *History of the Indians of New Spain*

Setting foot in New Spain sometime in 1524, Franciscan Toribio de Paredes Benavente was an early arrival to the mission.¹⁴⁹ As the story goes, on seeing his Franciscan robes and

¹⁴⁶ Durán, *History*, p. 23.

¹⁴⁷ Horcasitas and Heyden, 'Fray Diego Durán: His Life and Works', in Durán, *Book of the Gods*, pp. 35-6.

¹⁴⁸ Gillespie, 'The Aztec Triple Alliance', p. 250.

¹⁴⁹ Motolinía's age is unclear but it seems as though he was born sometime towards the end of the fifteenth century. In 1541, he wrote that he was more than 40; Georges Baudot deduces that he was born around 1490. He was therefore a similar age to Bernardino de Sahagún: Baudot, *Utopia and History*, p. 248, n. 7.

bare feet some indigenous people exclaimed ‘Motolinia!’ (meaning ‘he suffers!’ from the Nahuatl *tolīnā* meaning ‘to suffer/be impoverished’) and he is said to have adopted this name.¹⁵⁰ Arriving in Mexico City on 18 June 1524, Motolinía was a devoted servant of the mission to convert New Spain with particular admiration for conquistador Hernán Cortés.¹⁵¹ Motolinía, as a principal character in the conversion mission, was a committed friar. Georges Baudot describes him as ‘the heart and soul and the most fervent advocate of the millenarian beliefs in Mexico’.¹⁵² He wanted to learn more about the native customs and took considerable time in doing so. He wrote to Charles V in 1555 stating that: ‘Three or four of us friars have written of the antiquities and customs that these natives had, and I have what the others have written; and because it gave me more trouble and took more time, it is not strange that I have compiled them better and understand them better than the others’.¹⁵³ He was a passionate supporter of Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop of Mexico and the head of the Holy Office of the Mexican Inquisition (which was officially created in 1569).¹⁵⁴

Inspired by pioneering grammarian Andrés de Olmos,¹⁵⁵ Motolinía himself went on to influence other chroniclers such as Alonso de Zorita, Jerónimo de Mendieta and Juan de Torquemada who all used Motolinía’s writings extensively in their work.¹⁵⁶ Mendieta wrote

¹⁵⁰ Jerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana* (Barcelona, 2011), p. 208; Francis B. Steck, ‘Father Toribio de Motolinía: His Life and Writings’, in *Motolinía’s History of the Indians of New Spain*, trans. Francis B. Steck (Washington, D. C., 1951), pp. 6-7. Bernal Díaz del Castillo stated that the moniker was given to Motolinía by the ‘caciques y señores’ because, as a Franciscan monk, he gave away all his possessions to the native population and went hungry, barefoot and ragged himself. See Elizabeth Andros Foster, ‘Life and Works of Fray Toribio Motolinía’, in *Motolinía’s History of the Indians of New Spain*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth Andros Foster (Albuquerque, 1950), p. 2, n. 2.

¹⁵¹ Carta al Emperador Carlos Quinto quoted in Baudot, *History and Utopia*, p. 252, n. 19, p. 253.

¹⁵² Baudot, *History and Utopia*, p. 337.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 257, 270.

¹⁵⁵ Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁶ Charles Gibson and John. B Glass, ‘A Census of Middle American Prose Manuscripts in the Native Historical Tradition’, in Robert Wauchope and Howard F. Cline, *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 15 (Austin, 1975), p.349. Wigberto Jiménez Moreno states that Motolinía’s writings probably stimulated later Texcocan indigenous nobility to create colonial-era pictorials such as the *Codex Xolotl*: Wigberto Jiménez de Moreno, ‘La histografía tetzcocana y sus problemas’, *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Antropológicos*, 18 (1962), p. 83

that Motolinía was ‘one of the most outstanding and much respected friars, at that time guardian of the monastery of San Francisco in the city of Tlaxcala’.¹⁵⁷ Bartolomé de las Casas, author of the polemic *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies) and the man responsible for the propagation of the so-called ‘Black Legend’, also came into contact with the fervent Motolinía. Despite clear differences in their vision, Motolinía gave Las Casas some of his writings which the latter used in his *Historia apologética sumaria*.¹⁵⁸

His passion for conversion means that Motolinía is often a dramatic chronicler. His clear emphasis on wanting to root out what he perceived to have been pagan barbarism means that his work is particularly important for understanding religious practices. However, as with Sahagún and Durán, he focuses particularly on the ‘official’ round of 18 monthly rituals and their associated public activities. As we shall see, these men rarely took the time to enter a native home and, it seems, probably did not seek to understand domestic, household or private ritual activities. Of course, in the febrile climate of early colonial New Spain, it seems unlikely that they would have been invited to witness these ceremonies. But with the exception perhaps of Durán (who hints at small-scale agricultural and domestic shrines), these men seem not to have recognised the home as an important ritual space. With their limited resources, the friars needed to focus on public displays of ritual bloodshed.

Now that I have described the three principal chroniclers — Sahagún, Durán and Motolinía — let us discuss some of the advantages and methodological challenges they raise. This will lead to an explanation of how my integrated, interdisciplinary methodology can mitigate these matters.

¹⁵⁷ Foster, ‘Life and Works of Fray Toribio Motolinía’, p. 11.

¹⁵⁸ Baudot, *History and Utopia*, p. 281.

Methodological issues

Christian ideas, frameworks and values pervade — to varying degrees — the colonial writings about the pre-Hispanic Nahuas. Most jarring are the constant references to Nahua festivals according to the Christian calendar. These awkward allusions can, in some respects, be relatively easily set aside. Far more difficult to detect are the misunderstandings, mistranslations and difficulties of interpretation thrown up by this clash of culture, worldview and language. Nahuatl is an extremely complicated, agglutinating language which uses conceptual metaphor to express ideas.¹⁵⁹ As will be discussed, myriad Nahuatl concepts had no direct Spanish equivalent. The missionaries recognised the Nahuas predilection for symbolism, metaphor and allegory and used these strategies to explain the foreign concepts they were introducing within the population. Burkhart has explained how the friars adopted the concept of *tlazolli*, which had previously referred to physical rubbish or damage.¹⁶⁰ She argues that, during the colonial period, the friars capitalised on this existing word and related it to Christian ideas of sin and shame. Burkhart coined this phenomenon a ‘moral dialogue’ which Peter Sigal has subsequently suggested might have been a ‘mutual monologue’.¹⁶¹ It is not commonly appreciated that the friars themselves were capable linguists, many of them speaking fluent Nahuatl. Durán in particular is said to have spoken the language like a native, having grown up in New Spain. The friars themselves, therefore, created neologisms for the concepts they were introducing. For instance, *necuaatequiliztli* ‘pouring water on one’s head’ was invented to refer to baptismal rites.¹⁶² Sahagún went one step further. Recognising jade’s perfection and

¹⁵⁹ *Nepializtli*, for example, literally means ‘to keep oneself’ and was used to refer to sexual abstinence. *Neyolmelahualiztli*, meant ‘to straighten one’s heart’ and referred to a type of ritual confessing. See Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 214.

¹⁶⁰ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, esp. chap. 4. *Tlazolli* did have important metaphorical and metaphysical connotations in the Postclassic world, however, which will be discussed in chapter one.

¹⁶¹ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*; Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, p. 18.

¹⁶² Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, pp. 113-15.

water's purity, he described the sacrament of baptism as *chalchimmatlalatl* ('jade-green water').¹⁶³

In these few examples, we see that Nahua and colonial influences pervade the texts, ideas and illustrations. Burkhart rightly argues that 'European "influence" in the colonial texts is not simply a screen or a veneer that can be easily peeled away'.¹⁶⁴ The documents have sometimes been dismissed as useless, inseparable from colonial corruption to be useful for the study of the pre-Hispanic population.¹⁶⁵ Certainly, these complex, composite documents were the result of a dynamic collaboration between European friars and Nahua elders and neophytes.¹⁶⁶ These works should not be accepted uncritically; we must look upon them as the products of interested writers with a certain story to tell.¹⁶⁷ Certain aspects of these documents present challenges and, indeed, impose limitations on my research. Specific methodological concerns will be addressed and scrutinised as they arise in the thesis. However, it is necessary to discuss, in a broad fashion, how such challenges affect this study.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Psalmody christiana y sermonario de los sanctos del año en lengua Mexicana* (México, 1583), cited in Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 116.

¹⁶⁴ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 6.

¹⁶⁵ Jorge Klor de Alva, 'Sahagún and the Birth of Modern Ethnography: Representing, Confessing, and Inscribing the Native Other', in Jorge Klor de Alva, Henry B. Nicholson and Eloise Quiñones Keber (eds), *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Albany, 1988), pp. 31-52; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, pp. 3-5, 187, n. 17.

¹⁶⁶ The nature and production of these collaborations has been a fruitful topic of research. There have been many interesting studies of syncretism and transculturation of these colonial texts. Some notable examples are, for example: Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*; Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: the incorporation of Indian societies into the Western World, 16-18th centuries* (Cambridge, 1993); Patricia Lopes Don, 'Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers, and the Inquisition of New Spain, 1516-1543', *Journal of World History*, 17.1 (2006), pp. 27-50.

¹⁶⁷ See: Rosemary Joyce, 'Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy: The Production of Adulthood in Ancient Mesoamerica', *World Archaeology*, 31.3, Human Lifecycles (2000), p. 475; Susan D. Gillespie, 'The Aztec Triple Alliance: A Postconquest Tradition', in Elizabeth Hill Boone and Tom Cummins (eds), *Native Traditions in the Postconquest World* (Washington, D.C., 1998), p. 233-57.

¹⁶⁸ Baudot, *Utopia and History, passim*. For reasons of focus and space, I discuss here only those issues which affect my work directly on reconstructing variations and flexibility within pre-Hispanic Nahua ritual practice across time and space. For more comprehensive discussions, see: Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, pp. 277-93; Dodds Pennock, 'Insights from the "Ancient Word"', *passim*.

Using sources created within a colonial context with the objective of gaining access to pre-colonial life is a problematic endeavour. To put it optimistically, it has proved extremely challenging to access the perspectives and experiences of the pre-Hispanic Nahuas on their own terms. As has been thoroughly explored,¹⁶⁹ the textual sources were mostly elite-created. Moreover, those who collaborated were not necessarily permitted to speak freely, nor perhaps did they want to tell their conquerors all about what they did in a previous life. Rather, they seem to have responded — with varying degrees of commitment — to a series of set questions. The friars were there to convert the native populations to Christianity; a main concern of the ethnographic investigations was to document human sacrifice and other *public* ritual display. Indeed, Durán dismisses the seventh *veintena* festival of Tecuilhuitontli, ‘Little Feast of the Lords’, with little explanation other than that this was ‘an unimportant festivity, with little ceremony, few special foods, and no human sacrifice’.¹⁷⁰ They focused much less attention on the mundane-seeming activities which took place inside the home or natural environment, away from the temple precinct. Due to these issues, the ‘official’, state-sponsored ceremonies are much better documented. As well as being more immediately obvious than domestic practices, their focus probably arose from an outsider’s tendency to overstate the exotic or the unusual. As Alan Sandstrom has explained for present-day cultural anthropologists, there is a tendency to ‘stress ritual cannibalism, food taboos, matrilineality, blood sacrifice, and bizarre sexual practices’.¹⁷¹ While these practices are fascinating, ‘they can overshadow everyday behavior that may be less dramatic *but more important scientifically*’.¹⁷² Sandstrom is dealing with a

¹⁶⁹ Calnek, ‘The Sahagún Texts’, pp. 189-204.

¹⁷⁰ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 434.

¹⁷¹ Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, p. 14.

¹⁷² *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

present-day Nahua community but his discussion is also relevant to the early colonial friars who were, in a sense, pioneers of participant observation fieldwork techniques.¹⁷³

The focus of these early modern men has severely hampered nuanced explorations of domestic or private ceremonial behaviours. They either did not understand them as ‘religion’ or were happy to turn a blind eye to them in the face of the more pressing concern of eradicating ritual killing and bloodletting. This restricted approach has, moreover, directed generations of academics who seek to understand the Nahuas’ range of religious expression.¹⁷⁴ With rare exceptions, there has been a failure to interrogate whether, or how, the institutional ceremonial cycle might have been sensitive to political or social factors.¹⁷⁵ This gap in our understanding of Nahua everyday behaviour and lived experiences has been brought about largely by the aforementioned elite, male bias of the sources on which many scholars rely and the concerns of the European friars who sought to eradicate human sacrifice and associated pagan barbarity. Tracking variation between different incidents of the ‘same’ public festival (such as Xiuhmolpilli) is, although challenging, an easier endeavour than assessing flexibility between private rituals such as birth and marriage which are typically described in much more generic, temporally unspecific, ways. Moreover, they obscure personal perspectives and experiences; they tend to reduce individuals to either ‘men’ or women’, with little variation between social status or occupation, for example. In this way, individual perspectives and experiences, for

¹⁷³ Anthropologist Alan Sandstrom used participant observation methodology to conduct an ethnographic study of a community of Huastecan Nahuas in the 1970s and 80s. For his methodological discussion, see: Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, pp. 13-16. Although his ‘ethnographic present’ is the 1970s, his technique is relevant for our study.

¹⁷⁴ For example, among others: Broda, ‘Tlacaxipeualiztli: A Reconstruction of an Aztec Calendar Festival’; Gordon Brotherston, ‘The Year in the Mexican Codices: the Nature and Structure of the Eighteen Feasts’, *Estudios de cultura náhuatl*, (2003), pp. 67-98; Carrasco, ‘Give me some skin’.

¹⁷⁵ As I will discuss later, Catherine DiCesare represents an important exception to these approaches and assumptions. Her analysis of two ceremonies — Ochpaniztli and Huey Tozoztli — have been extremely important in the development of my own approach. She argued that these ‘cyclical veintena festivals responded to varying historical, local, and temporal contingencies’: DiCesare, ‘Tlaloc Rites’, p. 703. See also, DiCesare, *Sweeping the Way, passim*.

ordinary Nahuas at least, are extremely difficult, if not impossible. In my study, I venture to understand the lived experiences of non-elites. In many of these cases, the nature of the sources means that some of my conclusions must remain speculative, although based on a rigorous interpretation of the texts.

Aside from the friars' preference for recording details of public display over private experience, their writing was influenced by the structure and content of early encyclopaedias. A principal focus of works such as Bartholomaeus Angelicus' medieval *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (printed and widely read by sixteenth-century theologians)¹⁷⁶ and Roman author Pliny the Elder's *Historia naturalis*,¹⁷⁷ was the annual calendar and its relationship to the natural world. This European intellectual bias presents key issues to confront and negotiate when employing these texts. Sahagún and his counterparts were men of their time, they selected and recorded those aspects of Nahua culture which they deemed most relevant in their work converting the native population to Christianity.

Aside from the influence of early encyclopaedias in the ordering of information, the friars did not recount the Mexica calendar on its own terms but rather structured it within a European model of a solar year with major 'fixed' and minor 'movable' ceremonies. For example Durán, when explaining the rites associated with Tlacaxipehualiztli, 'Skinning of men', fixes this festival to a specific day: 'The second month began, according to our own calendar, on the twenty-first of March'.¹⁷⁸ Likewise, he wrote that Ochpaniztli, 'the Sweeping of Roads', 'fell at the beginning of the fourth month, and according to our own calendrical

¹⁷⁶ Betty Ann Brown, 'European Influences in Early Colonial Descriptions and Illustrations of the Mexica Monthly Calendar', Ph.D. thesis, The University of New Mexico (1977), p. 20-23.

¹⁷⁷ Ángel María Garibay, *Historia de la literatura náhuatl* (Mexico City, 1953-54), p. 71, quoted in Brown, 'European Influences in Early Colonial Descriptions', p. 23. Two copies of *Historia naturalis* were listed in the library of the Colegio de Santa Cruz at Tlatelolco, the school from which Sahagún recruited his scribes. See Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting*, p. 171.

¹⁷⁸ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 415.

count it took place on the thirtieth of April'.¹⁷⁹ Such statements have often been accepted uncritically by scholars who assume that a fixed Nahua ceremonial cycle can be easily integrated with its European counterpart.¹⁸⁰ It is important to recognise this European intellectual bias as it has had implications for the way in which these ceremonies have been discussed. If we understand the Nahua ritual cycle strictly within a Western framework of months and set days, it becomes impossible to appreciate their dynamic or flexible nature. Removing the cycle from a fixed framework of set days and months is essential to appreciating their adaptable nature.

Illuminating doctoral research by Betty Ann Brown represents an important exception to this Eurocentric tradition and provides crucial evidence that the Nahua ritual cycle was not a fixed calendar in the European sense. Brown proposed that, in pre-Hispanic times, there was no single ritual calendar but 'instead a ceremonial cycle with numerous regional variations'.¹⁸¹ Crucially, her research found that there was 'no pre-Conquest prototypes existed for the illustration of such a calendar'.¹⁸² In this way, when using the early colonial texts for understandings of the calendar and its associated festivals, we must be wary of descriptions which enforce fixed European notions of linear time upon the flexible sequence of ceremonial activities which constituted the Nahua ceremonial cycle.

The friars' informants and scribes were, for the most part, noble men who were drawn from the Franciscan convent school of Santa Cruz at Tlatelolco. The school was not open to all. It was set down that any child wishing to be accepted to the school, 'must be an Indian from a legitimate marriage, ruler or noble, and not a *macegual* (commoner), not defamed or tarnished

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹⁸⁰ See, for example: Caso, *Los calendarios prehispánicos*; Henry B. Nicholson 'Religion in pre-Hispanic Central Mexico', pp. 395-446.

¹⁸¹ Brown, 'European Influences in Early Colonial Descriptions', p. 342.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. viii.

by being common, nor descended from such parents...'.¹⁸³ Because of this, the chronicles such as the *Florentine Codex* likely speak of elite lives, experiences, perspectives and practices. By contrast, women and commoners were largely silent within these ethnographic projects, although their domestic experiences were recorded by male voices (in the sections regarding the lifecycle, for example). While it would be naive to assume that the male informants knew nothing of the lives of non-elites or women, it is reasonable to expect their accounts to present a stereotypical or stylised impression of their everyday activities. Because of the perspective limitations of the texts, any interpretation which relies on them exclusively at the expense of other useful sources will inevitably have their conclusions limited to the concerns of the elites. I seek to remedy this issue with the integration of pictorial and archaeological evidence, which I discuss later as 'middle-range' theory.

My work is a direct challenge to the notion that using early colonial texts can only ever reproduce pre-Hispanic Nahua culture in a so-called 'ethnographic present'.¹⁸⁴ This term refers to scholarship which, rather than appreciating the nuances of a dynamic society in flux, catches the moment of study in aspic. Burkhart shrewdly perceives that in anthropological studies: 'Living societies... are made to seem removed in time and space, objectified'.¹⁸⁵ She argues that such studies will always run the risk of reducing an entire society to a homogenous, monolithic idea of a single 'culture'. Certainly, this is a very present danger when attempting to understand the Postclassic central Mexican world. Due to the devastation of the conquest, the alphabetic sources through which we access their experiences and perspectives are often hugely reductive: 'the Indians did this...'. One of the most problematic features of these early colonial texts for my study is their lack of chronological range and temporal specificity. In their

¹⁸³ Baudot, *Utopia and History*, p. 113.

¹⁸⁴ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 5; Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, 1983).

¹⁸⁵ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 5.

eagerness to record pictures of Postclassic customs, the friars often glossed over variations in practices across both time and space. As Brumfiel has explained: ‘Texts are produced only during limited periods of a culture’s past’ and are taken as representative of an entire culture.¹⁸⁶ Scholarship has followed suit by describing Nahua society as a monolith, caught in time, with little concern for the ways in which cultural practices might have been sensitive to change. In this way, Nahua ritual behaviour has primarily been explored in what Lars Fogelin terms a ‘structural’ theoretical model that is based on the assumption that ritual practice was the enactment of a set of fixed religious beliefs, which remained largely unchangeable.¹⁸⁷

Burkhart has argued that the use of colonial sources to reconstruct pre-Conquest culture inevitably casts the subjects of study in an artificial, imprecise ‘ethnographic present’, ‘in which they are described as static, self-perpetuating systems’.¹⁸⁸ The suggestion is that using sources created in colonial settings will inevitably remove them from the variables of time and space, creating an unrepresentative and generic picture. This problem is especially acute in the study of the pre-Hispanic Nahuas. Those elite men who informed the colonisers about pre-conquest life were *colonial* Nahuas. Brumfiel persuasively implores us to not ‘overlook the realities of the contact situation and their influence on the sources’.¹⁸⁹ These realities were a turbulent and volatile situation in which many native people were abused and mistreated. They were either pressured (or, at the very least, strongly encouraged) to accept foreign rituals and customs. As we have already discussed, this environment led many informants to tell the friars what they wanted to hear, or to hold back precious information which they did not want to discuss (such as the art of reading the day-signs). While the colonial period was undoubtedly a

¹⁸⁶ Brumfiel, ‘Asking about Aztec Gender’, p.57.

¹⁸⁷ Lars Fogelin, ‘The Archaeology of Religious Ritual’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 36 (2007), pp. 55-71, esp. p. 57. See also Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), p. 90.

¹⁸⁸ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 5.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

pressurised, violent and dangerous place to live, it remains that the friars were trying to understand native customs and seek out the truth. Moreover, it is not incorrect to assume that the informants only had experience of colonial life. I highlight that at the time when Sahagún (likely) began his research Nahuatl elders born before the conquest were still alive. In 1536 ‘a 40-year-old Aztec would have been born during the reign of the *tlatoani* (ruler) Ahuitzotl (1487-1502) and a 60-year-old Aztec would have been born in the reign of Axayacatl (1470-81)’.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, while each chronicler-friar employed different techniques for collecting information, their work was informed by discussion with indigenous elite men and sometimes in consultation with extant pictorial manuscripts. As we have seen, Durán was said to have consulted the now-lost *Crónica X*, a pre-Hispanic codex, for information.¹⁹¹ In this way, while placing Mexica culture within a pre-Hispanic historical context might be a difficult task, it is not a fruitless task or a flawed endeavour. I do not accept Burkhart’s argument that any reconstruction of a pre-colonial past necessarily captures a society in aspic. As this thesis demonstrates, casting Nahuas as inert, objectified subjects operating within a single culture is not an inevitable product of the use of alphabetic sources. Rather it results from a choice to accept the colonial friars’ generalising methods and narrative.

Just as we should be wary of casting the Nahuas as a single, unified culture, we must not assume that all ‘early colonial sources’ are a monolithic category. In fact, the friars who wrote them had varying motivations and interests themselves. Their aim was to show the native peoples as capable of reason and, therefore, conversion. But, to conclude that all the friars’ activities were simply to convert the population is naive. Much of their chronicles went far beyond that which was necessary to proselytise.¹⁹² These chroniclers sought to destroy many

¹⁹⁰ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 6.

¹⁹¹ The similarity of their content suggests that Tezozomoc, Tovar and Acosta probably also consulted the apocryphal *Crónica X*. See Glass and Robertson, ‘A Census of Native Middle American Pictorial Manuscripts’, pp. 223-224, 236-37; Gillespie, ‘The Aztec Triple Alliance’, p. 249.

¹⁹² L. N. D’Oliver, *Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590)*, (Salt Lake City, 1987), p. xiv. See also,

aspects of a culture which, paradoxically, they spent much of their lives recording. There are rich records for the Nahuas' public religion, but topics also include natural history or their political and dynastic history.¹⁹³ Moreover, there were different types of friars, who each had their own aims and priorities. For example, Dominican friar Durán and his Franciscan counterpart Motolinía attempted to present the Nahuas' dynastic history with a heavy emphasis on politics and rulership. Sahagún researched and wrote far more widely, and seems to have recorded everything which he considered useful for conversion. Sahagún spent nearly sixty years researching pre-Hispanic practices.¹⁹⁴ The product of his life-long endeavour, the monumental *Florentine Codex*, is one of the most crucial sources for the study of daily life and ordinary customs among the pre-Hispanic Nahuas.

‘Middle-range theory’: Integrating archaeology with ethnohistory

Many of the gaps in our understanding have been left empty precisely because alphabetic sources cannot fill them on their own. In this way, we must develop new methods and strategies to take our investigations of Nahua culture further. In the context of this study, this means the integration of archaeology. My interdisciplinary approach builds substantially on the work of Brumfiel, who was an early advocate of combining historical and archaeological evidence to produce ‘a series of inferences or bridging arguments, so called middle range theory’ which allows more nuanced access to the activities and attitudes of historical

among other biographies, León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún*; Sahagún was honoured with a plaque at the Universidad de Salamanca, his erstwhile *alma mater*, which bears the inscription: *el padre la Antropología en el Nuevo Mundo*.

¹⁹³ For the natural world, see book eleven of the *Florentine Codex*. Durán's *History of the Indies of New Spain* is a crucial source for pre-Hispanic political history.

¹⁹⁴ Sahagún, for example, arrived in New Spain in 1529 as a young man of around 30. He began his research a few years later, and most scholars take the founding of the Colegio de Santa Cruz at Tlatelolco in 1536 as his starting point. When the *Florentine Codex* was finally completed, the Franciscan was nearly 90.

subjects.¹⁹⁵ She recognises that both methods have their limitations and so ‘Each may provide information where the other is silent’.¹⁹⁶ While some of Brumfiel’s work has been criticised as speculative,¹⁹⁷ it remains some of the only archaeological work to question the extent to which provincial commoners might have accepted the Mexica’s state ideology.¹⁹⁸ Brumfiel has argued that the Mexica’s overt militarism was targeted at impressionable young male elite, specifically within Tenochtitlan.¹⁹⁹ She suggests that provincial elites were not susceptible to this warfare- and sacrifice-centred ideology; rather, ‘other more local concerns — fertility, commonality — engaged and influenced other Aztec hearts and minds’ at the provincial level.²⁰⁰ Moreover, her particular focus on the degree to which women might have accepted, or been subordinated by, state ideology and tribute demands remains particularly innovative.²⁰¹ Brumfiel’s research provides tangible evidence that an interdisciplinary ‘middle-range theory’ can be extremely productive in mitigating the geographical, social and gendered biases of these sources.

¹⁹⁵ Brumfiel, ‘Asking about Aztec Gender’, pp. 57-8. Brumfiel was a prolific scholar of the Aztec Empire. Her integration of ethnohistory with archaeology in her investigations of strategic relationships between state institutions and commoner households has been particularly influential for the development of my research. For a very useful text which traces her career and publications, see Nichols, ‘Rethinking Huitzilopochtli’s Conquest’, pp. 153-62.

¹⁹⁶ Brumfiel, ‘Asking about Aztec Gender’, p. 58.

¹⁹⁷ Michael E. Smith, personal communication, 2014.

¹⁹⁸ Brumfiel, ‘Figurines and the Aztec State’.

¹⁹⁹ Brumfiel, ‘Huitzilopochtli’s Conquest?’, Brumfiel, ‘Aztec Hearts and Minds’, esp. pp. 293-301.

²⁰⁰ Susan E. Alcock and Kathleen D. Morrison, ‘Imperial Ideologies’, in Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D’Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison and Carla M. Sinopoli (eds), *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 280. See also Brumfiel, ‘Aztec Hearts and Minds’, pp. 283-310, in the same volume.

²⁰¹ Sharisse D. McCafferty and Geoffrey G. McCafferty, ‘Spinning and Weaving as Female Gender Identity in Post-Classic Mexico’, in Margaret Blum Schevill, Janet Catherine Berlo and Edward B. Dwyer (eds), *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes: An Anthology* (New York, 1991), pp. 19-44; Sharisse D. McCafferty and Geoffrey G. McCafferty, ‘Powerful Women and the Myth of Male Dominance in Aztec Society’, *Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, 7 (1988), pp. 45-59; Brumfiel, ‘Asking about Aztec Gender’.

Archaeological fieldwork

Material culture provides important primary data throughout my thesis. In the earlier sections which discuss public rituals, monumental architecture such as the remains of the Templo Mayor and major monoliths such as the Coyolxauhqui monolith are most relevant. The final two chapters of this thesis focus most explicitly on local practices and ritual within the home. In this context, I use under-explored published and unpublished archaeological excavation reports of settlements in Triple Alliance provinces such as Cuauhnahuac and Huaxtepec provinces. These reports are helpful in reconstructing provincial lives, as these archaeologists have excavated Aztec-period houses and temples, uncovering much ritual paraphernalia, accoutrements and architecture which still wait to be interpreted and integrated into understandings of religion in Postclassic central Mexico. Most important in this inventory are the traces of ritual activity such as clay figurines (probably used as fertility talismans), child burials and evidence of domestic participation in Xiuhmolpilli. Perhaps most important are Michael E. Smith's detailed investigations of commoner houses. As I discussed in the introduction on key scholarly influences, Smith's work is particularly valuable to my research as he was a pioneer of Mesoamerican household archaeology.

Archaeological evidence can improve our understanding of Nahua cities, landscapes, homes and the outer empire. From an urban point of view, material culture is extremely important for understanding how Nahua cities functioned. The documentary record is heavily skewed towards Tenochtitlan and so the evidence uncovered by Michael E. Smith can flesh out this picture considerably. His regional excavations can tell us about issues such as the proportions of the urban structure and organisation, the inhabitants' quality of life, and their connections with the regional economy. As I have discussed, archaeological evidence is absolutely crucial in the assessment of Nahua homes. As Mexico City sits on top of Tenochtitlan, no domestic archaeology has been undertaken in the capital city; we are

completely in the dark as to how commoners lived there before the arrival of the Spanish. The excavations by Smith, and others, are therefore all we have to go on in examining and discussing domestic dwellings and fortunately their work provides a wealth of information on commoner households in the provinces near to Tenochtitlan. While his work is still limited to regions relatively close to the imperial core, Smith has added much to our understanding of how ordinary folk lived. The documentary record is completely silent on pre-Hispanic domestic organisation, but archaeology tells us that commoners lived in simple dwellings of one or two rooms, centred around a patio.²⁰² In the latter chapters, I extrapolate this information to assess how spatial organisation might have affected ritual choreography and conformity.

Archaeological reports and material culture are not a silver bullet to solve the textual record's problems. We might like to think that archaeology is democratic in what it can tell us (everyone, after all, can leave traces of their experience in material culture). Archaeological remains are, indeed, 'quite unlikely to be manipulated by individuals with bias or vested interest'.²⁰³ However, in reality the process of archaeological excavation is more limiting.²⁰⁴ Even with close analysis and subtle incorporation, the constraints of archaeology as a discipline mean that gaps will inevitably remain in our knowledge. In the Mexican context, these limitations are exacerbated; projects which relate to elite lives gather more funding, publicity and support than those concerned with the lives of village peasants.²⁰⁵ Most significantly, previous scholarship has been heavily focused on the Templo Mayor, driven by the sensational

²⁰² Susan Kellogg, 'The Social Organization of Households Among the Tenochca Mexica Before and After Conquest', in Robert S. Santley and Kenneth G. Hirth (eds), *Prehispanic Domestic Units in Western Mesoamerica: Studies of the Household, Compound and Residence* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1993), pp. 207-24.

²⁰³ Russell J. Barber and Frances F. Berdan, *The Emperor's Mirror: Understanding Cultures through Primary Sources* (Tucson, 1998), p. 260, quoted in Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, p. 20.

²⁰⁴ Julia A. Hendon and Rosemary A. Joyce, *Mesoamerican Archaeology: Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 2005).

²⁰⁵ Smith, *At Home with the Aztecs*, *passim*.

discovery of the Coyolxauhqui monolith in February 1978. As a result of these studies, we are well-informed about the iconography, architecture, symbolism of this mighty temple, but we know comparatively less about other constructed and natural spiritual places.²⁰⁶ There remain many holes and blind spots, and no pre-Hispanic town or city has been excavated in its entirety. As Frances Berdan aptly summarises: ‘A full archaeological record of a complete Aztec site remains a dream’.²⁰⁷ However, despite the inevitable limitations, integrating material culture into my analysis produces a more nuanced picture which reveals regional, temporal and social variation in religious behaviour. This is an important historiographical shift towards fleshing out ritual experiences as Nahuas themselves might have lived it.

While not wishing to downplay their complicated issues, the work of Sahagún, Motolinía, Durán and other ethnographers presents the best textual sources available for the study of pre-Hispanic Nahua culture.²⁰⁸ The very reason these religious men set about their ethnographic projects was to support their mission; they wrote their treatises so that friars would be better equipped to root out persistent ‘idolatry’. In the appendix to book four of the Florentine Codex, for example, it clearly pains Sahagún to detail the art of reading the day-signs. He writes, though, that ‘The zeal for truth and for the Catholic Faith compels me to place here the very words of a treatise... so that wherever one may see it, he may know that it is something very pernicious to our holy Catholic Faith; and it may be destroyed and burned’.²⁰⁹ In this statement we see that friars were desperate to detail correct information, even when it made them deeply uncomfortable. In my opinion, the friars would not have wished to record distorted or unrepresentative information of pre-conquest beliefs, as this would have delayed

²⁰⁶ Broda, Carrasco and Matos Moctezuma (eds), *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery*; Carrasco (ed.), *To Change Place*; López Luján, *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor*; Matos Moctezuma, *Life and Death in the Templo Mayor*.

²⁰⁷ Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, p. 21.

²⁰⁸ Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, pp. 277-93, esp. pp. 277-79; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, pp. 3-13.

²⁰⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 4: Appendix: 139.

their evangelising project. Sahagún and Durán, two of the most important chroniclers for my study, were both convinced that the information they recorded was true (although, of course, this does not guard against deliberate misinformation on the part of the informants, or accidental misunderstanding). Sahagún proudly assures his reader that his findings have stood up to a lengthy process of evaluation: ‘the first sieve through which my works were sifted was the people of Tepepulco; the second, the people of Tlatilulco; and the third, the people of Mexico [Tenochtitlan]’.²¹⁰ Furthermore, he refutes accusations that he, or others, might have dreamt up its content.

Inga Clendinnen summarises the predicament concerning the alphabetic sources very neatly: they ‘are at once imperfect, and invaluable’.²¹¹ They are imperfect because of the many problems they present the historian, and invaluable because we possess no other contemporaneous written source with which we can insight into Nahua attitudes and voices. While using colonial sources to reconstruct the pre-colonial world always be tricky, the geographical, social and gendered biases of the alphabetic sources at our disposal render them especially problematic. The terrible legacy of colonial violence has left truly unfiltered indigenous voices silent in the documentary record. However, while we should be wary of potential misrepresentation, exaggeration or even confusion, we must not shy away from these sources.²¹² Despite the issues I have outlined above, they are by far the best textual descriptions we have for pre-contact life. Far from dismissing them out of hand, we should employ the colonial writings and paintings judiciously and shrewdly, in full knowledge of their biases.

²¹⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 55. [Brackets mine].

²¹¹ Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 277.

²¹² Cecelia. F. Klein, ‘Wild Woman in Colonial Mexico: An Encounter of European and Aztec Concepts of the Other’, in Claire J. Farago (ed.), *Reframing the Renaissance: visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650* (New Haven, 1995), p. 263.

This sensitive approach to a combination of textual and archaeological sources can bring us closer to understanding Nahua ritual on its own terms.

II

FIRE, FILTH AND SKINS: KEY PRINCIPLES OF NAHUA RELIGION

In Tenochtitlan, ‘official’ public ritual was predicated on the spilling of blood as payment for the deities’ primordial sacrifice.²¹³ This violence in the name of foreign ‘gods’ horrified and disgusted the European friars who had travelled, with papal dispensation, to convert and civilise the native population of central Mesoamerica in the early sixteenth-century.²¹⁴ The documentary sources speak of violent, stylised acts which were repeated year on year in desperate hope of assuaging fickle and insatiable supernatural forces. The complex nature of the sources at hand means that many aspects and principles of Postclassic Nahua religiosity remain contested and misunderstood. Without unmediated contemporaneous voices to guide us, interpretations of Postclassic life remain open to debate and interpretation.

Before being able to analyse rituals, it is essential we understand the workings of the calendar, the agrarian cycle and some fundamental principles of Nahua religion, such as deity substitution and the *tlazolli* (‘filth’) complex. The organisation of time was crucial to Mexica daily life; these official rituals did not occur randomly or haphazardly but were organised by a complex, sophisticated calendar. The early colonial friars were surprised to find in its workings evidence of the Mexica’s capacity for rational thought. They devoted many pages to expounding it; these men presented a fixed system, trying to explain certain features within their own calendar. We must remember, after all, that most of the chronicles were designed to

²¹³ These official acts were those which were sanctioned and promoted by the Mexica political hierarchies. This is in contrast to ‘unofficial’ acts, or rituals pertaining to the private, domestic or non-elite sphere. The dialectic between the two is a key concept explored in this thesis.

²¹⁴ The papal bull *Inter caetera*, decreed by Pope Alexander VI in May 1493, had given the Spanish crown sovereignty over lands ‘west and south’ of the Azores.

be read by fellow friars as ‘manuals’ to help them with their local conversion efforts. If we bear this in mind, it seems natural that they would explain the native calendar within a contemporary European framework. Sahagún, for example, explained the two cycles in terms of ‘fixed’ and ‘moveable’ feasts which mirrored the Christian calendar.²¹⁵

An agricultural ritual cycle

My research on Nahua rituals is inextricably linked with their method of counting time. When the European friars arrived, they were particularly taken with the Nahua calendar. However, in their efforts to explain the calendars within European frameworks, they reduced these systems to static, repetitive cycles. The Nahua calendar was an extraordinarily complex system which impressed, and confounded, the early modern friars. Its workings continue to be contested by scholars who privilege those alphabetic accounts and cast the calendar within Western epistemological frameworks of fixed units of time. Given its importance to my study, it is important to lay out my own stance on the Nahua’s calendrical systems. I will first, however, explain the way we think the Nahuas measured time.²¹⁶ The system comprised two cyclical counts which ran concurrently, but independently: a longer *xiuhpohualli* (365-day ‘year count’) and shorter *tonalpohualli* (260-day, ‘day count’).²¹⁷ People, places, events and things were all tied to these cyclical counts; ‘everyone and everything had its particular point of attachment and thus its place’ in the rounds.²¹⁸ As will be explored in my final chapter, a

²¹⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 19: 35-41; Brown, ‘European Influences’, p. vi.

²¹⁶ Alfonso Caso suggests that calendars such as the Aztec, Mixtec and Zapotec shared fundamental principles which transcended political, geographical and linguistic barriers. See: Alfonso Caso, ‘Calendrical Systems of Central Mexico’, in Robert Wauchope, Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal (eds), *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 10 (Austin, 1971), pp. 341-43; Caso, *Los calendarios prehispánicos*. For a different view, see Ross Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico* (Austin, 2001).

²¹⁷ *Xiuhpohualli* is translated from Nahuatl as ‘year count’ (from *xihuitl*, ‘year’ and *pohua*, ‘to count’). *Tonalpohualli* means ‘day count’ (from *tonatiuh*, meaning ‘day’ and *pohua*).

²¹⁸ Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 13.

person's place in this scheme of time depended on their day of birth; their resulting fate could be good, bad or indifferent. The essential character of their 'point of attachment' resulted from the layers of influence associated with particular temporal units (days, *veintenas*, years).

The *xiuhpohualli* comprised eighteen 'months' of twenty days each, which are referred to as *veintenas*. In this understanding, each *veintena* comprised its own particular festival in Tenochtitlan and its surrounding landscape.²¹⁹ Table 3 extrapolates the essentials of each ceremony from the information in the second book of the *Florentine Codex*. Generally speaking, each *veintena* had a purpose and design which was determined by its position within the natural cycle of rains and harvest.²²⁰ Maize was an enduring preoccupation for the Mexica. It was eaten at every meal in the form of tortillas or *tamales*. Together with beans and squash, maize formed the basis of their diet. Their dependence on this grain meant that the Nahuas were completely reliant upon their climate. Much time and energy were invested in understanding and supplicating the forces of nature to ensure a productive harvest. In the Basin of Mexico, seasonal changes were dramatic with the yearly cycle largely unchanged since the Early Horizon phase (900 BC-200 BCE).²²¹ The first ceremonies in the *xiuhpohualli* — from Atl Cahualo to Toxcatl — took place during the earlier dry season and were intense festivals involving the sacrifice of children to Tlaloc and other water and earth deities in the mountains around Tenochtitlan.²²² It was hoped that these brutal sacrifices would be rewarded with April showers which moistened the soil for the May planting season.²²³ The rainy season provided that it came reliably — began in June and stretched into October. Maize, the staple crop, needed

²¹⁹ For example: Broda de Casas, 'Tlacaxipeualiztli: A Reconstruction of an Aztec Calendar Festival'; Carrasco, 'Give Me Some Skin', pp. 1-26.

²²⁰ Elizabeth Morán, *Sacred Consumption: Food and Ritual in Aztec Art and Culture* (Austin, 2016), p. 4.

²²¹ C. Earle Smith Jr. and Paul Tolstoy, 'Vegetation and Man in the Basin of Mexico', *Economic Botany*, 35.4 (1981), p. 415.

²²² *Florentine Codex*, 2: 4: 8.

²²³ Maize must be planted in the spring in moist, warm soil as it is intolerant to the cold.

hot, moist soil; sunny mornings with heavy afternoon rainfall provided ideal growth conditions. If all went well, little seedlings would appear a month after planting. These shoots were plucked and gratefully offered to the corn deities during the spring-time festival, Huey Tozoztli. Months later, in our September, the large ears of maize would be harvested before farmers were called away for the season of war which could last from October to April.

Table 3: The *Veintena* cycle, according to the *Florentine Codex*, Book 2, ‘The Ceremonies’.

	Veintena name	Key themes/	Sacrifices	Presiding deities	Season	European Month
First	Atl Cahualo ‘Spreading of Corn’		Children; captives	Tlaloc, Chalchiuhtlicue, Quetzalcoatl	Dry	February
Second	Tlacaxipehualiztli ‘Flaying of Men’		Slaves; captives	Xipe Totec	Dry	March-April
Third	Tozoztontli ‘Small Vigil’	Celebration of the first flower blooms	Children	Tlaloc	Dry	April
Fourth	Huey Tozoztli ‘Great Vigil’	Celebrating the first stalks of maize	Children	Centeotl, Chicomecoatl,	Beginning of the rain (first shoots)	April-May
Fifth	Toxcatl ‘Dry Thing’		A perfect youth	Tezcatlipoca	Rain	‘Easter’ May-June
Sixth	Etzalqualiztli ‘Eating of Etzalli’		Captives	Tlaloc	Rain	June

Seventh	Tecuilhuitontli 'Small Feast Day of the Lords'		An <i>ixiptlatl</i> of Huixtocihuatl; captives	Huixtocihuatl	Rain	June-July
Eighth	Huey Tecuilhuitl 'Great Feast Day of the Lords'	Donation of food to the poor	An <i>ixiptlatl</i> of Xilonen (decapitation)	Xilonen	Rain	July-August
Ninth	Tlaxochimaco	War	No sacrifice?	Huitzilopochtli	Rain	August
Tenth	Xocotl Huetzi	Male strength	Slaves (burning and then heart extraction)	Xiuhtecuhtli	Rain	August-September
Eleventh	Ochpaniztli 'Road Sweeping'	Female midwives and physicians	An <i>ixiptlatl</i> of Teteo Innan or Toçi	Teteo Innan, Toçi	End of the growing season; first harvest; beginning of the war season; winds	September-October
Twelfth	Teotl Eco 'The Arrival of the Gods'		Captives (burning)	All deities	Rain	October
Thirteenth	Tepeilhuitl	<i>Tzoalli</i> images of the dead	Four women and one man	Mountains?	Rain	

						October- November
Fourteenth	Quecholli 'Precious Feathers'	Warfare preparation; hunting; masculinity making weapons	<i>Ixiptla</i> of Mixcoatl and his unnamed female consort; captives; slaves	Mixcoatl	Sun/War	November
Fifteenth	Panquetzaliztli 'Raising of Banners'	War	Slaves; captives	Huitzilopochtli	Sun	December
Sixteenth	Atemoztli 'Descent of Waters'		'Sacrifice' of dough images	Tlaloc	Thunder and rain	December- January
Seventeenth	Tititl	Manufacture of cotton sacks	An <i>ixiptlatl</i> of Tonan	Tonan	Sun	January
Eighteenth	Izcalli	Animal offerings; piercing of children's ears	Slaves; captives (only every fourth year)	Xiuhtecuhtli	Sun	January- February

This relatively predictable cycle formed the structure of the ritual calendar which was separated into two chronological sections: one devoted to the sun and the other to rain. As Nicholson determined in his classic paper: ‘No less than seven, or over a third, of these *veintena* ceremonies were involved with the propitiation of Tlaloc, the fertility deity par excellence, or closely related deities’.²²⁴ Tlaloc was not venerated just because he brought rain. His authority was concomitant with the natural environment’s power to produce food and, in particular, maize. Felipe Fernández-Armesto has pointed out that ‘Staples are almost always sacred, because people depend on them: they possess divine power. The fact that staples in their turn usually depend on people for cultivation does not seem to compromise their sacred status’.²²⁵ For the Nahuas, rain was not just weather, and maize was not just sustenance: both represented life itself.²²⁶

In addition to following the agrarian cycle, themes of social reproduction, political success and mythical history were prominently displayed in public and private ceremonialism.²²⁷ In this respect, ‘natural’ representatives of nature such as Xilonen or Tlaloc were certainly not the only deities to be venerated during the ritual cycle. What we might term ‘cultural’ or ‘societal’ gods played an important part.²²⁸ Culture hero deities such as Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca and Mixcoatl had ethnic or tribal roots to a particular geographical location. Umberger has referred to such deities as ‘political patrons’

²²⁴ Nicholson, ‘Religion in pre-Hispanic Central Mexico’, p. 434. Nicholson’s paper is essential reading for pre-Hispanic Mexican religion and culture. As one of the first scholars to synthesise the material, his typology and classification of deities and rites remains extremely influential, if contested.

²²⁵ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Food: A History* (London, 2001), p. 34, quoted in Morán, *Sacred Consumption*, p. 4.

²²⁶ The title of Sandstrom’s renowned ethnographic study of a contemporary Nahua village arises from a metaphor regarding the importance of maize. He writes that ‘the villagers consider maize to be the absolute necessity of life, the source of nourishment that takes precedence over all others. When the Nahuas say “corn is our blood”, the literal meaning of this metaphor is that it is their most important food’: Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, p. 128.

²²⁷ Ceremonies also had social, practical functions. Huey Tecuilhuitl (‘Great Feast Day of the Lords’), for example, was a redistributive feast where nobles provided food for the less fortunate.

²²⁸ Nicholson classified these gods as ‘War-Sacrifice-Sanguinary Nourishment’. Nicholson, ‘Religion in pre-Hispanic Central Mexico’, pp. 408-32.

and argues convincingly that their prevalence, imagery and worship ‘depended on the vicissitudes of political history’.²²⁹ Her analysis of Tenochtitlan public monuments has argued that, in fact, Huitzilopochtli was not the Mexica’s supreme deity until after the 1460s, when they pushed for imperial expansion and became the senior partner of the Triple Alliance.²³⁰ While post-conquest textual evidence — capturing things as they were on the eve of conquest — emphasises Huitzilopochtli’s supreme religious dominance, Umberger’s analysis of public monuments shows that Tezcatlipoca was, in fact, the supreme deity in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco before the Mexica’s rise to hegemony.²³¹ So, the Mexica ‘pantheon’, or set of deities, was not fixed across time or space. The fortunes of each political patron, or cultural god, was tied to the fortunes of their patron city or people. This is most starkly noted in the Mexica’s conquest practices. When the Mexica subjugated a town, the local temple was burned, and their titular deity was appropriated. The defeated town’s deity had been overcome by Huitzilopochtli; the weaker deity’s idol was removed and taken to reside within a special temple in Tenochtitlan’s ceremonial precinct.

Cultural deities such as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca had, therefore, been assimilated into the Mexica pantheon at different times across the years. These deities exemplified the entanglement of Mexica lived experience with mythical history and imperial domination. While Huitzilopochtli had grown in prominence inside Tenochtitlan, he seems to have enjoyed little representation outside of the immediate imperial core. Quetzalcoatl, the ‘Feathered Serpent’ was the god of wind, but had particularly intriguing roots among the Mexica’s predecessors, the Toltecs.²³² The Mexica were continually concerned with legitimising their power and status; a key strategy in this endeavour was claiming heritage with the Toltecs, their

²²⁹ Emily Umberger, ‘Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli: Political Dimensions of Aztec Deities’, in Elizabeth Baquedano (ed.), *Tezcatlipoca: Trickster and Supreme Deity* (Boulder, 2014), pp. 84-85.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Florentine Codex*, 3: 4: 13.

predecessors in the Valley of Mexico. They were eulogised by their Mexica ‘descendants’ as a sophisticated people who had developed art, astrology and writing.²³³ In linking themselves with these elegant and cultured people, the Mexica attempted to shrug off their barbarous past. In this section, then, we have seen that the Mexica ritual cycle — and their gods — were not fixed or predictable. Nor did they simply mirror the seasons. Instead, deities and their religious performances could wax and wane over the course of the years, depending on the performers’ priorities and wishes.

The tonalpohualli comprised twenty *trecenas* of thirteen days each, a period similar to our understanding of a week. As with the *veintenas*, the Nahuatl term for *trecena* remains unknown and scholars tend to use the Spanish-derived term which features in many of the early colonial accounts (from the Spanish for ‘thirteen’, *trece*). These *trecenas* made up the 260-day *tonalpohualli*, which was a divinatory sequence interpreted by *tonalpouhqui* (‘readers of days’) for forecasting and prophecy. Each individual day was named with a number and a day-sign (e.g. One Reed) and was thought to encapsulate positive, negative or ambivalent characteristics. There were twenty day-signs, as shown in Durán’s illustration. I will discuss the ‘reader of days’ in more depth later in the study, but suffice it to say that they interpreted the day-signs for a client, for example to advise on a suitable day for a family ritual. Table 4 shows that the first day of the first *trecena* was 1 Crocodile. The first *trecena* ended with 13 Reed and the day-signs kept rolling, so the day after 13 Reed would be 1 Jaguar, and the system continued after that. There were 260 possible permutations which made up a single year.

²³³ Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, pp. 23-25.

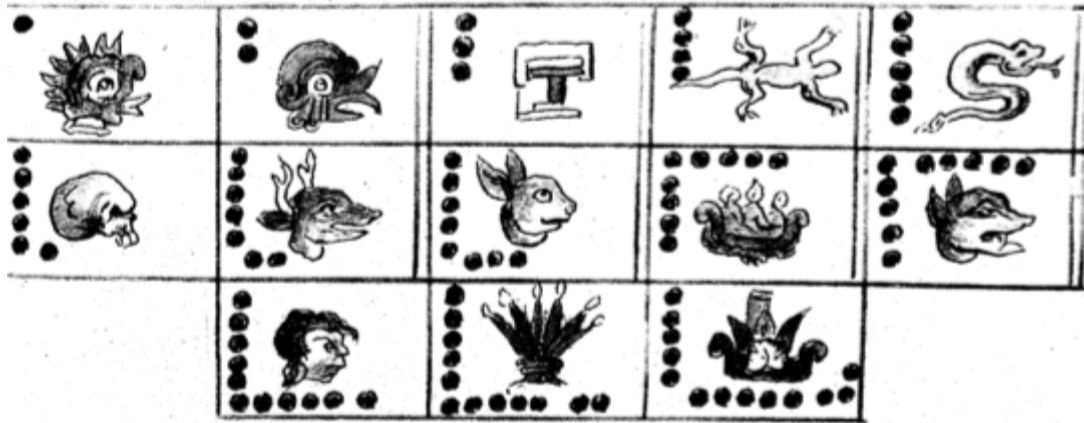


Figure 12: A trecena, from 1 Crocodile to 13 Reed
 Durán, *Book of the Gods*, plate 37, p. 361.

1	Crocodile	10	Dog	6	Rain
2	Wind	11	Monkey	7	Flower
3	House	12	Wild Grass	8	Crocodile
4	Lizard	13	Reed	9	Wind
5	Serpent	1	Jaguar	10	House
6	Death	2	Eagle	11	Lizard
7	Deer	3	Buzzard	12	Serpent
8	Rabbit	4	Motion	13	Death
9	Water	5	Flint Knife	1	Rabbit

Table 4: An example day-sign sequence.
 Days which 'reset' the sequence are shaded in grey

There were five days in the 365-day year which did not have a name and, technically, sat even outside of time itself. At the end of the final *veintena*, Izcalli, the calendar fell out of time and five superfluous, intercalary *nemontemi* ('useless') days were 'unlucky, nameless, and profitless'.²³⁴ The word is constructed from *nen* 'vain' and *temi* 'to fill'. The *nemontemi* days are referred to collectively, as a discrete phase and not as individual days.²³⁵ This was a powerful, liminal phase during which time virtually no activities were undertaken. People avoided each other and certainly stayed within the confines of their home to avoid misfortune.²³⁶

²³⁴ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 395. This Nahuatl word has proved awkward to translate. Scholars have tended to accept Durán's interpretation of them as 'useless'. See: Durán, *The Ancient Calendar*, p. 469; Susan Milbrath, *Heaven and Earth in Ancient Mexico: Astronomy and Seasonal Cycles in the Codex Borgia* (Austin, 2013), p. 21. See: Karttunen, *Analytical Dictionary*, pp. 167 and 222 and Rémi Simeon, *Diccionario de la lengua Náhuatl o Mexicana*, (1977), p. 464.

²³⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 171-72 and Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 396. Hill Boone argues that the *nemontemi* must have had day-signs in order for the year-bearer name to advance each year. See: Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 255, n. 14; Caso, 'Calendrical Systems of Central Mexico', pp. 341-43. The classic Maya also measured time with a 260-day cycle formed of 20 named days organised in a number cycle from one to 13. Their solar year was divided into 18 months of each days each, with five fallow days. See Inga Clendinnen, 'Landscape and World View: The Survival of Yucatec Maya Culture under Spanish Conquest', *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History*, 22.3 (1980), p. 382. The grammar of the word '*nemontemi*' is unclear from the sources. In the interests of consistency, I refer to these days as a singular, discrete phase of time (i.e. 'the *nemontemi* days').

²³⁶ *The Tovar Calendar*, fol. 157r; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 65.

A 52-year cycle ended when both *tonalpohualli* and *xiuhpohualli* end-dates coincided. This event only happened every 18,928 days (or 52 years). A full cycle was also known as Nexiuhpiliztli.

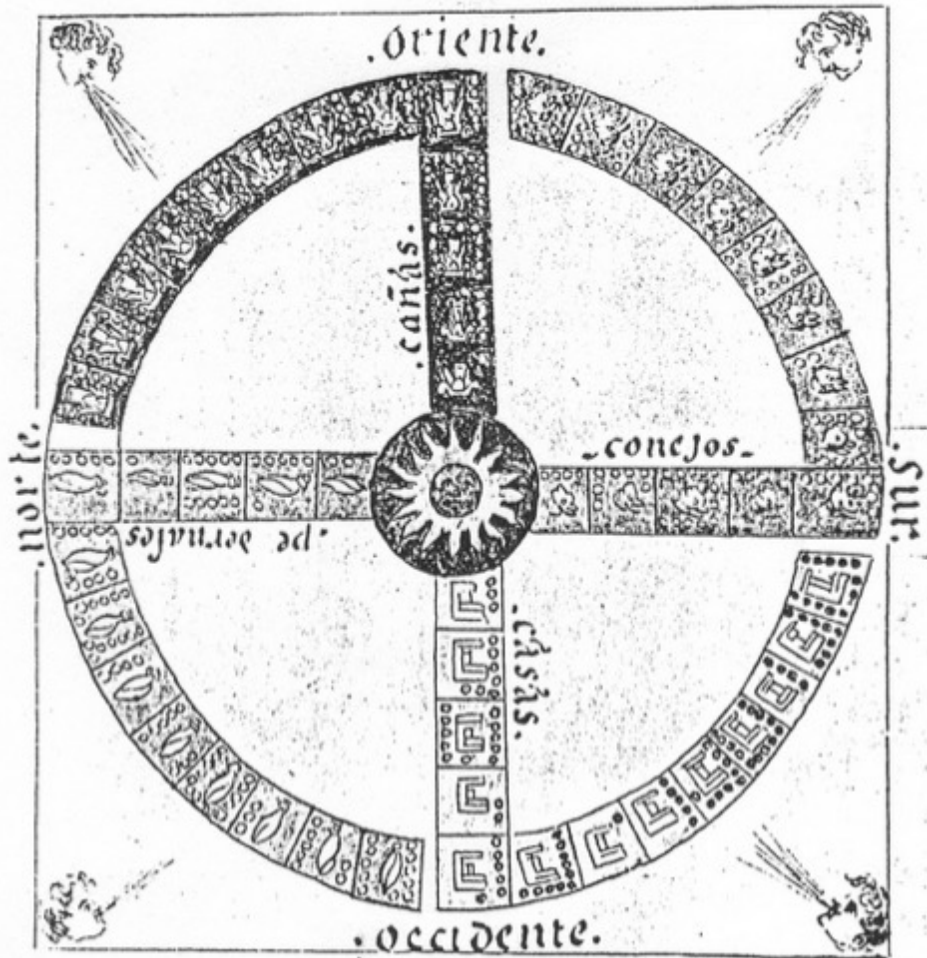


Figure 13: Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, plate 35.

In figure 13 we see that each solar, 365-day period was labelled with a year-bearer name and a number, in a similar way to the *tonalpohualli*.²³⁷ However, in this system there were only four potential names which would combine with the numbers one to 13.²³⁸ In Durán's illustration

²³⁷ Although an attractive illustration, there are errors in Durán's *Ancient Calendar* diagram of the 52-year cycle and its textual description. In Plate 35, the year drawn as 7 Rabbit should be 8 Rabbit. Durán has skipped over 7 House in the sequence in favour of Rabbit, which thereafter disturbs the order. See Durán, *The Ancient Calendar*, p. 390, n. 4. Despite this mistake, this illustration remains useful for understanding Mexica time.

²³⁸ Note that there is some scholarly discussion about the supposed convention of naming years according to the final day of the *tonalpohualli*. Caso has argued that each of the 52 years was named

each year-bearer in the cycle is labelled: *tochtli* (‘conejos’, or rabbit), *acatl* (‘cañas’, or reed), *tecpatl* (‘pedernales’, flint) and *calli* (‘casas’, house) and associated with a direction.²³⁹ Table 4 shows that the 52 permutations began with the year 1 *tochtli*, 2 *acatl*, 3 *tecpatl*, 4 *calli*. After 4 *calli*, the names returned to *tochtli*. After 13 *tochtli*, the numbers had to reset to 1. However, the year-bearer cycle rolled on to *acatl*, as per the cyclical sequence. So the year moved on to 1 *acatl*, 2 *tecpatl*, 3 *calli*, 4 *tochtli*, 5 *acatl* and so on. The final year in the 52-year sequence was 13 *calli*. The final date in this year happened to be the final end-date of the *tonalpohualli*, meaning that both counts reset. It was at this moment that, in theory, the binding of years ceremony, Xiuhmolpilli, which I will discuss, should have been celebrated as it tied both old and new 52-year cycles together.

1	Tochtli	1	Acatl	1	Tecpatl	1	Calli
2	Acatl	2	Tecpatl	2	Calli	2	Tochtli
3	Tecpatl	3	Calli	3	Tochtli	3	Acatl
4	Calli	4	Tochtli	4	Acatl	4	Tecpatl
5	Tochtli	5	Acatl	5	Tecpatl	5	Calli
6	Acatl	6	Tecpatl	6	Calli	6	Tochtli
7	Tecpatl	7	Calli	7	Tochtli	7	Acatl
8	Calli	8	Tochtli	8	Acatl	8	Tecpatl
9	Tochtli	9	Acatl	9	Tecpatl	9	Calli
10	Acatl	10	Tecpatl	10	Calli	10	Tochtli
11	Tecpatl	11	Calli	11	Tochtli	11	Acatl
12	Calli	12	Tochtli	12	Acatl	12	Tecpatl
13	Tochtli	13	Acatl	13	Tecpatl	13	Calli

Table 5: A fifty-two-year cycle

according to the last day of the preceding *tonalpohualli*. So for example, in his theory, the year 2 *acatl* was named as such because the final day of the previous ritual count had been 13 *acatl*. See Milbrath, *Heaven and Earth in Ancient Mexico*, p. 10 and Caso, *Los calendarios prehispánicos*.

²³⁹ Durán followed the contemporary custom of pluralising dates (e.g., *casas*, meaning ‘houses’). However, in classical Nahuatl the plural form is rarely used for inanimate entities and so scholars now translate these dates in the singular (e.g., ‘2 House’ and not ‘2 Houses’). Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 389, n. 3.

This system was, I suggest, deliberately complicated in order that each individual year might invoke special connotations and associations by virtue of its number in the sequence and its day-sign. The Mexica calendar was an intriguing combination of cycles and linear time. Their understanding of time as positive or negative was related to their position within the universe. Key to understanding this concept is that time was linked to space. As is evident from the next table, each year had an associated deity, direction and colour which gave it a predominantly (but not overwhelmingly) positive, negative or ambivalent nature. While there were many heavens above and underworlds below, the living world itself was divided into four quadrants (*nauhcampa*), represented by the cardinal directions, which all extended outwards from a central fifth section.²⁴⁰ If we refer back to Durán's circular drawing of Nexiuhpiliztli, we see: *acatl* with the east, *tecpatl* with the north, *calli* with west and *tochtli* with the south. Also significant is that east features at the top of the drawing. Facing the rising sun, East was the most positive year and brought vitality. Table 5 synthesises the information from Durán's ancient calendar with regards to the connotations of each direction. While *tecpatl* years were supremely and constantly negative: 'barren, fruitless, dry, hungry years',²⁴¹ *tochtli* years are particularly interesting because of their ambivalent nature.²⁴² This meant, perhaps, that human effort was more greatly required during a *tochtli* year in order to produce rain and good harvests. Evidence suggests that *tochtli* years were particularly feared because the worst famine to strike central Mexico happened during one such year.²⁴³ As such, any subsequent *tochtli* year was regarded with trepidation. As we shall see in a later chapter, this cyclical, fatalistic worldview motivated their ritual practice, affected its schedule and could modify its choreography.

²⁴⁰ Carrasco, 'Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor', p. 140.

²⁴¹ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 392.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 393.

²⁴³ Archaeological and ethnohistorical data confirm that one of the worst famines to strike pre-Columbian Mesoamerica occurred in 1454, a 1 *tochtli* year: *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, p. 217.

Year-bearer	Direction	Associations
Acatl (Reed)	East	Positive The most auspicious years for the Mexica, ‘they loved the reed [<i>acatl</i>] years, and were happy when these years came’. ²⁴⁴
Tecpatl (Flint Knife)	North	Negative Associated with Mictlampa (‘the Place of the Dead’) as the <i>tecpatl</i> was the instrument of sacrificial death. <i>Tecpatl</i> years were ‘barren, fruitless, dry, hungry years’. ²⁴⁵
Calli (House)	West	Negative Particularly unfavourable, worse than <i>tecpatl</i> , <i>Calli</i> was ‘the worst of all signs’. ²⁴⁶ This was a time when ‘all one’s day was spent in idleness’, ²⁴⁷ a particularly egregious state given that indolence was highly frowned upon in industrious Mexica society.
Tochtli (Rabbit)	South	Ambivalent ‘Neither bad nor good, for in some years things went well and in others badly’. ²⁴⁸

Table 6: Year-bearers and their associations

²⁴⁴ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 393.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 393. Matos Moctezuma provides a more succinct outline of the basic precepts of the arrangements of space and time. See: Matos Moctezuma, *Life and Death in the Templo Mayor*, p. 24; also Alfredo López Austin, *Human Body and Ideology* (Salt Lake City, 1988), pp. 58-61.

Our understandings of Nahua time

We have no unmediated indigenous voices to explain the calendar to us and so we are heavily reliant on what the friars explained in their chronicles. Evidence suggests that friars treated the two calendar cycles very differently. The 365-day *xiuhpohualli*'s foundation in astronomy and its correlation with the European calendar was taken as pleasing evidence of intellect.²⁴⁹ By contrast, the strange 260-day *tonalpohualli* had no European equivalent and its peculiarity provided easy proof of the Nahuas' inherent heresy; as Sahagún declared, 'this book of days is more correctly called sorcery'.²⁵⁰ Whereas Sahagún had declared the *xiuhpohualli* to be 'praiseworthy for many reasons',²⁵¹ he condemned the *tonalpohualli* as a:

very pernicious count, superstitious, and full of idolatry... [which] cannot be and never was a calendar; for the calendar, as hath been said, is represented in the opening of the Second Book [*xiuhpohualli*], and containeth all the days of the year, and the feasts of the year.²⁵²

The friars were dismissive, but clearly wary, of the 260-day cycle which 'is a difficult count, full of error, with no foundation of natural astrology'.²⁵³ The friars promoted the longer, 365-day count as 'the year' and discounted the *tonalpohualli* as an irrational method of counting time. Scholars have generally followed this trend in accepting the *xiuhpohualli* as the year (as it relates to Western calendrical principles) and the *tonalpohualli* as an obscure 'ritual count'. In this way, the *xiuhpohualli* is understood to be the more important, public count and the

²⁴⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 4: Appendix: 145.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4: 1: 1. The *tonalamatl* (literally 'book of days') was the book where *tonalpohualli* were recorded.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4: Appendix, 140.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 4: Appendix: 137. In this passage, Sahagún references 'Book Two' of his *Florentine Codex*, 'The Ceremonies', in which the festivals of each month of the *xiuhpohualli* are detailed.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4: Appendix: 145. The length of the *tonalpohualli* has intrigued many scholars and a variety of theories have been put forward to explain its 260-day length. Among the most common relate to the Venusian cycle and the length of human gestation period. See Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 17.

tonalpohualli is recognised, even by scholars, as being useful really only for prognostication and other divination.

There is, however, no evidence that the Postclassic Nahuas perceived the *xiuhpohualli* as more important to their daily lives. In fact, close examination of the evidence would suggest the opposite to be true.²⁵⁴ Betty Ann Brown's comparative analysis of textual and pictorial representations of the calendar found that there was no consistent pre-conquest convention which recorded *veintena* periods of the *xiuhpohualli*. Brown points out that early colonial artists tended to repeat pre-contact practices faithfully. She discerns that the *tonalpohualli* illustrations are 'remarkably similar in the various Early Colonial examples, [and so] are drawn from a conventional pre-Conquest prototype'.²⁵⁵ By contrast, 'there is diversity of composition and content and marked European influence in the monthly [*veintena*] calendar illustrations. This indicates that there was no conventional formula available for the Early Colonial artists to copy or repeat'.²⁵⁶ I agree with Brown that 'The monthly [*veintena*] calendar may therefore have been of relatively little importance to the pre-Conquest Mexica', and its representation was heavily influenced by European intervention.²⁵⁷ *Codex Borgia* is the only known pre-Hispanic source to depict *veintena* representations. Crucially, this important manuscript does not depict these monthly festivals as a fixed series, which is often the case for colonial descriptions.²⁵⁸ Therefore, it seems as though the Nahuas did not conceive of any individual festival as a whole, separate 'month' which bore relation to any other 'month'. There is also no irrefutable proof that each *veintena* even lasted twenty days, save for the fact that the missionaries named them *veintenas*. Tlacaxipehualiztli was the second *veintena* in the

²⁵⁴ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 404.

²⁵⁵ Brown, 'European Influences', p. 347.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁵⁸ DiCesare, *Sweeping the Way*, p. 9.

xiuhpohualli cycle. This feast, Sahagún wrote, began eighty days before the final sacrifice, meaning that it probably overlapped with the drama of three previous *veintenas*.²⁵⁹

In this way, we must be extremely cautious not to take for granted the prescriptions of the friars. They understood their own religious calendar as being governed by fixed feasts such as Christmas or Epiphany, determined by the sun, and moveable feasts such as Pentecost or Easter, which were determined by lunar cycles.²⁶⁰ In this way, they were comfortable with the idea that feast days could change every year. However, their entire liturgical calendar was, in theory, governed by solar and lunar cycles. No such ‘natural’ foundation was clear to them for the *tonalpohualli* which they duly denigrated as a diabolical artifice. However, the evidence points to the *tonalpohualli* exerting far greater influence before the Conquest; it was this count that was consulted in all significant personal decisions and daily choices. Of course, the friars had close knowledge of some aspects of Nahua ceremonies and religious principles, but they interpreted what they understood within their own mental frameworks of liturgical cycles, books of hours and saints’ days.²⁶¹

The tonalpouhqui, the ‘reader of days’

An important figure in our study of Nahua ritual will be the *tonalpouhqui* or ‘reader of days’. This was a person who prognosticated; that which is sometimes called a ‘soothsayer’.²⁶² The *tonalpouhqui* was described by Alonso de Molina, in his 1571 Nahuatl dictionary

²⁵⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 21: 47-60.

²⁶⁰ Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 58-59.

²⁶¹ Brown, ‘European Influences’, p. 211; DiCesare, *Sweeping the Way*, p. 59.

²⁶² Many other studies of Nahua ritual interpret the *tonalpouhqui* as a ‘soothsayer’. As I explained in my introductory note, I am keen to avoid reductive Eurocentric translations which ignore the spirit of the original. Here, the emphasis is clearly on the act of reading. I see no reason to translate this Nahua word or to shoehorn it into a Western framework of understanding. I will refer to this figure as a *tonalpouhqui*, or as the ‘reader’ throughout this work.

Vocabulario de la lengua castellana y mexicana, as ‘*advino o agorero, que echa suertes*’.²⁶³

This man, and it does seem to have been men, is hugely important throughout my analysis. They were professional practitioners who transcended the boundaries between state and ‘official’, and household and personal ritual. They could advise anyone on a range of issues, from commoners about their children’s naming, lucky days for a wedding ceremony or even the Mexica ruler about auspicious days to initiate warfare campaigns.²⁶⁴ Figure 0-2 shows the *tonalpouhqui*, the elderly man on the right, consulting his *tonalamatl* at the request of a new mother, who holds her baby. A scroll emanates from the old man’s mouth, indicating that he is speaking. The reader of days consulted screenfold manuscripts, literally called ‘books of days’, which contained a calendar in pictographic writing. The reader of days cross-checked information within the almanac, adding in his own knowledge of the day-signs to produce a unique reading. In this way, the *tonalamatl* could not be read on its own terms, a considerable amount of prior knowledge was needed for its interpretation. It is unfortunately unclear how the *tonalpouhqui* acquired the necessary skills for his profession. As his authority seemed to be closely linked to astrology, a priestly duty, it seems as though he would have been drawn from the priestly class. Given the extraordinary complexity of reading the Nahuatl calendar, he



Figure 14: The mother consults the *tonalpouhqui*
Florentine Codex, book 6

would have required an institutional education. We will discuss more about the education system in due course. However, in Tenochtitlan young boys were generally sent to the *telpochcalli* (‘house of youths’) for a practical, warrior education. Sons of nobles

²⁶³ Molina, p. 149. In English: ‘a fortune-teller or soothsayer who tells fortunes’.

²⁶⁴ A reader of days advised Cuauhtemoc, the last Mexica *tlahtoani*, to cease fighting for eighty days during the Spanish siege of Tenochtitlan. Cuauhtemoc heeded the advice and combat resumed only after this ceasefire. See Durán, *History*, p. 475; James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993), p. 269.

were usually sent to the *calmecac* ('house of tears') for a more sophisticated, theoretical education, which prepared them for high office. Hill Boone conjectures that *tonalpouhqui* 'had excelled at the calmecac'. However, the evidence for this is unclear.²⁶⁵

We should not forget that the political and social climate during the colonial period in New Spain was tense. It was during this time that selected informants worked with mendicant friars in order to produce many of the textual sources analysed here. Moreover, Sahagún and his colleagues clearly and openly disapproved of the *tonalpohualli* and its masters. For them, reading day-signs could only have been the result of malign influence: 'this art of soothsaying followeth... some characters and numbers in which no natural foundation existeth, but only an artifice made by the devil himself'.²⁶⁶ As previously discussed, Sahagún reminded his reader that such information was only provided in his *Florentine Codex* so that his fellow evangelisers could understand their neophytes in order to convert them.²⁶⁷ In the face of such hostility, a 'reader of days' was extremely unlikely to reveal the inner workings of the complex art of divination.²⁶⁸ Indeed, Sahagún confirms this: 'The Indians who well understood the secrets of these wheels and calendar showed and explained them to but few, because through their knowledge they gained their livelihood and were held in esteem'.²⁶⁹ There is an enlightening example of a how indigenous people continue to conceal religious activities from outsiders. Anthropologist Alan Sandstrom gained the trust of Huastecan Nahuas in the 1970s in order to conduct an ethnographic study of their community. The people of 'Amatlán' welcomed

²⁶⁵ Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 28. For present-day Nahuas, Sandstrom has documented that so-called 'shamans' (*tlatimiquetl*, 'person of knowledge')—who heal disease and prognosticate—actively decide to take on the role. Typically, their *tonalli* ('fate') predisposes them for this life, but others report signs such as ritual dreams or a miraculous recovery from illness. *Tlatimiqueh* train with a 'master' for around six or seven years: Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, pp. 233-34.

²⁶⁶ *Florentine Codex*, 4: Appendix: 145.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4: Appendix: 139.

²⁶⁸ Eloise Quiñones-Keber, 'Painting Divination in the Florentine Codex', in her *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún* (Boulder, 2002), pp. 251-76.

²⁶⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 4: Appendix: 141.

Sandstrom and explained many aspects of their way of life.²⁷⁰ They were, however, extremely reticent to discuss their spirituality or ritual practices.²⁷¹ It was five months before Sandstrom detected any kind of ritual activity at all and ten years before anyone willingly invited him to study their practices in person. In fact, their activities were so well-hidden that Sandstrom claims to have been ‘beginning to wonder whether I had perhaps discovered the first human group without rituals or religion’.²⁷² This vignette puts into perspective the early colonial friars’ difficulty in collecting information of pre-Hispanic religion.

The *tonalpouhqui*’s knowledge resists easy definition within a Western framework. Because of the overlapping day-signs, deities and *trecenas*, fortune-telling was a mysterious art relying principally on interpretation. For example, a day could have its own properties, but it would also be affected by the day which had begun the *trecena* it sat in.²⁷³ Readings could therefore be ambiguous; the result of the *tonalpouhqui*’s reading was less easy to prove right or wrong. There are hints in the sources that a reader could be something of a charlatan. In his discussions of what he refers to as ‘fortune-tellers’ in late sixteenth-century Morelos, priest Hernando de Alarcón remarked:

since the profession does not cost them any money— but only memorizing the fortune-telling incantation and, along with that, saying they know a lot and that there is nothing to hide from their knowledge — they easily enter into the profession and, with a greater facility in their performance, they are certain to profit. If, for our sins, he has got the prediction right once — a thing which frequently happens for anyone who has good reasoning — he becomes so reputed that not only Indians but Spaniards as well consult him.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ ‘Amatlán’ is a pseudonym for a real Nahuatl community used to protect their identity: Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, p. xvii.

²⁷¹ Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, p. 232.

²⁷² Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, pp. 231-32.

²⁷³ *Florentine Codex*, 4: 1: 1-2; 4: 2: 5.

²⁷⁴ *Treatise on Heathen Superstitions*, p. 148.

While Alarcón was writing nearly one hundred years after the conquest, this seems an important insight into the *tonalpouhqui*'s predictions. Of course, his account relates to colonial fortune-telling. During this period, the esoteric knowledge had likely been masked or disguised and relied on covert education. A charlatan might have had an easier time in the colonial period than in the Postclassic era, when reading day signs was a recognised, honourable and important profession. However, Alarcón is right to point out that a reader might only have needed to be lucky a few times with vague readings to be hailed as an oracle. The *Florentine Codex* also suggests that some could enter this profession for ulterior motives. This important source describes the 'bad soothsayer' as 'a deceiver, a mocker, a false speaker, a hypocrite'.²⁷⁵ Might this mean that a reader of days could be a somewhat lacklustre priest? The reader of days could have been a trainee priest who, while he might gain important esoteric knowledge in the *calmecac*, had not met the required standard for the full priesthood.

What is clear is that a *tonalpouhqui* could become a highly respected, influential person: Sahagún wrote in his appendix to the book on readers of days that the calendar 'was fraud and deceit in order to dazzle and derange people of low capacity and little understanding. Notwithstanding, this art of soothsaying, or rather, diabolical fraud or deceit, was highly regarded'.²⁷⁶ Unusually for Nahua culture, a *tonalpouhqui* was materially rewarded for his work. A charismatic *tonalpouhqui* could live comfortably as they were paid with food, 'the lot of the soothsayer was to drink, to eat; and not just a little did they give him; he went [with] turkeys and a load of food'.²⁷⁷ However, we should remember that Sahagún's account had informants principally drawn from the nobility. In fact, not everyone would have been able to send the *tonalpouhqui* home laden with produce. Seventeenth-century chronicler Torquemada provides some interesting insight into the differences in rewards parents of higher or lower

²⁷⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 10: 9: 31.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4: Appendix, 145.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6: 36: 198-99.

status could offer: ‘Their office meant that they ate well because if they read for a lord or a king only once, they would be rich for life. People of lower status paid moderately, and the very poor gave a turkey or something’.²⁷⁸ In this comment we see that a reading from a *tonalpouhqui* was essential. Even a humble family still saw the reader of days and paid him for his services. This seventeenth-century chronicler also suggests that the number of readers was restricted, ‘because there were many births and few diviners, they always had clients and their riches increased’.²⁷⁹ Durán was convinced that the readers of days held considerable influence over people. Writing many decades after the conquest, the Dominican friar lamented that such people continued to operate: ‘there are many of these soothsayers, who with a thousand deceits cause people to believe in two thousand omens’.²⁸⁰ He despaired that before the conquest ‘they deceived these simple, wretched people, who believed these things’.²⁸¹ Of course, Durán’s informants might have been linked to the priesthood themselves and so could have been exaggerating their influence. However, the evidence strongly indicates that the *tonalpouhqui* was an authoritative figure who had specialised knowledge of the day-signs and who was paid to interpret them for ordinary folk who did not have access to the same knowledge. Now that we have established some fundamental principles relating to the organisation of time and its relation to the ritual cycle, let us examine some idiosyncratic features of Nahua ritual.

***Ixiptlah*: How deities became flesh**

The Nahua had a polytheistic belief system. Far from praising or worshipping a single omnipotent, omnipresent god, deities were overlapping, multivalent, varied and variable. They

²⁷⁸ Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, 4, p. 204.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, pp. 420-21.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

patronised phenomena, groups or natural forces. Most importantly, they took on human, animal and material form to participate in ritual processes. This was known as *ixiptlah* and it remains one of the most misunderstood of the Nahua practices. It recurs almost constantly in Nahua ritual, any study of this topic must reflect upon the meaning and purposes of *ixiptlah*. We must explain the interaction between the human and the divine (*teotl*) in the Nahua ritual process.

Nahua deities could take on human form, or invest humans with their force, and participate in ritual activity.²⁸² In practical terms, this meant that a person could become a deity during a ceremony. Usually, this meant that the person assumed the deity's attire, apparel or a *tlaquimilolli* ('sacred bundle') and became transformed. This was not just a human transformation. Objects such as amaranth seed dough or paper could also be invested with divine energy.²⁸³ Essentially, a person or thing becomes a specific deity by means of wearing their clothes. This is known as an *ixiptlatl* (pl. *ixiptlah*); Molly Bassett refers to the result of this process as 'localized embodiment'.²⁸⁴ For Bassett, the flaying of Achitometl's daughter—the Yaocihuatl (which we discussed in Mexica mythical history earlier)—was the first of this tradition.²⁸⁵ She argues that this famous tale 'established the mythohistorical paradigm for the ritual process through which the Aztecs manufactured localized embodiments of their gods'.²⁸⁶ In a sense, *ixiptlah* exemplifies the entanglement of myth, history and performative ritual in

²⁸² Deities could also participate in the business of life. For example, as we shall see in chapter five labouring women became invested (or maybe, 'possessed') by the dangerously powerful Earth Mother Cihuateteo.

²⁸³ The practice of transforming mundane objects into divine entities was particularly resistant to colonial extirpation (perhaps because it could be concealed relatively easily). Alarcón, for example, describes the practices occurring in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, present-day Nahuas continue to make paper figurines to their maize deity Chicomechitl ('Seven Flower'). See Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, esp. chapter 6. These Nahuas consider Chicomechitl paper figures to be animate, see Molly Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies* (Austin, 2015), pp. 14-25, esp. p. 23.

²⁸⁴ Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things*, p. 3.

²⁸⁵ See the introduction to this thesis.

²⁸⁶ Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things*, p. 3.

the Nahuatl world. *Ixiptlah* helps us to understand how Nahuatl rituals were mythical history in action.

A brief example of an *ixiptlatl* will illustrate how this notion operated in practice. Xilonen was the goddess of tender maize. During the rainy season, a feast called Huey Tecuilhuitl ('Great Feast Day of the Lords') featured a woman adorned as Xilonen: 'Her face was painted in two colors; she was yellow about her lips, she was chili-red on her forehead. Her paper cap had ears at the four corners; it had quetzal feathers in the form of maize.'²⁸⁷ After dancing with other maidens who were similarly dressed, Xilonen was taken to the maize deity Centeotl's temple and decapitated by a fire priest. Her heart was extracted and 'they who knew, who were well experienced, knew where they placed it'. Whereupon everyone celebrated the fresh crop by eating 'for the first time' tender seeds and by enjoying the new blooms of flowers.²⁸⁸

Scholars have usually understood *ixiptlah* to have been representatives, substitutes or images of deities. This is evidenced in the usual translation of the term as 'impersonator'.²⁸⁹ However, analysis of the original Nahuatl in the *Florentine Codex* account of the Huey Tecuilhuitl feast is extremely revealing of the nature of the *ixiptlah* and of how Sahagún's elite, male informants might have understood this persona. In the Nahuatl, the female *ixiptlatl* became Xilonen and was referred to exclusively by this deity's name as soon as she assumed her apparel: *iquac miquja, in Xilonen cioatl* ('then the woman Xilonen died').²⁹⁰ For ritual participants and spectators, then, this woman was not merely a representative or impersonator

²⁸⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 27: 103. It is not clear how Xilonen's *ixiptlatl* was selected. In the *Florentine Codex* account, the description of her adornment and death follows immediately an account of punishing a man and a woman for concubinage. This might indicate that Xilonen's *ixiptlatl* was the woman who had been involved in this misdemeanour.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ Clendinnen, pp. 73, 75, 105-10. For an authoritative exploration of *ixiptlah* for pre-Hispanic and present-day Nahuas, see Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things*. For a different view see, for example, Diana Magaloni Kerpel, *The Colors of the New World: Artists, Materials, and the Creation of the Florentine Codex* (Los Angeles, 2014), pp. 10-13.

²⁹⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 27: 103.

of the deity (as the English translation's square brackets implied and other scholars have assumed), this person *was* the deity.

Bassett is one of the only scholars to deal with *ixiptlatl* in detail. I agree with her idea of 'localized embodiment' as an explanation for this concept, which conveys more active ideas than is conveyed by words such as 'representative'. Bassett argues that 'the Aztecs understood life and being as existing along a continuum that did not (and still does not) draw hard-and-fast distinctions between the (in)animate, the (super)natural, or the (super)human [see figure 15].'²⁹¹ As Sandstrom writes, in this world 'everybody and everything is an aspect of a grand, single, and overriding unity'.²⁹² The interconnectedness of Nahua experience with their deities and the landscape mean that there can be no binary distinctions in these categories. There were no strict divisions between divine and mortal. During Huey Tecuilhuitl, then, a woman took on Xilonen's traits and became this deity. My analysis of the Nahuatl description of this festival confirms Bassett's argument that an *ixiptlatl* was the localised embodiment of an imagined deity and not simply an impersonator. Aside from showing that the *ixiptlatl* became the maize deity Xilonen, this vignette exemplifies Sandstrom's idea of the Nahua world as interconnected, whole and indivisible.

²⁹¹ Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things*, p. 24.

²⁹² Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, p. 238.

Spectrum of Animacy

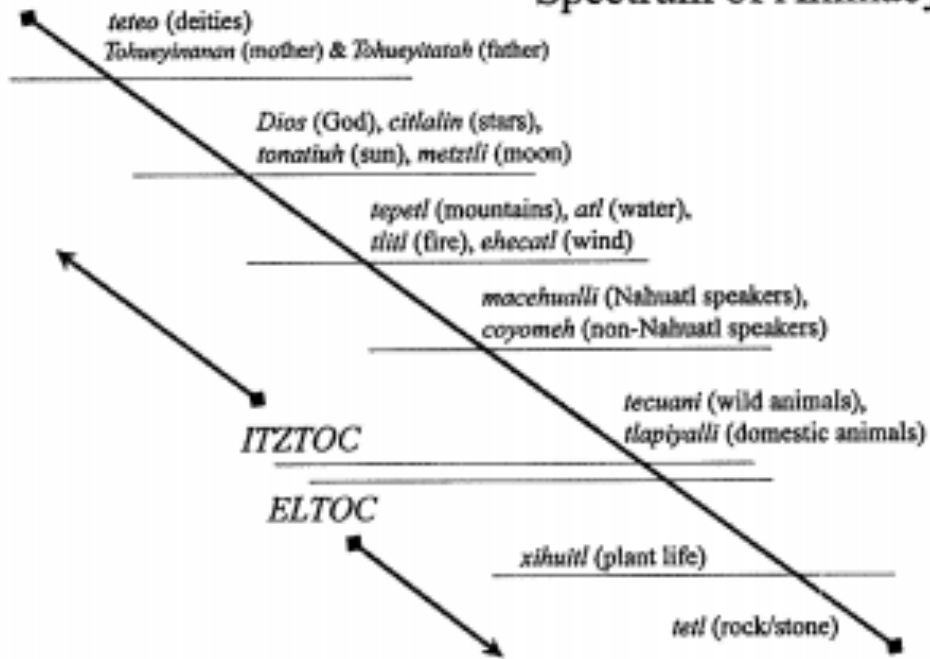


Figure 15: The spectrum of animacy
Bassett, *The Fate of Earthly Things*, p. 12.

***Tlazolli*, the ‘filth’ complex**

The *tlazolli* complex underpins many Nahua mentalities and activities, and therefore merits explanation.²⁹³ While it is not a particularly contested trope, it gives rise to many controversial concepts. Moreover, *tlazolli* is an important theme which underpins much of the analysis within this thesis. The Nahuatl was translated by Franciscan friar Molina as ‘rubbish which they throw on the heap’; it is derived from *izolihui*, ‘for things to get old, wear out’.²⁹⁴ In its literal and physical sense, *tlazolli* referred to any matter which had deteriorated or been damaged so as to no longer be useful or in the right place, such as odd bits of straw, hair or twigs. *Tlazolli* could also be bodily fluids, excrement and filth. As Burkhart summarises in her influential monograph on the subject, *The Slippery Earth*: ‘What one sweeps up with a broom is *tlazolli*’.²⁹⁵ However, *tlazolli* also held influence for the metaphysical with allegorical connotations related to excess, something abhorred in a society grounded, as it was, in the virtues of productivity and moderation. In this way, the Mexica invoked *tlazolli* as a metaphor for abasement by means of behaviour such as sexual licentiousness, laziness or greed. A person guilty of such offences became contaminated with *tlazolli* which could bring about the *tlazolmiquiztli* (‘filth death’) of another subject. This contamination was possible because of the interconnectedness of their world; all actions and activities had consequences. For example, the *Florentine Codex* warns that if a promiscuous person entered a turkey pen the chicks would die from the associated filth (*tlaçolmictia*).²⁹⁶ In this way, any unsanctioned behaviour of ‘excess’ posed a threat to others and to wider society. In the Nahua world, everyone had their

²⁹³ The term ‘*tlazolli* complex’ was coined by Sigal in his work on colonial Nahua sexuality and ritual: Peter Sigal, *Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture* (Durham, N.C., 2007), esp. chapter 5. Sigal’s work was largely based on Burkhart’s seminal text *The Slippery Earth*. While she focuses on the colonial encounter, there are crucial insights into pre-contact ways of being. See Brumfiel, *The Slippery Earth*, chapters four to six for her discussions of filth, sickness and excess.

²⁹⁴ Molina, *Vocabulario*, 118v. This is my translation. The original Spanish is: ‘vasura que echan en el muladar’.

²⁹⁵ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 88.

²⁹⁶ *Florentine Codex*, 5: 24: 191.

own responsibilities and they were encouraged to conduct themselves with moderation, eloquence and restraint, for the benefit of themselves and mutual society. Once *tlazolli* was attached to a subject, its chaotic power was unleashed on the world; this disruptive element ‘was an active force in its own right as well as an indicator of immorality’.²⁹⁷ Essentially, it was recognised that some *tlazolli* was essential for procreation. There is a moment in the *Florentine Codex* account of the birth ceremony, for example, when the midwife vigorously washes the newborn. She bellows, possibly referring to the child’s conception, that she must ‘Remove the blotch, the filth, the evil of his mother, of his father! ... May the filth be washed away!’.²⁹⁸ We see here, then, that a restricted, controllable amount of *tlazolli* is desirable, indeed necessary, for life and vitality. However, this force became threatening when it was no longer useful, in the case of the newborn or, as we shall see, when it resided in incorrect places during ritual experiences.

Tlazolli is a recurrent trope in Nahua understandings of the world and it, therefore, played an important role in ritual processes. We shall see an extremely significant example of ritual filth in our later discussions of Xiuhmolpilli, where household dirt was swept away during the early, domestic phases of the festival. In a society which prized cleanliness, order and balance, we might ponder the importance of filth to the Nahuas. It was important precisely *because* it signified excess and chaos. *Tlazolli* existed as the ‘inamic partner’ of order. This term, coined by philosopher James Maffie, arises from the combination of the Nahuatl verb *namiqui* (‘to meet someone’) with the locative suffix *-c* (‘on, in, among’).²⁹⁹ The word ‘inamic’ refers to forces whose existence reinforces each other, which were ‘mutually dependent, mutually conditioning, and mutually engendering’.³⁰⁰ In the Nahua view, *tlazolli* existed to balance order:

²⁹⁷ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 95.

²⁹⁸ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 32: 175-76.

²⁹⁹ Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, p. 144; Karttunen, *Analytical Dictionary*, p. 159.

³⁰⁰ Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, p. 147.

light balanced dark and death balanced life. Its existence was, therefore, necessary to equilibrate more favourable states and conditions. Its mere presence in the world was, therefore, not inherently problematic. After all, as Burkhart points out, ‘the business of living inevitably brought one into contact with *tlazolli*’; maize — the revered staple crop — itself grew from soil and dirt.³⁰¹ However, *tlazolli* needed to be managed so that it did not exist in inappropriate spaces, lest it threaten the shaky equilibrium over which the Nahuas spent their lives agonising.

This leads me to discuss the cyclical, fatalistic outlook which underpinned much of the Mexica ritual. The Mexica understood that they were living in the last incarnation of the world, the Fifth Sun. The preceding four ages had been destroyed by jaguars, hurricanes, fire and flood. Their own age would be destroyed by an earthquake at the end of an unspecified 52-year cycle, a ‘bundle of years’.³⁰² The infamous ‘Calendar’ or ‘Sun Stone’ elaborately displayed this cosmic understanding of the universe [see figure 16]. This enormous monolith, over three and a half metres in diameter and over 24 tons, was unearthed from underneath colonial Mexico City in December 1790.³⁰³ It is now displayed as the centrepiece of the Mexico-Tenochtitlan exhibit at Mexico City’s National Anthropology Museum (Museo Nacional de Antropología). While, as figure 0.4 indicates, the Calendar Stone is displayed vertically, it is generally accepted that this was a sacrificial stone which lay flat.³⁰⁴ While its purpose has not been resolved, it has been suggested that the Stone was used as either a *quauhxicalli*, a receptacle for sacrificed hearts, or even as the base on which a sacrifice took place.³⁰⁵

³⁰¹ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 89

³⁰² *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca*, trans. and ed. J. Bierhorst (Tucson, 1992), esp. pp. 75-84. See Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (Norman, 2012), pp. 37-45 for another translation and commentary on the *Leyenda de los Soles*.

³⁰³ Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, p. 19.

³⁰⁴ Emily Umberger, ‘Aztec Sculptures, Hieroglyphs and History’, Ph.D. Thesis (Columbia University, 1981), pp. 194-96.

³⁰⁵ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Felipe Solís, *The Aztec Calendar and Other Solar Monuments* (Mexico City, 2004), p. 37, quoted in Berdan, *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, p. 19.

At the centre of the enormous disc lies a face which represented the fifth, and final, incarnation of the universe. From this gaping mouth appears a sacrificial knife, and the glyph for 4 *ollin*, or ‘movement’, frames the menacing face. Each of the previous four ‘ages’ are represented inside this glyph: 4 jaguar, 4 wind, 4 rain and 4 water. Running in a cycle outside this representation are the 20 day-signs, from Crocodile to Flower, that we discussed in reference to the *tonalpohualli* [see table 4 and figure 12]. Two enormous serpents representing, Xiuhtecuhtli and Tonatiuh, frame the disc, with human heads emerging from their gaping mouths. The Calendar Stone was a sculpture which portrayed the state’s view of their people’s place in cyclical time. A physical expression of cosmovision, it portrayed very clearly the finality of their existence. The four glyphs are neatly displayed around the central, ‘fifth’ face and it is abundantly clear that there is no space for an age beyond their own.



Figure 16: The Sun Stone
Mexico-Tenochtitlan exhibition, Museo de Antropología, Mexico City.
Photograph: Harriet Smart.

This outlook governed not only the Mexica's philosophical perception of their position in the grand scheme of the generations but also the practical way in which they went about their daily lives. The Mexica conceived of their daily experience — the rising and setting of the sun, for example — as having been produced by the aforementioned inimic partners. Light and dark were engaged in a perpetual and creative struggle which produced each night and day. That light and life would prevail was not predictable; at any moment, conditions might tip the balance in favour of darkness, death and destruction. Moreover, this worldview promoted obedience to learned ritual practice, and motivated a religious cult in which living beings were sacrificed regularly in devotion to the sun, in the hope of securing a favourable equilibrium. For the Mexica, moments of cosmic uncertainty (such as calendar transitions or lunar eclipses) presented a threat to the fragile arrangement of order, symmetry and balance.³⁰⁶ It was this angst which sparked a fear of phases, such as the setting of the sun, as fragile moments when the delicate balance was most likely to be challenged. Fear of darkness is encapsulated in the culture god Tezcatlipoca; the Nahuatl deity most associated with night-time and darkness. His epithet — 'smoking mirror' — points Tezcatlipoca out as a sorcerer *par excellence*; obsidian mirrors were used for divination and prognostication. As Nicholson wrote, 'no deity better expressed the pessimistic, fatalistic, *weltanschauung* [worldview] which prevailed in late pre-Hispanic central Mexico'.³⁰⁷ He was a potent deity to have on side as he could destroy plagues, and even dispatch an unworthy *tlahtoani*.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ Liminal or uncertain spaces were also faced with trepidation. Crossroads were a particularly important trope in the sources. The *Florentine Codex* warned that malevolent *cihuateteo* lay in wait at these intersections in order to inflict damage on unwitting passers-by. Children were thought to be especially susceptible to these forces: *Florentine Codex*, 5: 1: 79; *Florentine Codex*, 5: 1: 93.

³⁰⁷ Nicholson, 'Religion in pre-Hispanic Central Mexico', p. 412. For more on this important deity, see Elizabeth Baquedano (ed.), *Tezcatlipoca: Trickster and Supreme Deity* (Boulder, 2014).

³⁰⁸ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 1: 1; *Florentine Codex*, 6: 6: 25-29.

In this section, I have explained the main frameworks, themes and purposes of Nahua ritual and explained the regulation of time. These explanations have laid the groundwork for later discussions of the Nahuas and their understanding of themselves as living in the grip of fickle and unknowable deities who at any moment could ruin their crops, cast them out of their homes and destroy their entire civilisation. It was through ritual drama and control of earthly forces such as filth that the Nahuas sought to cling on to their way of life. Now that we have established these fundamental, contested principles, let us move on to discuss how these features operated in practice. The subsequent chapter uses the festival Xiuhmolpilli ('the Binding of Years') to explore the manipulation of time by the elites and the use of ritual spectacle for political control. Moreover, the next section will analyse closely the accounts of Xiuhmolpilli in order to demonstrate how this ritual changed over time.

III

CASE STUDY 1: VARIATION IN A PUBLIC FESTIVAL, XIUHMOLPILLI

Once every 52 years, the end-dates of the *tonalpohualli* and the *xiuhpohualli* coincided. This was considered a full calendar cycle and was referred to as *Nexiuhpiliztli*.³⁰⁹ It was a fearful and dreadful time because mythical histories told the Nahuas that it was at the end of an unspecified calendar round when the world would be plunged into darkness and chaos.³¹⁰ Fearing cosmic apocalypse, the Nahuas celebrated a special ceremony to ensure another calendar round. This festival was known as *Xiuhmolpilli* (literally, ‘the binding of our years’). It was an extraordinary festival which sat outside the usual round of *veintena* celebrations. This was an exceptional, once-in-a-lifetime, ritual experience which exemplifies the Nahuas’ trepidation when faced with uncertainty and transition. Crucially, this was a dynamic ceremony involving the entire populace (if the early colonial writers are to be believed). The ritual action travelled from home to temple and from the imperial core to outlying city-states. The ritual required participation from the *tlahtoani*, an enemy sacrificial victim, elite priests and ordinary men, women and children. It seems to have been directed by Tenochtitlan’s priestly class and as such this festival provides an ideal case study to interrogate themes of state power, elite control and varied responses to centralised power across time and place.

The purpose and timing of *Xiuhmolpilli* were very different to the *veintena* ceremonies which, as I have explained, largely ran according to the agricultural cycle to ensure successful

³⁰⁹ Durán translates this as ‘Completion, or Binding, of a Perfect Circle of Years’: Durán, *The Ancient Calendar*, p. 389.

³¹⁰ *Codex Chimalpopoca*, esp. pp. 75-84. For another translation and commentary of the *Leyenda de los Soles*, see León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, pp. 37-45.

harvests. However, rather than encouraging seasonal changes Xiuhmolpilli had little obvious foundation in the natural world. Instead, its purpose was to bind two artificial cycles of time. The Mexica elites tied this ancient festival to the rising of the constellation, the Pleiades. Of course, rituals were never entirely ‘natural’. They could not have existed without human effort, organisation or performance. However, some festivals — Xiuhmolpilli, for instance — took on a wider political, social significance seem to have gone beyond their original purpose as a celebration of the natural world. This study will seek to explore how certain rituals could be adapted and manipulated to serve elite and imperial aims. Do the monthly agricultural cycle rituals — the *veintenas* — bear more similarity across provinces, as they are tied to more ancient, fundamental beliefs concerning fertility? Is there a sense that more developed, political rituals, such as Xiuhmolpilli, were centrally created and propagated? Or were the Mexica building on and appropriating an ancient, widespread festival with their adherence to Xiuhmolpilli?

An analysis of Xiuhmolpilli also permits us to detect change over time, which is not often possible with *veintena* ceremonies.³¹¹ This is because *veintenas* are, generally, only described once in the colonial chronicles as they were regular, ‘monthly’ ceremonies. Xiuhmolpilli, by contrast, was much rarer ceremony with an ancient history. In this way, it recurs in historical accounts as a discrete, individual ceremony rather than being referred to as a single, recurring ritual. Combining textual, pictorial and archaeological evidence, we can identify how Xiuhmolpilli changed location, grew in size and changed in timing. This interdisciplinarity allows us to combat the weaknesses of both the textual and archaeological records. Colonial descriptions tend to be detailed and precise in their accounts. However, these chronicles and pictorials are often chronologically or temporally vague. They often explain that

³¹¹ Although, later chapters will demonstrate that certain *veintenas* were celebrated differently in different years.

‘the Indians did this...’ or ‘this festival was like this...’ without explaining when or who exactly was involved. We can fill these gaps with archaeological and pictorial sources which are, themselves, less detailed but chronologically more precise. As I discussed in the methodological section, this approach is certainly not a silver bullet but a nuanced combination of texts, pictures and material culture can help us overcome the static nature of the alphabetic record. The results of this interdisciplinary approach reinforce the central argument of this thesis: that Nahua rituals were not unchanging, fixed or entirely pre-determined by an elite class. Rather, all Nahuas — to varying degrees — could be dynamic agents of their ritual activity.

Xiuhmolpilli provided a brutal physical and psychological reminder of the cosmic uncertainty which governed the Mexica experience. Xiuhmolpilli began when, one evening, ‘the elders pretended that the sun and the moon were to be hidden for four days and that everything would be enveloped in darkness’.³¹² At this priestly command, families across the Empire are said to have discarded their possessions, extinguished their hearths, scrupulously cleaned and vigorously swept their homes, ‘saying that in one of the wheels the world was sure to come to an end and that perchance it was the one in which they were living’.³¹³ At dusk, priests of Huehuetēōtl (‘Old God’, a fire deity) began a stately ten-mile procession from the ceremonial precinct at Tenochtitlan to an extinct volcano, Mount Huixachtlan, reaching the temple at its summit, Huixachtecatl, by twilight. A well-born victim called Xiuhtlamin had accompanied the procession and was pulled across the sacrificial stone and ritually killed as the stars shone down and commoners watched below. The main part of this phase was the drilling of a new fire, which would signal the calendar transition to these witnesses. A specialised, experienced ‘fire priest’ from Copilco was charged with the weighty task of

³¹² Durán, *History*, p. 445.

³¹³ Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, p. 332.

drilling these flames. The body caught fire, providing the signal that the sacrificial priests had been successful in drawing on a calendar transition. The people below played their own part in this ritual by cutting their own flesh, they drew blood from their ears and splattered it upwards, towards the sacrificial scene. This blood was necessary to nourish the sun and maintain this calendar transition. The blazing new fire was then meant to be quickly and systematically distributed throughout Tenochtitlan and the Empire by elite warriors. It is impossible to tell from the available sources how quickly the fire was actually distributed. However, the intention was clearly that the new fire be delivered as swiftly as possible. Xiuhmolpilli ended the following morning as commoners relit their domestic hearths and acquired household items, satisfied that the unpredictable deities who ruled their lives had granted the birth of a new calendar cycle. There was enormous relief as they considered themselves saved for another 52 years and life went on.

Ethnographic sources for Xiuhmolpilli

This concise description of Xiuhmolpilli is largely based on the *Florentine Codex*, and before undertaking a close textual analysis it is essential to analyse the authorship and provenance of the extant Xiuhmolpilli accounts. As has been discussed, no pre-contact sources from Tenochtitlan survived the Spanish conquest and the mass destruction of the early colonial period. We are reliant upon colonial reports for our interpretations of almost all Nahua rituals and Xiuhmolpilli is no exception. The *Florentine Codex* undoubtedly provides the most extensive accounts of Xiuhmolpilli across four chapters of Book Seven with an abridged version in the appendix of Book Four.³¹⁴ While we cannot know whether any of Sahagún's informants were eyewitnesses, they may well have been aware of the drama, even if they had

³¹⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 4: Appendix: 143-44; *Florentine Codex*, 7: chaps 9- 12.

not participated in it themselves. The often-timeless nature of the early colonial descriptions hinders conclusions firmly rooted in linear time. However, Xiuhmolpilli does not bear the same difficulties as *veintena* ceremonies as it was described, most likely, as it took place in 1507. It would have been the only incidence of a Xiuhmolpilli festival of which the friar-chronicler's elite informants could have experienced or had, at least, second-hand knowledge. In the appendix to the *Florentine Codex*' fourth book, Sahagún explained that 1507 was the final Xiuhmolpilli which was held in 'full solemnity'.³¹⁵ He claimed that this passage was written in 1579 and explained that the next Xiuhmolpilli in the cycle should have been held in 1559. However the native people 'held no public ceremony, because the Spaniards and members of the religious Orders were now in this land'.³¹⁶ In this way, the accounts we have of Xiuhmolpilli must relate to a single incidence of this ceremony and they are not accounts of generic, synthesised or 'typical' versions of the ceremony.

While its ethnographic focus and the relative level of detail bolster the significance of the *Florentine Codex* Xiuhmolpilli account for my analysis, other important versions exist, for example: Diego Durán's *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, Motolinía's *History of the Indians of New Spain* and José de Acosta's *Natural and Moral History of the Indians of New Spain*.³¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Durán includes his Xiuhmolpilli description in his *History* and not in *The Book of Gods and Rites*. This might indicate that Durán understood this ceremony to have historical and political significance, rather than purely being a ritual drama. Although they are crucial to my study, it is undeniable that these accounts can never match Sahagún's replete account. The Xiuhmolpilli chronicles of friars Acosta, Durán and Motolinía lack much of the Sahaguntine detail and are restricted to only a handful of pages. The accounts

³¹⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 4: Appendix, 144.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, p. 332; *Codex Borbonicus*, *Codex Chimalpahin*, vol. 1, pp. 191, 193, 199, 221; vol. 2, pp. 25, 27; *Codex Chimalpopoca*, pp. 43, 77, 107, 121; *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fols 32v, 42r, pp. 217, 229; Durán, *History*, pp. 445-46; Motolinía, *History*, pp. 112-13.

of Dominican Durán and Franciscan Acosta were compiled later than those of Sahagún and Motolinía and neither man was yet born when Motolinía and Sahagún set foot in New Spain. Durán (c. 1537–1588) was a later, more prolific chronicler than Motolinía, and his detailed *Ancient Calendar* (c. 1576-79) is an important source for my study. While it has been suggested that ‘many of Durán’s passages are based on recollections dating back to the 1540s’,³¹⁸ the bulk of his fieldwork seems to have taken place in the 1550s and 60s, 20 years after Sahagún began his studies and over three decades after the Spanish conquest. Sahagún’s Xiuhtmolpilli description acts as a yardstick against which other textual accounts — by Franciscans José de Acosta and Motolinía and Dominican friar Diego Durán — are measured. As I explained in my methodological section, Motolinía is generally regarded to have been much less rigorous than Sahagún in his research methods. The *Florentine Codex* versions (particularly that of Book Seven) have, therefore, been taken by scholars to be the most ‘reliable’.³¹⁹ However, I am not reliant on textual accounts alone for my analysis of Xiuhtmolpilli. While this section does benefit from the historical nature of the chronicles, we have other sources at our disposal. In the second part of this chapter, I will look beyond the 1507 Xiuhtmolpilli to scrutinise the ways this ceremony had changed over time. Such information is not available in the documentary record; material culture and archaeological reports can tell us much about the physical displacement, development and use of this spectacle.

³¹⁸ Horcasitas and Heyden, ‘Fray Diego Durán: His Life and Works’, in Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 37.

³¹⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 7: chaps 9- 12. See, for example, Alfredo López Austin, ‘La fiesta del fuego nuevo según el *Códice florentino*’, in *Anuario de Historia* (Mexico City, 1964), pp. 73-91; Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, pp. 41-44; Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, p. 16; Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, pp. 143-47.

State power and elite control

Let us begin a close analysis of Xiuhmolpilli as a case study for the principal themes of Mexica imperial ceremonial power and dynamic display. As a series of connected rituals, Xiuhmolpilli involved many people from different social groups in Tenochtitlan and across the empire. Priest and commoner collaborated to spur on the next ‘bundle of 52 years’; through a series of ritual activities, the landscape was activated as a ritual participant itself as the sequence moved around home, temple and provinces. These ceremonial processes provide an excellent point of entry into a discussion of centralised Mexica religion as a political tool for ideological domination. This section explores elite priestly control over the choreography of Xiuhmolpilli and uses this festival as a lens through which to explore what the Mexica ruling elite sought to display with their public ceremonialism. Whether or not these aims were achieved is a crucial aspect of this study and will be discussed in depth in the final two chapters which focus on local and private ritual.

The Mexica celebrated Xiuhmolpilli with the purpose of ‘binding’ the completed years and the bringing about a new calendar cycle.³²⁰ The *xiuhpohualli* had ended five days beforehand; there were no more days in the year. The calendar had expired. The dreaded *nemontemi* days began as time was suspended. This lifeless phase was observed every solar year, but the days took on particular significance at the end of a cycle. The laconic colonial accounts of the *nemontemi* are frustratingly opaque. For example, Sahagún offers scant information except to say that the phase was feared and simultaneously venerated. Durán offers more information in his *Ancient Calendar*, recording that ‘On these five days the people fasted

³²⁰ Many scholars refer to this 52-year period as comparable to our notion of a century. Yet, to my mind, this is a fragile comparison as, crucially, years were a recurring sequential set in the calendar. Any given year in this cycle remains unidentifiable without knowing to which bundle it is attached (for example, the year 2 *Acatl* could be 1403, 1455 or 1507). As such, the 52-year ‘bundles’ are far from our understanding of a century and such a conclusion is a reductive Eurocentric conclusion.

and did great penance, including abstinence from bread and water. They dined no more than once a day, and even that meal consisted of dry tortillas. They endured flagellation, bloodletting and sexual abstinence'.³²¹ Motolinía records abruptly that they were 'useless, and belonged to no year'.³²² Scholars have largely agreed that these were days when 'no official business was conducted, cleaning was left undone, arguments were avoided and people walked cautiously to avoid the bad omen of stumbling'.³²³ The terse quality of the evidence might speak to the fact that the indigenous informants considered some of the *nemontemi* activities too distasteful or unmentionable to divulge in detail to the friars. Perhaps the chroniclers' elite informants were unaware of the precise nature of the individual, domestic activities in which commoner people engaged in the home.³²⁴ The liminal *nemontemi* might have even been considered taboo; the indigenous collaborators did not illustrate them in Durán's *Ancient Calendar* plates whereas each *veintena* is illustrated in this work.³²⁵ This was a phase when anything seemed possible. Victor Turner has argued that liminal moments, sitting outside normal time, 'provide an abnormal experience of a world without social structure or one in which the usual structures are turned upside down. Liminal states offer an experience of what is potential but unrealized in normal life'.³²⁶ Certainly, the *nemontemi* gave agonising previews of the cold, destruction which was possible — the end of the universe, after all — if the fire was not drawn successfully. The *nemontemi* raised the stakes of Xiuhmolpilli considerably.

³²¹ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 469.

³²² Motolinía, *History*, p. 53.

³²³ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 65.

³²⁴ It is difficult to know whether these domestic activities took place in noble households. As I will discuss in the fourth chapter, Xiuhmolpilli offerings have been uncovered from an elite residence in Cuexcomate, a rural town in Cuauhnahuac province. Sahagún's writing seems to suggest that these activities would have taken place in all houses: *Florentine Codex*, 7: 9: 25.

³²⁵ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, plates 38 to 55.

³²⁶ Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, p. 20. See Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

Despite the prevailing understanding that people ventured outside only if strictly necessarily, a limited number of accounts make reference to public religious activities during the *nemontemi*. For example, the late-sixteenth century *Tovar Calendar* (c. 1585) offers:³²⁷

These five days nobody did anything, people did not even go to the temple. They only occupied themselves by visiting each other, wasting time. The priests stopped sacrifices and only attended the cult of Huitzilopochtli, in the form and manner which is painted here, these days were wasted like a kind of leap year, except that it happened every year.³²⁸



Figure 17: *The Tovar Calendar*, fol. 157r.

³²⁷ Tovar's calendar seems to have been heavily influenced by Durán's and José de Acosta's chronicles.

³²⁸ *The Tovar Calendar*, fol. 157r. The translation and palaeography are mine. The original Spanish is: '...estos cinco días no hacia cosas alguna la gente ni acudia al templo solo se ocupavan en visitarse unos a otros perdiendo tiempo y los sacerdotes del templo cesavan de sacrificar y otras cosas solo se ocupavan estos cinco días en encenda y asolas al dios Uitzilopochtli en la forma y figura q aqui esta pintado, era estos dias valdios como una specie de vissexto, sino que era cada ano...' See George Kubler and Charles Gibson, *The Tovar Calendar*, *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts & Sciences*, 11 (New Haven, 1951), pp. 35-36.

Similarly, Motolinía remarks that ‘there remained five additional days which, they said, were of no use and were not part of any particular year. Great ceremonies and festivals were likewise held on these five days, until the year began’.³²⁹ These allusions are challenging to reconcile with a narrative of self-denial and penance. Indeed, the weight of the evidence of Sahagún and Durán’s accounts and the rushed nature of Motolinía’s description indicate that he may have been mistaken in noting that ‘fiestas’ occurred during this transition period. Moreover, even if certain festivals *did* take place during this time, it need not necessarily follow that they were exuberant activities. As the *Tovar Calendar* details, the priests occupied themselves entirely with attending the cult of Huitzilopochtli; these ceremonies were likely to have been solemn priestly acts of devotion to Tenochtitlan’s patron deity. Perhaps more significantly, I suggest that careful distinction be drawn between different types of people and their behaviour. For example, it might have been considered odd for an ordinary person to leave his or her home. Yet priests, with their eternal responsibility to the sun, might have participated in activities forbidden to commoners during this mysterious phase. Besides, evidence suggests that in the Nahuatl world the nature of ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces, and the boundaries between them, differed from our understandings of these spheres. The distinction between these spaces is discussed in greater depth in the final section of my study. Suffice it to say here that ‘the household’ did not refer strictly to a nuclear family occupying one building, but to people living in multi-structure complexes enclosed by walls and centred around a courtyard.³³⁰ The Nahuatl

³²⁹ Motolinía, *History*, p. 39. This translation is mine. The original Spanish is: ‘Estos cinco días eran también de grandes ceremonias y fiestas, hasta que entraban en año’. It is important to note that both Foster mistranslates ‘fiestas’ as ‘feasts’ in his edition: ‘five days were, until the new year began, likewise a time of great ceremonies and feasts’, which contradicts the abstemious nature of this period. See Motolinía, *History*, p. 53.

³³⁰ James Lockhart, *Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, 1992), p. 61; Caroline Dodds Pennock, “‘A Remarkably Patterned Life’: Domestic and Public in the Aztec Household City”, *Gender and History*, 23.3 (2011), pp. 528-46, esp. pp. 532-35.

word which we might translate as ‘family’, *cemithualtin*, is literally ‘those of one patio’.³³¹ With this model in mind, people could have visited much of their extended family without straying far from home.

Every Xiuhmolpilli account emphasises the crucial role of the priests in decreeing the performance, timing and content of Xiuhmolpilli: ‘The elders who were in charge of these things advised Motecuhzoma that it was the year of the end of the cycle’.³³² Priestly intervention was needed because, although every Mexica was aware of the calendar by means of their state-sponsored education, an ordinary person would not necessarily have had the sophisticated knowledge to be aware that the calendar cycle’s end-dates were about to coincide. At that time, the priests decreed that all fires — from modest hearths to lavish, public temple braziers — be doused. In this way, the *nemontemi*, which provided the conclusion for each year, assumed an even greater sense of foreboding. Supposedly, no-one and nowhere were exempt; Motolinía emphasises that ‘In some places they had a perpetual fire burning... and on this day they extinguished also these fires’.³³³ Putting out every fire sent a substantial, visible signal that their world was entering an extraordinary phase which was neither night nor day: it was a ‘night divided in half’.³³⁴ Neither half belonged to any particular year or day count. The first sat within the ‘dead’ *nemontemi* phase; the second half might never appear so was arcane and unknown. Durán’s description of the final *nemontemi* is particularly evocative of the reach of priestly power: ‘the elders pretended that the sun and the moon were to be hidden for four days and that everything would be enveloped in darkness’.³³⁵ That both sun and moon were

³³¹ Louise Burkhart, ‘Mexica Women on the Homefront: Housework and Religion in Aztec Mexico’, in Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood and Robert Haskett (eds), *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (Norman, 1997), p. 29. Also, *Nahuatl Dictionary*, <http://whp.uoregon.edu/dictionaries/nahuatl/index.lasso> [accessed 25 February 2016], searched for ‘cemithualtin’.

³³² Durán, *History*, p. 445.

³³³ Motolinía, *History*, pp. 112-13.

³³⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 9: 25.

³³⁵ Durán, *History*, 60: 445.

concealed implies that the priests' authority extended to suspending the vital, diurnal struggle of these inimic partners.³³⁶ However, it is difficult to know whether people thought that the priests actually held the power to cause this suspension. Rather, the priests might have been considered authoritative guides during this phase. In the Nahua context, these mutually productive forces were embodied by light and darkness; sunlight was associated with order, life, strength and fire, and darkness was linked to disorder, death, weakness and drought.³³⁷ The suspension of light and fire during this uneasy time therefore tipped the balance in favour of disorder and death.

This aspect of priestly influence is crucially important as it might also have appeared to threaten the power of the state. In Tenochtitlan, Mexica culture revolved around a state-sponsored cult based on regular, sacrificial worship which supposedly 'fed' the sun and perpetuated the world. This aspect of their existence is exemplified in the Mexica's own special deity Huitzilopochtli, who patronised warfare and the sun. In reality, it would seem unlikely that the sun and moon could be hidden, but Huitzilopochtli's cult would doubtless have been less visible during this time. As people had to remain indoors and discard their domestic shrines and ritual objects, the power and influence of this almighty deity might have seemed distant and impotent. The fact that the *nemontemi* sat emphatically outside of the time and order of the state-sponsored ritual calendar seems to suggest that these fallow days represented a perilous moment for the state and for the Mexica *tlahtoani* himself. His power and authority rested uneasily upon the perception of his strength and ability to command respect and loyalty from vassals inside the capital city and in the Valley of Mexico and beyond. Moreover, his power was intrinsically linked with the sun. The Mexica's solar worship meant that any time in which the sun was diminished meant that the ruler's authority could be similarly threatened.

³³⁶ See the first chapter for an explanation of Maffie's term 'inimic partners'.

³³⁷ Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, p. 154.

The dousing of fires displayed the geographic and ideological reach of the Mexica elite's power to their vassals and enemies. Furthermore, fire was a supremely important element which was venerated in both public and private spheres. While Sahagún and Motolinía's informants were generally plucked from the upper *échelons* of Mexica society, these men appeared to have been convinced that 'they put out fires everywhere in the country round'.³³⁸ They told the friars that fires were put out 'in Mexico and all its lands in Tetzco and its provinces, by command of the ministers of the temples'.³³⁹ If, as the sources suggest, all fires were extinguished in this way, it would have created an impressive physical exhibition of Mexica power, efficiently cutting indiscriminately across vast space from which they drew tribute. Although not explicit in the sources, it seems that each house and institution bore responsibility for putting out their own hearth or brazier: 'by command of the ministers of the temples the Indians extinguished all of their fires with water, both the fires in the temples... and those in private houses'.³⁴⁰ Dousing the fire, the implicit centre of the home, was certainly not done lightly in a world thought to be held in balance by nourishing the sun.

The choreography of Xiuhmolpilli magnified the fragile link between cycles of cosmic time and must have played on all the Nahuas' insecurities. As Sigal has argued, 'the New Fire Ceremony signifies danger at every turn'.³⁴¹ Given the importance of light and fire to their lives, it seems likely that ordinary people would have considered anathema an order to extinguish fires and to remain for days in dark purgatory. Harking back to Turner's ideas of liminality, the *nemontemi* days were an agonising preview of the lifeless fate should a new fire not be drawn on the final night in the presence of those elite priests at Huixachtlan and the commoners who strained their necks below.

³³⁸ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 9: 25.

³³⁹ Motolinía, *History*, p. 112.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, p. 145.

The hearth and the home in Xiuhmolpilli activity

The historiography concerning Xiuhmolpilli is surprisingly thin for such a major festival, and no scholar has analysed the entirety of the ceremony. Most lacking is serious consideration of the initial phases. For example, Carrasco purports to interrogate ‘the underlying social and symbolic purpose of the ritual’,³⁴² yet his abridged analysis considers the festival only from the moment of procession to sacrifice, ignoring altogether the important activities which took place in the home.³⁴³ Where the participation of ordinary folk is considered, it is generally as a backdrop, or that the domestic activities were ‘In preparation for the rite...’, as Read argues.³⁴⁴ However, I argue that the domestic phases of the ceremony were not mere preparation, but crucial to the Xiuhmolpilli ceremonial process itself. Most importantly, I suggest that no individual ritual action held any meaning without its correct situation in sequence and order. Each phase seems to prepare, develop and extend the ritual landscape. In my analysis, I will show that ordinary people were active contributors to a series of dynamic activities which were equally important to the success of the festival as the later sacrificial rite. These findings represent a significant departure from the historiographical tradition which privileges the dramatic priestly action as emblematic of the whole ceremony’s choreography and purpose. Close analysis of the sources reveals that Xiuhmolpilli did not just take place in the restricted and enclosed space of a temple, but also travelled across the sacred landscape from home to mountain.

After all fires were put out, the focus of ritual action narrowed down to the domestic sphere. Here, ordinary men and women adopted a pattern of behaviour which might seem

³⁴² Carrasco, ‘Star Gatherers and Wobbling Suns’, p. 286.

³⁴³ See also Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, pp. 96-103. See, for example: Christina M. Elson, and Michael E. Smith, ‘Archaeological Deposits from the Aztec New Fire Ceremony’, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 12 (2001), pp. 157-74; Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, pp. 236-39; Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, pp. 293-94.

³⁴⁴ Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, p. 125.

surprising. Acosta's atmospheric description of the reasons for these activities merits being quoted in full:

...on the last night they broke all the vessels they possessed and extinguished all the fires, saying that in one of the wheels the world was sure to come to an end and that perchance it was the one in which they were living, and that since the world was going to end there was no need to cook or eat, and for what did they need vessels or fire... they would stay like this all night, saying that perhaps dawn would never come again, all of them watching very closely to see if the sun would rise.³⁴⁵

This account of the destruction of household items conjures the desperate mood which hung in the air during Xiuhmolpilli. The almost unbearable anxiety that 'perhaps dawn would never come again' preyed on people's minds as they languished in cold darkness and this apparently motivated them to destroy their worldly possessions. This strange atmosphere was compounded by the uncomfortable state of limbo which the preceding *nemontemi* had enforced; the world seemed to be suspended in lifeless time.



*Figure 18: Breaking and throwing away household goods
Florentine Codex, book 7*

³⁴⁵ Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, p. 332.

The Mexica hearth symbolised the home. This domestic fire sat at the centre of the dwelling and was enclosed by three *tenamaztli* hearth stones which Burkhart claims were ‘conceptualized as female deities’.³⁴⁶ Providing the vital elements of heat and light, the hearth burned above the womenfolk’s interred umbilical cords and heated the *comalli* (griddle) on which the women cooked the family’s tortillas. A fire secured the viability of a settlement and it provided the community with protection and vital resources. As we saw earlier, when the Mexica settled at Lake Tetzaco first acts involved the drilling a new fire. This dedication was not particular to the Mexica. Hill Boone has argued that, while specifics could vary a Mesoamerican foundation ritual usually involved naming a place, the placement of a cult bundle,



Figure 19: Chantico
Codex Telleriano-Remensis, fol. 21v.

the lighting of a fire and building a temple.³⁴⁷ This ceremony was not restricted to new public spaces; fire designated a space as a settled, occupied area. The *Florentine Codex* describes the ‘omen’ that a new home’s hearth had to be lit in the presence of elders and could not be drawn indirectly from the hearth of another home.³⁴⁸ This, the fire which smouldered inside each home was not understood as merely a basic, terrestrial element but provided important, protective properties for the people of the dwelling. Fires had their own

deities: Huehuetēotl, one of the most ancient deities in the pantheon and the female Chantico whose name translates from Nahuatl as ‘She who dwells in the home’.³⁴⁹ She was the patron of

³⁴⁶ Burkhart, ‘Mexica Women on the Homefront’, p. 29.

³⁴⁷ Hill Boone, ‘Bringing Polity to Place’, pp. 547-73.

³⁴⁸ *Florentine Codex*, 5: 35: 194.

³⁴⁹ In Eduard Seler’s version of the *Codex Aubin*, Chantico is identified as the female counterpart of Xiuhtecuhtli, the fire god celebrated at Xiuhmolpilli: *Tonalamatl Aubin*, pp. 117. This is reinforced in the *Codex Borbonicus* representation of Chantico, where her face is painted in red and black, the typical colours of Xiuhtecuhtli: See also *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, p. 186; Nicholson, ‘Religion in pre-Hispanic Central Mexico’, p. 413.

fire, the hearth and volcanoes. This female deity exemplified the close association between the domestic fire, the home and female space.

Fire offered protection and a hearth should not be extinguished. Indeed, Xiuhmolpilli seems to have been the only moment when the hearth would be deliberately put out.³⁵⁰ The hearth was particularly important during the most dangerous phase of a woman's life: childbirth. A new fire was kindled in the room where the woman had given birth and was not allowed to go out until the little baby had been named and formally dedicated to female water deity Chalchiuhtlicue.³⁵¹ It seems that before the baby had been entrusted to this female deity, it benefited from the fire's protection. The dousing of the domestic hearth appears particularly meaningful because of its central importance to the character of the home and to the people it sheltered. When the cold ashes replaced the hearth's warmth and light, the home no longer received the fire's protective, vital forces.

It is important to recognise here that, while the home could provide some protection in moments of danger and uncertainty,³⁵² it was never a cosy space exempt from the dynamic forces which governed the Nahuas' sacred landscape. Far from it, as Burkhart has argued, the home was 'a place where those currents intersected forcibly with human existence'.³⁵³ The home was vulnerable to the same forces and inimic partners which governed the sacred landscape. These elements were understood to be 'mutually dependent, mutually conditioning, and mutually engendering'.³⁵⁴ In the Nahua home, every item had its place and anything damaged or out of position presented a threat to the delicately balanced order. One of the most

³⁵⁰ Burkhart, 'Mexica Women on the Homefront', p. 29.

³⁵¹ *Florentine Codex*, 4: 34: 111.

³⁵² During moments of uncertainty and danger people often opted to remain inside the home. For example, during *nemontemi* people remained indoors and restricted their movements to their immediate kin's patio household to avoid misfortune. Another moment when the home was seen as a refuge was during the nineteenth day-sign, *ce quauhtli* (one eagle), children were ushered into the house to avoid the malign power of Cihuateteo ('woman-gods') who descended to harm them. *Florentine Codex*, 4: 33: 107-9. See also *Florentine Codex*, book 4, illustration 79.

³⁵³ Burkhart, 'Mexica Women on the Homefront', p. 30.

³⁵⁴ Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, p. 147.

important, daily threats to the home was *tlazolli*, or filth. As we saw earlier, *tlazolli* was essentially anything damaged, no longer useful or something which served a purpose if it was in the right place but had somehow ended up displaced. Domestic utensils were, therefore, not merely utilitarian. They were treated with extreme caution. A broom, for instance, was itself made from *tlazolli* — bits of twigs — and so had to be left outside the home so that it did not contaminate the space.³⁵⁵ Book Five of the *Florentine Codex* ('The Omens') details the many superstitions associated with the *tenamaztli*, *comalli* and the *metlatl* (grinding stone), which were among the household items discarded at Xiuhmolpilli.³⁵⁶ Of this extensive list of omens, one of the most significant was the misfortune wrought by a broken *metlatl*, which was 'an omen of evil to the natives, when someone was grinding there, and it broke... it was said, that she who ground would die'.³⁵⁷ It seems astonishing that, as Acosta hauntingly described, all these household items were smashed and cast away when, in the normal course of time, they were treated with such caution. Importantly, in addition to the cooking utensils, shrines used in domestic ritual were also discarded: 'statues, hewn in either wood or stone, kept in each man's home and regarded as gods, were all cast into the water'.³⁵⁸ The remarkable disparity between how people acted on a daily basis and what they did during Xiuhmolpilli means that they should be central to our understanding of the festival. We cannot ignore these actions in our analysis.

So, what possible reason could have motivated ordinary Mexica folk to forcibly break and discard their own objects? Archaeologists Elson and Smith have argued that household objects had to be cast away during Xiuhmolpilli because, having been contaminated by the

³⁵⁵ Burkhart, 'Mexica Women on the Homefront', p. 30.

³⁵⁶ For example, young boys should not kick the *tenamaztli* as it would weaken their feet causing them ill-fortune in war (*Florentine Codex*, 5: 13: 187); small children were restrained from licking the *metlatl* as it would make their teeth fall out (*Florentine Codex*, 5: 34: 194). Moreover, if placed in the correct position, the *metlatl* would apparently bring its owner good fortune in a game of *patolli* (*Florentine Codex*, 5: 21: 190-91).

³⁵⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 5: 34: 194.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7: 9: 25.

‘essence’ of a sacrificial victim, ‘these things no longer held desirable properties’.³⁵⁹ While this argument *might* be relevant to the discarded household figurines, which could have been daubed with the blood of a victim, it seems very unlikely that the *comalli* or *metlatl* would have been anointed in this way. There are several reasons why I am not persuaded by Elson and Smith’s argument for the destruction of possessions. The most important is that it is not borne out by the alphabetic sources, which make no mention of any kind of contamination. It is not plausible that every household object in every household would have been considered to have been contaminated. Moreover, the concept of contaminating objects with blood seems a Western construct. While the Mexica were clearly very keen to keep their spaces clean and ordered, there are instances of houses and people being daubed with blood during ceremonies. Lastly, in the unlikely event that contamination was the reason, it is not likely that people would have kept objects in the house — an important locus of power - using them regularly over the course of 52 years, if they considered them to have been damaged or contaminated.

My own assessment suggests that the hearth stones, cooking pots, pestles and other possessions were discarded with the express purpose of inciting chaos and creating disorder. My argument builds on David Carrasco’s model regarding the meaningful alignment of Nahua public sacred landscape.³⁶⁰ Carrasco convincingly argues that ‘the ceremonial order of Aztec life, which has recently been called “the Aztec arrangement”, was a vigorous interplay between a locative view of the world, in which all things are sacred if they are in their place, and an apocalyptic view of the world in which the sacred dissolves when things have no place or are out of place’.³⁶¹ According to creation myths, these ‘views’ had become irretrievably

³⁵⁹ Elson and Smith, ‘Archaeological Deposits from the Aztec New Fire Ceremony’, p. 159.

³⁶⁰ Carrasco, ‘Star Gatherers and Wobbling Suns’, p. 284.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.* An important strand of scholarly investigation concerning ceremonial and ritual landscape has concerned the symbolism, orientation and cosmivision of Tenochtitlan’s magnificent twin-temple pyramid. See: for example, Broda, ‘The Templo Mayor as Ritual Space’, in Broda, Carrasco and Matos Moctezuma (eds), *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, Center and Periphery*, pp. 61-123; Richard Townsend, ‘Pyramid and Sacred Mountain’, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 385 (1982), ‘Ethnoastronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the American Tropics’, pp. 37-62; Rudolph

unbalanced on four previous occasions which precipitated the destruction of the universe. If we accept that, for the Nahuas, all things had power by virtue of their appropriate place, the ritual symbolism of material disorder and extinguishing of fires is revealed: these household objects were destroyed with the intention of disturbing the usual order and unleashing chaos. The damaging actions activated the home as a ritual space, and connected it with the ceremonial landscape. Casting away everyday objects deliberately courted danger. It tipped things in favour of destruction, bringing the apocalypse even closer than the extinguishing of fires had. This was a necessary, if undesirable and frightening, step in the march of the Xiuhmolpilli process. In the Mexica understanding of the five ages, ordinary people considered themselves at the mercy of the wheels of time.

An inspection of *Codex Tudela* reveals how ideas of waste and ruin played out through the destruction of household objects. This source explains that ‘*y quebravan todas las ollas y cantaros q[ue] avian servido y los comals y basijas q[ue] tenían, todo lo quebravan*’.³⁶² The use of ‘que habían servido’ is particularly interesting as it implies that the utensils have been ‘used up’ and are no longer valuable or worthwhile. This strengthens the argument that the destruction of pots was a deliberate attempt at destabilisation through the creation of *tlazolli*. While *tlazolli* typically refers to ‘filth’ in a literal and metaphorical sense, a subtle reading of the definition can also imply that something can be *tlazolli* if it is used up and no longer serves the correct purpose. This was a physical expression of the dire situation in which ordinary Mexica found themselves as the calendar cycle drew to a close. The genuine and imminent threat of oblivion meant that ‘one of the wheels the world was sure to come to an end and that perchance it was the one in which they were living’.³⁶³ In attaching the home to the public

van Zantwijk, ‘The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Model of Aztec Cosmvision’, Elizabeth P. Benson (ed.), *Mesoamerican Sites and World Views* (Washington, D.C., 1981), pp. 71-86.

³⁶² *Códice Tudela*, fol. 83 v. This translates as: ‘they broke all the jars and jugs which had been used up and the tortilla griddles which they had, they broke them all’.

³⁶³ Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, p. 332.

ceremonial landscape, the disturbance not only affected the settled order of the household but, by extension, brought the Nahuatl world to the brink of cosmic apocalypse. While it is unlikely that the Mexica wished to flirt with disaster, they had to do so to work through this necessary ritual process and emerge, alive, on the other side. Within the fine balance of creative inimic partners, the smashing of the *tenamaztli*, *comalli*, *metlatl* and figurines was not preparatory spring cleaning, but an uncontrolled threat to the stability and balance which maintained the world. It is particularly intriguing that it was the home, a space of rich cosmic power, which provided the locus for this important ritual activity.

But the action within the home did not stop there. Following the smashing of belongings, the household was vigorously swept and scrupulously cleaned: ‘everywhere there was much sweeping — there was sweeping very clean. Rubbish was thrown out; none lay in any of the houses’.³⁶⁴ Sahagún’s reference provides valuable insight into women’s role in this festival. As discussed, the colonial chronicles tend to reproduce contemporary European standards concerning appropriate gender roles. In this way, the friars often overlooked or misunderstood women’s importance to ritual.³⁶⁵ However, within the Nahuatl scheme of gender parallelism explored by scholars in recent years,³⁶⁶ sweeping was an emphatically female domestic task, evident when baby girls were presented with a broom shortly after birth.³⁶⁷ A modern mind

³⁶⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 9: 25.

³⁶⁵ On women’s roles in public ceremony, see Betty Ann Brown, ‘Seen but not Heard: Women in Aztec Ritual — The Sahagún Texts’, in Janet Catherine Berlo (ed.), *Text and Image in Pre-Columbian Art: Essays on the Interrelationship of the Verbal and Visual Arts* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 119-53.

³⁶⁶ As discussed in the final chapter concerning domestic ritualism, it has been argued that the Nahuas separated the genders into complementary, equal socioeconomic and cultural domains for the purpose of productivity. By contrast, some scholars advocate that the Nahuas perceived gender as a flexible category, requiring physical division for the purposes of stabilisation. See: Klein, ‘Gender Ambiguity in Nahuatl Ideology’; Joyce, ‘Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy’ pp. 473-83. Although some of Joyce’s evidence refers specifically to the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, her arguments should be read with a critical eye as her conclusions refer to Mesoamerica more generally.

³⁶⁷ *Codex Mendoza*, fol. 57r. Male babies were presented with warrior garb and accoutrements to signify that their masculine fate lay on the battlefield. Moreover, umbilical cords of male and female newborns were buried under the battlefield and hearth, respectively; a clear indication of gendered

might interpret the responsibility of sweeping as a relegation to domestic drudgery. Indeed, in the discussion of the female birth rites (which included burying her umbilical cord under the hearth) Sahagún deduced that, in contrast to male destiny in warfare, ‘the woman was to go nowhere. Her very task was the home life, life by the fire, by the grinding stone’.³⁶⁸ While it is extremely difficult to access female perspectives and experiences through alphabetic androcentric sources, it has been argued that female domestic tasks were not considered inferior or any less useful than the male responsibilities of warfare or agriculture. As Burkhart has claimed, ‘Just because Mexica women spent much of their time cooking, cleaning, sewing, and caring for children, duties assigned also to their European counterparts, it cannot be assumed a priori that these activities were considered in any way trivial or marginal in relation to the male domain’.³⁶⁹ The home was a female space and, given the alphabetic sources emphatic description of ‘there was much sweeping, there was sweeping very clean’, women were crucial to Xiuhmolpilli.³⁷⁰

Sweeping was a hugely important cultural and spiritual activity in the Mexica world as it managed *tlazolli* (‘filth’). As we know, the Mexica’s precarious existence rested on an equilibrium produced by dynamic and creative interplay between inimic partners.³⁷¹ In the Xiuhmolpilli ritual context, filth and order were the protagonists. Because, as Maffie and others has argued, these phenomena were mutually dependent, filth’s quotidian existence was not inherently problematic. However, the problem occurred when excessive amounts accumulated in unsuitable spaces such as the home. During Xiuhmolpilli, the house was vigorously swept to shift filth outside of the home. It would not have been possible to eliminate *tlazolli* entirely for, as Burkhart remarks, ‘The process of living inevitably brought one into contact with *tlazolli*.

expectations of their fate. *Florentine Codex*, 6: 31: 171. The birth and naming ceremonies are examined in greater depth in the final section of this study.

³⁶⁸ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 31: 171.

³⁶⁹ Burkhart, ‘Mexica Women on the Homefront’, p. 26.

³⁷⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 9: 25.

³⁷¹ Maffie, pp. 137-39. See the first chapter of this thesis for my discussion of *tlazolli*.

Maize grew from the mud, from the body of the tainted earth deity...'.³⁷² Moreover, total elimination would not even be desirable for it would create an imbalance in the other direction. It would be preferable to sweep the *tlazolli* away from the ordered, central home to its proper place on the periphery where its chaos belonged. Sweeping was, during Xiuhmolpilli, an act of religious purification.

There are other examples of cleanliness and order being important to Nahua ritual process. In the festival Huey Tozoztli children were sacrificed to bring on the rains, Carrasco detects what he calls 'a ritual micromanagement of human action' which ensured correct ritual organisation.³⁷³ In an average year, Sahagún describes that during Huey Tozoztli young men organise the fresh maize plants in an ordered fashion before their domestic shrines, they 'set them up carefully before their gods'.³⁷⁴ They sprinkled them with blood and 'In the middle of these they placed maguey thorns'.³⁷⁵ Carrasco explains that these locative terms are significant and that the emphasis on correct arrangement relates also to the social purposes of the ritual. I would take his analysis one step further to relate this action to the wider themes of fertility and prosperity which seem to characterise this springtime festival. The location of objects during ritual is not incidental. They *have* to be placed in this way or there was no ritual. The penalties for correct ritual performance were strict. The fact that commoners purposefully disordered their homes is hugely significant to the destructive potential of Xiuhmolpilli as a ritual process. During these moments, there is a lack of the specific locative terms referred to by Carrasco. Discarding their objects seems, for a ritual at least, fairly random and uncontrolled. These

³⁷² Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 89. See also Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, p. 20.

³⁷³ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, p. 105-6.

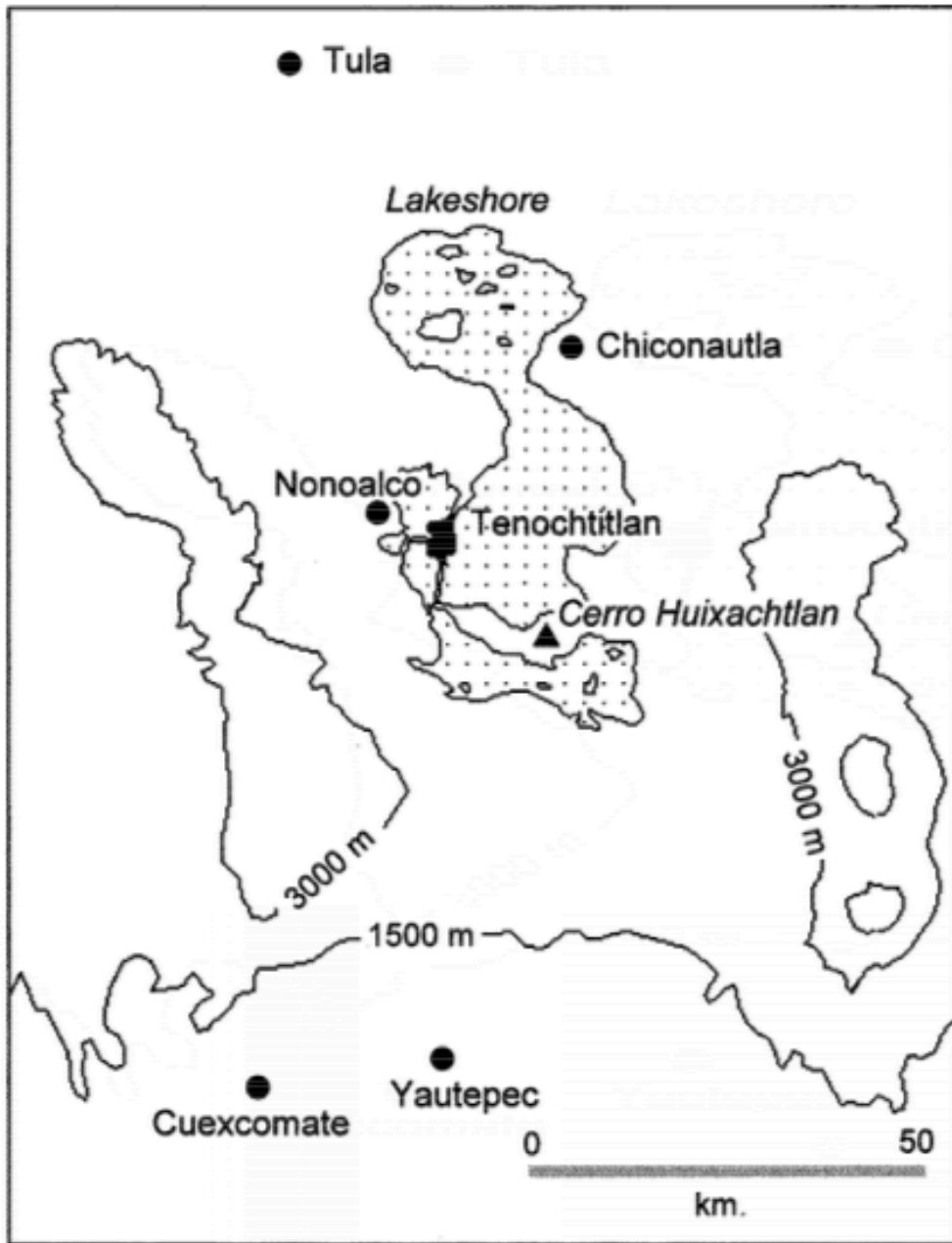
³⁷⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 23: 61. As we shall see, Durán's *Book of the Gods and Rites* relays how in 1507 Huey Tozoztli took on special political connotations which drew the action away from Tenochtitlan and its domestic aspects. See chapter three of this thesis on sacred landscapes and ritual stages.

³⁷⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 23: 61.

chaotic, disordered moments sat in stark contrast to the choreography of other rituals which were exhibitions of order, perfection and stability.

Although, as discussed in my introduction, the nature of the sources makes accessing individual perspectives problematic, I suggest that these men and women's destructive acts might have provoked in them an emotional and psychological investment in the success of the entire festival. Their own actions had been risky. In the Nahua worldview, any action created ripples of consequence across time and space. During their participation in Xiuhmolpilli, these people had tempted fate and tipped the Nahua ceremonial landscape perilously in favour of the apocalyptic view of the world by destroying their own possessions and disturbing the ritual landscape of their own homes. Because each sequential phase of Xiuhmolpilli was dependent on its preceding and succeeding stages, it was crucial that the rest of the ceremony be completed successfully so that the balance could be redressed. If the subsequent phases of Xiuhmolpilli were not properly enacted it was entirely plausible that 'all would be ended; there would evermore be night. Nevermore would the sun come forth. Night would prevail forever, and the demons of darkness would descend, to eat men'.³⁷⁶ In this example of collective ritual action, ordinary men and women considered themselves active participants in the continuation of the world's current phase. With the landscape enveloped in darkness, the elite priestly class had exercised impressive control by ordering the suspension of the normal order of time. This imperilled state could now only be salvaged by the festival's successful completion, which would involve direct intercession by the Mexica *tlahtoani* Motecuhzoma in a public act of ritual sacrifice.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 9: 10: 27.



Map 6: Location of Mount Huixachtlan in Central Mexico
 Elson and Smith, 'Archaeological Deposits from the Aztec New Fire Ceremony', p. 161.

The public sacrifice

At dusk on the final night of the calendar round, the Huehuetectl priests reached the summit of Mount Huixachtlan, having processed for some ten miles from Tenochtitlan's ceremonial precinct. Representatives of the rain deity Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl, who 'blew the Fifth Sun into motion',³⁷⁷ went along with the procession. Pictorial evidence from *Codex Borbonicus* shows that the priests carried bundles of sticks, as physical representations of the years, which were burned as the transition was deemed successful [see figure 20].³⁷⁸

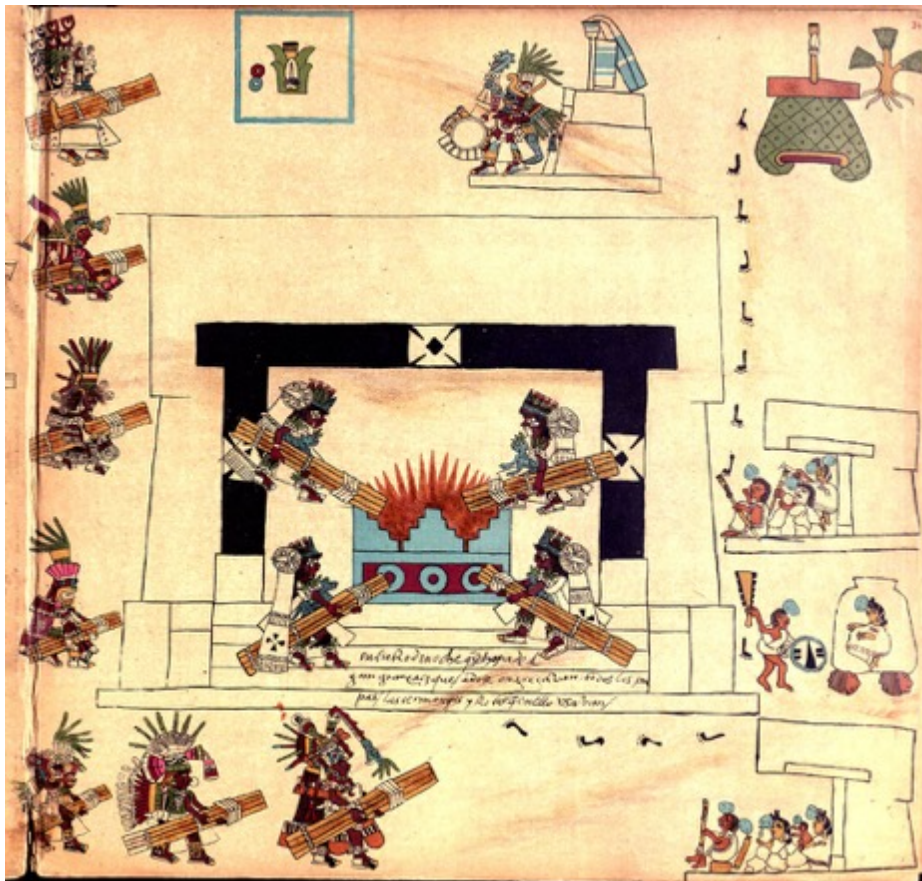


Figure 20: Xiuhmolpilli
Codex Borbonicus, p. 34.

³⁷⁷ Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, p. 126.

³⁷⁸ *Codex Borbonicus*, p. 34. Stick bundles are prominent motifs in many of the pictorial accounts of Xiuhmolpilli. From my reading, the alphabetic sources make no reference to these bundles of sticks.

They brought with them a captive who would pay with his life. The *Florentine Codex*, which provides unrivalled detail for the public sacrificial moment of the ceremony, provides an extremely rare insight into an individual victim. At the 1507 celebration of Xiuhmolpilli, the sustaining fire was restarted in the body of ‘a man from Uexotzinco, a well-born man... called Xiuhtlamin’.³⁷⁹ Sahagún describes that Xiuhtlamin had been held captive in Tlatelolco after being taken captive by Mexica warrior



Figure 22: The Xiuhmolpilli sacrifice
Florentine Codex, book 7

called Iztcuin. Intriguingly, Mexica *tlahtoani* Motecuhzoma had personal involvement in his selection, having ‘ordered that indeed everywhere should be sought a captive whose name [contained the word] *xiuitl*’, (meaning ‘year’ or ‘jade’).³⁸⁰ Quiñones Keber speculates that the victim might be the white figure on folio 32v. of *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* [see figure 21].³⁸¹ It was particularly unusual that Motecuhzoma would have been involved in the precise selection



Figure 21: Xiuhtlamin?
Codex Telleriano-Remensis, fol. 32v.

of a sacrificial victim. Indeed, that the Xiuhmolpilli victim was a single man is particularly interesting. Other moments of state glorification involved mass human sacrifice: at the Rededication of the Templo Mayor in 1487, for example, when estimates ranged as high as 84,000 victims over the course of the ceremonies.³⁸²

³⁷⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 12: 31-32.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 7: 12: 31. It is not mentioned whether the *tlahtoani* exerted control over this process. Xiuhmolpilli festivals before 1507. The brackets were inserted by the Dibble and Anderson translation.

³⁸¹ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, p. 217.

³⁸² This figure is, however, extremely contested and the actual figure is likely to have been considerably lower. For a recent evaluation of the available evidence regarding human sacrifice statistics, see Caroline Dodds Pennock, ‘Mass Murder or Religious Homicide? Rethinking Human

Xiuhtlamin's name highlights the Mexica's all-encompassing fatalistic worldview. 'Year' is the most obvious interpretation for Xiuhtlamin as *xiuitl* can mean 'year'. This bears relevance to the ceremony of 'binding of the years'. Read suggests that, in being named in such a way, Xiuhtlamin 'may have been fifty-two years old himself since children born during the year of this fifty-two-year rite were given names that included the word *xiuitl*'.³⁸³ With this in mind, Xiuhtlamin 'was likely born during the year of the last ceremony and therefore held within the temporal power of the calendar'.³⁸⁴ However, *xiuitl* can also mean 'turquoise',³⁸⁵ and was a stone often used as a metaphor to describe anything desirable or precious.³⁸⁶ In the conventionalised style of the pictorials it was, for example, the turquoise diadem which denoted a *tlahtoani*. This blue-green mineral was an extremely important component of ceremonies which displayed Mexica power. As well as conveying status, turquoise could indicate fertility, being linked to notions of abundance and wealth.³⁸⁷ Turquoise was not available from their homeland in the Basin of Mexico; Frances Berdan has pointed out that it had to be imported into the capital via the tribute and market systems.³⁸⁸ Its precise point of origin has not been located,³⁸⁹ however, it seems as though the precious stones which the Mexica demanded came from the far reaches of the empire. Moreover, it was associated with the Mexica's forebears — the artistic Toltecs — who the Mexica thought were the first to have discovered turquoise.³⁹⁰ In this way, turquoise 'became an extravagantly valuable possession and status marker, laden

Sacrifice and Interpersonal Violence in Aztec Society', *Historical Social Research/ Historische Sozialforschung*, 37.3 (2012), pp. 276-302.

³⁸³ Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, p. 125; *Florentine Codex*, 7: 12: 31.

³⁸⁴ Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, p. 164.

³⁸⁵ Karttunen, *Analytical Dictionary*, p. 324.

³⁸⁶ Magaloni Kerpel, p. 43; Pasztory, *Aztec Art*, pp. 250, 278.

³⁸⁷ Morán, *Sacred Consumption*, pp. 23-24.

³⁸⁸ Frances Berdan, 'Turquoise in the Aztec Imperial World', in J. C. H. King, Max Carocci, Caroline Cartwright, Colin McEwan and Rebecca Stacey (eds), *Turquoise in Mexico and North America: Science, Conservation, Culture and Collections* (London, 2012), pp. 91-102, see p. 96.

³⁸⁹ Bassett, *Fate of Earthly Things*, p. 103.

³⁹⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 10: 10: 168; Bassett, *Fate of Earthly Things*, pp. 101-10.

with so much symbolism that it is difficult for us to comprehend'.³⁹¹ Linking this to our Xiuhmolpilli example, the use of a sacrificial victim with a name for turquoise simultaneously linked the Mexica with their Toltec heritage and displayed their current political power. Moreover, it seems that the Mexica might have only gained access to turquoise in substantial quantities in the years before the 1507 Xiuhmolpilli, as they pushed further out towards the Gulf and Pacific coasts. This play on words underlines Xiuhtlamin's highly regarded status as a valuable actor in the Xiuhmolpilli drama. Far from being the nameless victim of most sacrifices, Xiuhtlamin is afforded his own persona in this drama. Read makes some intriguing comparisons between Xiuhtlamin's standing as an honourable war captive and the Mexica's spiritually important staple crop, maize, 'his heart (*teyolia*) was, like grain, endowed with forces required for both germination and divination'.³⁹² His pertinent name and admirable social position as a war captive meant that Xiuhtlamin conferred considerable *mahcehua* (merit) on the Xiuhmolpilli ceremonial process.

While I suggest that each phase of Xiuhmolpilli was crucial to the ceremony's successful completion, the *Florentine Codex* and *Codex Borbonicus* representations reveal the climactic phase to be the most perilous, for all who were invested in this ceremony. Commoners, through their dutiful domestic activity, had done all they could and responsibility for successful completion of the ceremony had been transferred to the small group of fire priests. If the fire was not drawn successfully, 'Night would prevail forever, and the demons of darkness would descend, to eat men'.³⁹³ It was the blood produced by this central sacrifice which would

³⁹¹ Phil C. Weigand, 'Observations on Ancient Mining within the Northwest Regions of the Mesoamerican Civilizations, with Emphasis on Turquoise' in Alan K. Craig and Robert C. West (eds), *Quest of Mineral Wealth: Aboriginal and Colonial Mining and Metallurgy in Spanish America* (Baton Rouge, 1994), p. 22, quoted in Bassett, *Fate of Earthly Things*, p. 101.

³⁹² Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, p. 164.

³⁹³ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 10: 27.

perpetuate the Mexica world, ‘Without sacrifice, a state of *tlahtlacolli*, or disarray, would exist for the entire cosmic community’.³⁹⁴

Significantly, the previous ritual phase had required participation from ‘all the land’ in their homes, but the focus was completely restricted to Mount Huixachtlan for the sacrificial moment. ‘Book Four’ of the *Florentine Codex*, with its abridged account of Xiuhmolpilli, specifies that ‘a great multitude of people was on the mountains surrounding this province of Mexico — Texcoco, Xochimilco and Cuauhtitlan — waiting to see the new fire’.³⁹⁵ Those who lived around the base of the mountain jostled for the best view: ‘there was unwavering attention and expectation as all remained facing, with neck craned, the summit of Uixachtecatl’.³⁹⁶ They stood still; ‘all were frightened and filled with dread’.³⁹⁷ Everyone had a stake in this important moment; no one was ignorant or disinterested: ‘Hence everyone ascended the terraces; all went upon the housetops. No one was on the ground below. The house was abandoned. They sat’.³⁹⁸ The excruciating liminality of the moment was such that pregnant women had to be ‘placed in granaries, for they were looked upon with fear. It was said and claimed that if, truly, the new fire were not drawn, these also would eat men; [for] they would be changed into fierce beasts’.³⁹⁹ The author of *Codex Borbonicus*, a very early colonial pictorial manuscript, considered the enclosure of pregnant women a sufficiently important detail to be included in the illustration of Xiuhmolpilli. The bottom right-hand side of the folio shows a pregnant

³⁹⁴ Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, p. 124.

³⁹⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 4: Appendix: 143.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7: 10: 28.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7: 10: 27.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.* These brackets appear in the Dibble and Anderson translation. In Nahua culture, pregnant women (especially those in the later stages) were thought to hold incredible physical and metaphorical power. During parturition, a woman was overtaken by the awesome Earth Mother force, Cihuacoatl. A potent creator and destroyer, this deity was much feared and her potency remained in the body of a labouring mother for several days her birth. If (as seems to have happened often) a woman died in childbirth, her husband protected her corpse for several days in case youths or thieves came to steal part of her body as talismans, such was the power her body was thought to yield. See: *Florentine Codex*, 6: 29: 161; *Florentine Codex*, 6: 29: 164; Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, I, pp. 80-81.

woman (identifiable by her rounded stomach) in a small structure, a man armed with a shield watching her. Interestingly, the woman's guard is the only figure in *Codex Borbonicus* representation to face away from the central priestly action, emphasising the importance of his task to restrict the woman's movements. He clearly observed her intently. Children, thought to be particularly vulnerable to negative forces, were kept awake not only to witness the moment, but also because it was thought they would transmogrify into mice if they fell asleep.⁴⁰⁰ Here, we see again that the ritual landscape had been tipped in favour of disaster. The entire populace was vulnerable to the negative forces which could, at any moment, sweep over and destroy their world.

When the Tianquiztli constellation rose in the sky, the spectators excitedly welcomed it as the sign that they had been saved from the apocalypse. The priests wasted no time, grabbing Xiuhtlamin immediately and restraining him by each limb, they arched his back across the stone. The chief priest, a man from Copulco, then dexterously struck open the victim's chest with a sharp obsidian knife, wrenched out the pulsating heart and offered it skywards. The information about the chief priest's city of origin is particularly intriguing; this level of detail is extremely rare for a ritual account. The fact that Sahagún's informants remembered this fact underscores Xiuhmolpilli's unique status in the Mexica ritual repertoire. While the informants might have only been able to remain generic, recurring features of the monthly *veintena* rituals, they gave the colonial friars much more precise details of the exceptional Xiuhmolpilli because it had happened only once in their lifetime. Once this Copulcan priest had ripped open the victim's chest, he quickly bored the 'new fire' into the victim's chest cavity 'by the high priest dressed in his sacerdotal vestments and finery'.⁴⁰¹

⁴⁰⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 10: 27-28.

⁴⁰¹ Durán, *History*, p. 446.

It is a striking image: an enraptured huddle gathered around the base of the mountain as their world's fate hung in the balance. What exactly were they crowding around to see? Carrasco, Elson and Smith claim that the zenith passage of Tianquitzli (the constellation known to us as the Pleiades) was 'the signal that the movement of the heavens had not ceased'⁴⁰² and that 'the sun would rise the next day to start another 52-year calendar round'.⁴⁰³ However, these conclusions seem not to have been reached by close textual analysis. The *Florentine Codex* (the only primary source which emphasises any anticipation of a precise signal) points to the high priest's successful drawing of new fire in the chest of a sacrificial victim as the indication that another calendar cycle had been granted: 'Everyone was apprehensive, waiting until, in time, the new fire might be drawn'.⁴⁰⁴ Durán agrees with the *Florentine Codex* in emphasising the centrality of fire to the ceremony's success.⁴⁰⁵ Therefore, the human effort of an elite Mexica priest was, at least, the official signal that the world had been saved. However, Carrasco, Elson and Smith might have a point because the appearance of the stars might have been a more identifiable to ordinary people away from Huixachtlan. Clearly, not all the people to whom the Mexica elite wished to convey a powerful ideological message would have been able to get sufficiently close to the sacrificial scene, much less witness Xiuhtlamin's immolation.

The fire lit within Xiuhtlamin's lifeless chest produced an impressive spectacle of vitality and light, a sight which contrasted starkly with the desperate mood which had cast a pall over the *nemontemi*. As the fire licked the body and then engulfed it entirely, 'it flared and burst into flames, and was visible everywhere. It was seen from afar.'⁴⁰⁶ 'There was much happiness and rejoicing' as both priests and spectators were relieved to have successfully played their respective parts in this phase of the ceremony.⁴⁰⁷ The flames provided an unequivocal sign that

⁴⁰² Carrasco, 'Star Gatherers and Wobbling Suns', p. 285.

⁴⁰³ Elson and Smith, 'Archaeological Deposits of the Aztec New Fire Ceremony', p. 158.

⁴⁰⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 10: 28.

⁴⁰⁵ Durán, *History*, pp. 445-46.

⁴⁰⁶ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 10: 28.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 7: 12: 31.

the rejoicing multitude (those near Mount Huixachtlan, at least) would soon be able to relight their hearths and resume their daily activities: ‘they played on many drums and horns and flutes and other instruments of rejoicing and merriment’.⁴⁰⁸

While the priestly activities were the explicit focus of attention during this climactic phase of Xiuhmolpilli, spectators were not passive or uncritical witnesses to a grand spectacle. Indeed, just as the scholarship concerning this festival has neglected to appreciate the crucial importance of the activation of sacred landscape which took place within the home, so too have they underappreciated the presence of ordinary people in the sacrificial phase. Far from being mere spectators, the commoners played a key role in this ceremony. Whether or not ordinary people experienced social and culture pressure to conform to this ceremony, those who did so made a choice to witness the ceremony and to let their own blood. Commoners’ relationship with the elite priests is crucial to exploring what the Mexica ruling elite sought to achieve with public ceremonialism. The gathering together of an expectant crowd — as happened in Xiuhmolpilli — is a common trope in traditional ritual. Émile Durkheim, in his famous account of Australian indigenous village ceremonies, coined the term ‘collective effervescence’ to describe the heightened emotional state of ritual participants and spectators. He argued that ‘The very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation’.⁴⁰⁹ He suggested that collective effervescence might lead to exhilaration after the ritual was completed.⁴¹⁰ In pre-modern societies, bringing together

⁴⁰⁸ Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, p. 332.

⁴⁰⁹ Émile Durkheim, *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse* (Paris, 1912), pp. 217-18, quoted in Fischer et al., ‘The Fire-Walker’s High: Affect and Physiological Responses in an Extreme Collective Ritual’, *PLOS One*, 9.2 (2014), p. 2.

⁴¹⁰ There are hardly any scientific quantitative studies of ritual experiences. A rare exception examined physiological responses to a fire-walking ceremony in the Hindu community in Mauritius. Surprisingly for such an ‘extreme’, intense and painful ceremony, participants who walked barefoot across burning asphalt reported experiencing greater happiness compared to spectators of the same festival. Spectators reported increased fatigue, however. These findings corroborate anthropological theories that collective rituals promote positive emotions among participants. See: Fischer et al., ‘The

disparate vassals was a method of ensuring compliance with the group's social mores and cultural values which were usually imposed from above. Inomata, for example, has suggested that the classic Maya rulers used what he terms 'theatrical events' to tie disparate, independent communities to central rulership. He argues that 'Mass spectacles, in which a large portion of a community assembled and worked together, provided opportunities for individuals to witness and sense the bodily existence and participation of other members'.⁴¹¹ These theories are helpful in understanding the Xiuhmolpilli activities where commoners watching below experienced a bewildering display of sacrificial splendour, the successful outcome of which seemed to depend on a series of natural signals and processes. While the Xiuhmolpilli experience would have certainly been terrifying and bewildering as the fate of apocalyptic death hung over them, the mood seem to have lifted quite rapidly after the sacrifice was over. The *Florentine Codex* indicates that once the gathered spectators had caught a glimpse of the sparking of the new fire, they were overwhelmed with joy and relief. Feeling exhilarated and overwhelmed at the successful new fire, these people had a Durkheimian collective experience at the foot of Mount Huixachtlan.

The spectators were waiting for 'natural' signs — of fire and stars — to confirm to them that they had been saved from disaster. Xiuhmolpilli, therefore, seems like a ritual which relied upon the natural world for success. However, in reality, Xiuhmolpilli had little real *purpose* or relationship with natural forces, save that the Mexica elites bound its success to the fire and stars. Xiuhmolpilli celebrated an artificial, even arbitrary, division of time. The 52-year cycle was an engrained feature of Mesoamerican time but it had little astronomical purpose or foundation. There is no natural, seasonal cycle of 52 years. This was a construction of the

Fire-Walker's High: Affect and Physiological Responses in an Extreme Collective Ritual', *PLOS One*, 9.2 (2014), pp. 1-6. For the literature arguing that collective rituals produce positive effects, see: Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

⁴¹¹ Inomata, 'Plazas, Performers, and Spectators', p. 818.

Mexica calendar. It seems as though the Mexica rulers tied this constructed ritual to the Tianquiztli constellation to present themselves as favoured by the deities. This exploited the profound danger presented by the calendar transition to reinforce the dominance of the Mexica in their vassals' minds. In this way, the commoners' presence, their understanding and reciprocal activity were crucial to the choreography of the public sacrifice. It is well-established in scholarship that, in order to be effective, rituals should have perceptive audiences.⁴¹² Without willing and accepting spectators, the sacrifice had little meaning or purpose. Thus, the Mexica capitalised on the intensity of their captive audience's gaze to project themselves as the 'chosen people' and to legitimise their constructed rituals. The combination of an impressive sacrificial scene with the appearance of the rising Tianquiztli constellation conspired to provide an ideal setting for the priests to link their actions with the continuation of the universe. By purposely linking their successful, public, ritual activities to the continuation of the universe, the priests projected the impression that sacrifice was necessary to appease notoriously fickle deities. Moreover, given the close alignment of the sun with Mexica state power, the public activity publically reminded of and renewed the concept of state power in their vassals' minds. The transitory stars, seemingly acting on cue, communicated to the audience that the unpredictable deities held the Mexica in their favour (for now, at least).

Accordingly, the Mexica elite went to great lengths to ensure that their vassals were knowledgeable of society's history, customs, values and crucially, expectations, with a public education system for all youths, male and female. The Mexica developed a complex system of public education. Broadly speaking, at puberty boys entered either the commoner warrior

⁴¹² Cannadine and Price, 'Introduction: Divine Right of Kings', pp. 1-19; Geertz, 'Centers, Kings, and Charisma', pp. 121-46. An interesting comparison to Xiuhmolpilli is the Babylonian 'New Year Festival' which lasted nine days and was a magnificent display of royal power, witnessed by 'almost everyone within the city and its immediate environs'. See Amélie Kuhrt, 'Usurpation, Conquest, and Ceremonial: from Babylon to Persia', in *Rituals of Royalty*, pp. 20-55, esp. 31-39.

(*telpochcalli*) or the elite priestly (*calmecac*) school.⁴¹³ In addition to these institutions, there was a third school, the *cuicacalli*. Where the first two schools were practical and ideological institutions, this was a ‘house of song’ was attended by both boys and girls. Separated by sex to learn the arts of poetry and performance, the two sets came together for songs and dances. In this way, although the spectators were physically excluded from the locus of sacrificial activity, their role as interpreters of political and religious ideology was integral to this ritual as a display of imperial power. All men in Tenochtitlan, not matter how lowly, would have attended these institutions. The education of girls remains poorly understood as the colonial chroniclers did not recognise its value. However, great importance was placed upon education and eloquence in Mexica society. The people who gazed up at Xiuhmolpilli were, therefore, not just passive, gawping spectators but critical witnesses who understood the value of these moments. Presence of jostling, eager folk was necessary to the choreography of the dramatic sacrificial act. However, they did not just witness the spectacle. On the contrary, they reciprocated the drama by letting their own blood when they saw the sparking flames: ‘the people quickly cut their ears, and spattered the blood repeatedly toward the fire. Although [a child] still lay in the cradle, they also cut his ears, took his blood, and spattered it... everyone performed a penance’.⁴¹⁴ The Nahuatl word interpreted as ‘penance’ is *tlamaceoa*, the literal translation of which is, ‘to merit what one desires’.⁴¹⁵ This term connotes the idea of repaying the gods for the primordial sacrifice they had committed when they let blood of themselves for the creation of the world. Within the understanding of *tlamaceoa*, the ordinary people were far from passive spectators,

⁴¹³ The exact distinctions between these three institutions remains obscure. It is argued that the *telpochcalli* was for most ordinary people and the *calmecac* was attended by noble offspring and particularly talented commoners. See: Durán, *Rites*, pp. 113-15; Edward Calnek, ‘The *Calmecac* and *Telpochcalli*’, pp. 169-77; Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, pp. 128-32; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, pp. 73-78.

⁴¹⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 10: 28. The notion of ‘penance’ is a Christian term related to contrition for sin, a concept which was not present in the Aztec worldview where notions of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ did not figure. Analysis of the original Nahuatl in the *Florentine Codex* uncovers a different attitude.

⁴¹⁵ Karttunen, *Analytical Dictionary*, p. 279. Karttunen’s orthography is *tlamahcēhua*. Molina translated the noun, *tlamaceualiz*, as *penitencia* (penance). Molina, p. 125.

but were clearly invested in the central act. As the priests had committed a sacrificial act, so did the commoners below. The blood they spilled and sprayed upwards to the central sacrifice was confirmed that the ‘blood debt’ in which the Mexicas operated. Blood was needed to nourish the sun and provide it with the vital energy it required to move each day across the sky and provide life and light to the dependent Mexica. The priests and commoners were letting blood in order to renew and acknowledge this sanguinary debt and continue the sun’s diurnal cycles.

Political manipulation of natural forces

Once the celestial signs had unequivocally proven that the ritual had brought about a calendar transition, the action moved swiftly so that fires could be relit throughout the territory without delay. Notably, all Xiuhmolpilli accounts emphasise that the Huitzilopochtli, Mexica’s principal god — deity of sun and warfare — had to first be revered. Motolinía explained that, ‘Without delay they ignited their torch and, before anyone was permitted to ignite his, they carried it with great zeal and haste to the principal temple of Mexico’.⁴¹⁶ Hovering near Huitzilopochtli’s temple at the Templo Mayor precinct, fire priests and runners who had been sent from city-states across the empire assembled. These men had been specially selected, ‘these were all only chosen ones, strong warriors, valiant men, picked as best’.⁴¹⁷ At this moment, the priests were joined by their counterparts from all the major Tenochtitlan temples. Keeping the local fire priests waiting, the Mexica priests pointedly revered their own deity Huitzilopochtli, before distributing the fire: ‘Before anything else, they took it up, direct, to the top of the temple, where was kept the image of Uitzilopochtli and placed it in the fire holder. Then they scattered and strewed white incense’.⁴¹⁸ This detail is crucial to Xiuhmolpilli’s significance as an

⁴¹⁶ Motolinía, *History*, p. 113.

⁴¹⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 11: 29.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

exquisite political display. Deities such as Tlaloc and Huehuetēotl enjoyed ancient and widespread reverence throughout the Aztec empire. Huitzilopochtli was the Mexica's particular patron, having led them through their long migration from Aztlan. He patronised two of the Mexica's greatest preoccupations: sun and warfare. As fire priests and warriors from subject and allied city-states stood waiting, the Mexica elite indulged their patron, marking him out as a more immediate concern than the need to distribute fire to their subject and allied city-states. Entreating their own god meant that the blazing new fire was first attributed with Mexica power. Fire went out to the whole empire, directly from Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica's own special patron, protector and advocate.



*Figure 23: Temple fires are relit
Florentine Codex, book 7.*

Once Huitzilopochtli had been suitably revered and the fire distributed to important public spaces in Tenochtitlan:

...everyone — the priests and fire priests — took the fire from there. [Having come] from all directions, the fire priests of Mexico had been sent there, charged with the task, as well as those who had come from distant [places] everywhere — messengers and runners.⁴¹⁹

Those selected to retrieve the fire were the elite men of the warrior class, ‘the fleet, the swift, who could run like the wind’.⁴²⁰ Although the process by which these men were chosen is not made clear, it must have been a privilege to have been distinguished among ‘only chosen ones,

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

strong warriors, valiant men, picked as best'.⁴²¹ The scale of the empire meant that many households remained ignorant of the successful transition until the messenger arrived with the fire. While people might have seen the rising of the Tianquiztli constellation, it remains that they might not have the specialist knowledge to interpret the stars without a knowledgeable priest. The fact that the messengers and runners distributed the fire 'Without delay, with ease',⁴²² might have seemed extraordinary, even overwhelming, to families had been stuck in the prolonged anguish of the *nemontemi*. It seems that both elite and commoners recognised the value of rapid delivery of fire as ordinary men and women implored the runners to go faster, 'Much did they goad [the runners] and make them hurry, so that they might speedily bring it to their homes. They hurried to give it to one another'.⁴²³

The exact manner and order in which the fires were relit is unclear. While the majority of the sources suggest that it was delivered directly to homes, Acosta noted that 'all went for new fire to the place where the high priest had lighted it'.⁴²⁴ The disparity in the accounts might be accounted for by variations in practice within the areas under Mexica sway. Given the preoccupation with speed during this phase of the ceremony, perhaps commoners living in city-states far from the imperial core retrieved fire from a central place and locations closer to the capital had fire delivered straight to the home. This might indicate that these provincial people were especially eager to relight their hearths and braziers as they did not wish to wait for a foreign runner to deliver it to them. Either way, the evidence conjures the image that fire was triumphantly greeted — whether it arrived first in the home or the city-state — with great relief to the Nahuatl people, 'there was the laying of many fires; there was the quieting of many hearts'.⁴²⁵

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*

⁴²² *Ibid.*

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁴ Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, p. 332.

⁴²⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 11: 29.



Figure 24: The relighting of domestic hearths
Florentine Codex, book 7

The documentary record is obscure as to how far the fire sparked at Huixachtlan would have travelled. Motolinía, for example, mentions that, ‘In the provinces distant from Mexico they performed the same ceremony and it was done everywhere with much feasting’.⁴²⁶ It is not clear to which part of the ceremony Motolinía’s statement refers. Given the general tendency of friars to focus on public ritual killing, it seems safe to infer that he meant the mountaintop sacrifice. The geographical limitations of the sources, exposed in the accounts regarding the extinguishing of fires, recur in this section. The alphabetic sources were, in general, created from the perspective of Tenochtitlan, and other metropolitan centres such as Tlatelolco. Sahagún, for example, famously explained in the introduction to the *Florentine Codex*’s second book that: ‘the first sieve through which my works were sifted was the people of Tepepulco;

⁴²⁶ Motolinía, *History*, p. 113.

the second, the people of Tlatilulco; and the third, the people of Mexico [City].⁴²⁷ However, in reality, missionaries in New Spain did not just stay inside Mexico City but often travelled vast distances to carry out their evangelising agenda. In this way, their accounts may contain information obtained throughout New Spain without explicit references to different regions. Most of the detailed information available relates to the colonial metropolitan centre at Mexico City. How would the elite male informants have even known where and how the ceremony was practised away from their *altepetl*? Rather than providing factual information, they might have tried to reinforce the image of Tenochtitlan as predominant in the empire. In lived experience, it is plausible that all regions held their own ceremonies and festivals, which they would have considered hugely significant. Even if this fire ceremony was practised away from Tenochtitlan, as Motolinía seems to have thought (or been told), local rituals might have had a different meaning for provincial peoples. In Tenochtitlan, Xiuhmolpilli seems to have been linked with the power of the *tlahtoani* and the state. Here, we see that our alphabetic sources present a certain version of Mexica, and Nahua ritual practices. We cannot access the full reality of Postclassic ritual experiences through these colonial writings. However, with these sources we *can* tell that those in Tenochtitlan considered themselves (or wanted others to consider them) at the pinnacle of the political hierarchy. As I will demonstrate, archaeological evidence is crucial to exploring alternative perspectives.

Certain elements of Xiuhmolpilli appear to have been designed to undermine city-states' sense of independence. As we have seen, fire held universal importance to the Nahuas. With its close association with the home, it represented a source of life and light. The Xiuhmolpilli sequence of events is emphatic that the Mexica attempted to control access to fire's energy. As we saw earlier, the level of fear instilled in ordinary people was such that, apparently after the

⁴²⁷ *Florentine Codex*, Introductions, 2: 55. Brackets mine.

decree, ‘no one dare light a fire in secret, until four days later’.⁴²⁸ In this way, the Mexica reinforced the notion that provincial city-states were reliant on the protection and generosity of the capital Tenochtitlan.⁴²⁹ Bruce Trigger has argued that ‘the control of energy constitutes the most fundamental and universally recognized measure of political power’.⁴³⁰ Trigger’s theory is particularly relevant to the Xiuhmolpilli ceremonial sequence where fire, a crucial natural resource providing light and heat, was the most important element. During Xiuhmolpilli, fire was manipulated as propaganda. Emanating from Huitzilopochtli’s central temple, the flames reminded all the surrounding towns and villages of their dependence on the Mexica’s military power, resources and benevolence. However, we should remember that fire was not merely of practical value to the Mexica and their dependent neighbours. In Nahua culture, fire was closely associated with ancient domestic deities such as Huehuateotl and Chantico. However, in Xiuhmolpilli it came directly not from the home or even from a fire-related deity, but from the all-powerful, all-conquering Huitzilopochtli, god of warfare and of the sun. In this ceremony, fire symbolised Mexica power and it moved across the landscape to demonstrate their military reach.

We must be careful not to go along with the elite-created sources and ignore the capacity of ordinary Nahuas to accept, reject or modify the ritual protocol. The sources — as colonial, elite-created products — do not allow insights into deviations from what seems to have been a scripted performance. People may well have been intimidated by demands to extinguish their hearths and the sources are indeed emphatic that fires lay cold during *nemontemi* and were only relit after the ceremony was completed. For the Mexica, strong social and communal pressure, coupled with their universal education system, meant that it was highly likely that ordinary

⁴²⁸ Durán, *History*, p. 445.

⁴²⁹ This is an interesting idea given evidence which suggests that the opposite. A theory exists that, by the latter years of the Aztec Empire, the population of Tenochtitlan was so disproportionately large that, arguably, it was reliant on external tribute to sustain its swollen number.

⁴³⁰ Bruce G. Trigger, ‘Monumental Architecture: A Thermodynamic Explanation of Symbolic Behavior’, *World Archaeology*, 22.2 (1990), p. 128.

people would conform. However, while people are likely to have complied, we cannot assess whether such demands would have bred resentment or disquiet among the populace. We cannot assume *a priori* that, just because it seems they complied wholeheartedly with the requirements of the ritual, their participation was enthusiastic and willing. Every stage of the participation of ordinary people was characterised by aesthetic performances. While we characterise the extinguishing of fires and smashing of pots as early ‘domestic’ activity, in fact these acts were fairly public as people discarded objects outside of their homes, often in the group patio. In this way, the Xiuhmolpilli ritual process corresponds to Bloch’s idea of ‘highly formalized situation’, whereby confrontation or subversion risks such unthinkable consequences that participants are left with little alternative but to either participate fully or risk rejecting it entirely.⁴³¹ In the Nahua context, retribution for incorrect ritual practice was thought to have come about from several sources. The most important were supernatural forces which had not been appeased. The desired consequence of Xiuhmolpilli was the continuation of time itself. Should all not participate correctly and collectively, time might have ended. However, these ideas also brought about human pressures. It is not difficult to imagine that friends and neighbours would have encouraged, and admonished, each other to perform the rituals dramatically and purposefully. The Mexica administration adopted these rituals and gave them state ritual trappings, choreography and symbolism in order to tie their political power to successful natural forces.

In spite of Xiuhmolpilli’s imaginative and physical dynamism, certain scholars remain wedded to the idea that the centralised, fixed, ritual stages were the most important. Carrasco’s interpretation of this ceremony, for example, heavily emphasises the importance of the Templo Mayor. He suggests that his ‘a-centric’ art-historical method, which scrutinises minor details,

⁴³¹ Maurice Bloch, ‘Symbols, Song, Dance, and Features of Articulation: Is Religion an Extreme Form of Traditional Authority?’, *European Journal of Sociology*, Faith and Power, 15 (1974), pp. 59-60; see also Inomata, ‘Plazas, Performers, and Spectators’, p. 808.

to understand a whole picture.⁴³² The ‘minor’ details on which Carrasco hones in are, first, the authority of Moctezuma and second, the centrality of Templo Mayor. While he is adamant that his approach deliberately focuses ‘not on the most obvious characteristics’, such a methodology retains attention on the Mexica’s ruler and the central cult at the expense of any consideration for local temples or non-elite actors. He suggests that Motecuhzoma’s decree regarding the name of the sacrificial victim slain at Huixachtlan and the return of the fire to the Templo Mayor might ‘provide a clue to the underlying social and symbolic purpose of the ritual’.⁴³³ Carrasco argues that these ‘minor details’ represented, in fact, important threads which wove through the entire ceremony but have remained unappreciated because they were obscured in the sources: ‘These threads are the flow of Moctezuma’s authority through all aspects of the ritual and the presence of the Templo Mayor as the axis mundi of the New Fire Ceremony [Xiuhmolpilli]’.⁴³⁴ Carrasco concludes that ‘the spatial focus of the New Fire Ceremony... concentrates on the Templo Mayor’.⁴³⁵

First, his focus on individual details without necessary context obscures the many different people who acted in a myriad of different ritual settings and fails to grasp the complex meanings of this ceremony. While, as I have discussed previously, the ceremony of Xiuhmolpilli was a critical moment for the Mexica state’s legitimacy and its *tlahtoani*’s political position, this was by no means the only meaning. Although elite control was an important feature of the process, distinguishing their actions as representative of the entire

⁴³² Carrasco, ‘Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor’, p. 139. This type of analysis, the ‘Morelli’ method, was used by nineteenth-century historian Giovanni Morelli to detect forgeries. Rather than focusing on the notable features of the paintings (which were well-known and could be learned) the art historian homed in on inconsequential details. See also, Carlos Ginzberg, ‘Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and the Scientific Method’, in *The Sign of Three, Dupin, Holmes, Pierce* (Bloomington, 1983); Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 13-16.

⁴³³ Carrasco, ‘Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor’, p. 139.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

ceremony ignores the powerful roles played by ordinary people as active participants and witnesses to the drama.

Secondly, I strongly dispute Carrasco's suggestion that the Templo Mayor was intended as Xiuhmolpilli's central stage when the only ritual action to take place there was the relighting of Huitzilopochtli's braziers after the ritual sacrifice. In fact, the focal, sacrificial act — arguably the most important moment of the festival — occurs some distance away from Tenochtitlan's ceremonial precinct at Huixachtecatl's mountain shrine, a 'peripheral' location. If the intention was to focus on the Templo Mayor as a ritual stage then why was the human sacrifice — the festival's climactic moment — not performed there but several kilometres away at a different (smaller) temple instead? Moving the sacrifice away from the ceremonial precinct at Tenochtitlan required great physical effort on the part of the fire priests, the ten-kilometre walk ended with a steep climb to a relatively inaccessible temple at Huixachtecatl. It was deliberate and purposeful. The Templo Mayor, in fact, features remarkably little in the Xiuhmolpilli process, if we pay close attention to the sources. In the most comprehensive version of this ceremony, in Book Seven of the *Florentine Codex*, the great temple remains unmentioned until the moment when fire priests return to light the fire brazier at Huitzilopochtli's shrine after the sacrifice, in the third chapter of the account.⁴³⁶ Xiuhmolpilli is also represented pictorially in the important *Codex Borbonicus*. This festival is represented in a single folio and the representative depiction of the entire ceremony is the procession to Huixachtlan, and the drawing of the new fire in the centre of the mountain-top temple. The Templo Mayor does not feature in this 'Aztec' representation.

Lastly, Carrasco suggests that the authority of Moctezuma and the Templo Mayor as the spatial centre of Xiuhmolpilli have remained underappreciated in analyses of this ceremony

⁴³⁶ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 11: 29.

because they were ‘partially hidden’ in the colonial sources.⁴³⁷ But why would this be the case? As we know, elite Mexica men (who may have even witnessed the Xiuhmolpilli of 1507, the last one before the Spanish conquest) influenced the compilation of some of the colonial accounts; why would they downplay the power and authority of their leader in one of their most remarkable and exceptional ceremonies? Similarly, why would they obscure the centrality of their supposedly greatest temple? As we see in accounts of their military conquests, the Mexica were more than capable of promoting, and even in certain cases overstating, the nature of their power. Moreover, any Xiuhmolpilli-related activity at the Templo Mayor would have been most visible and notable to those who could not catch sight of the mountain-top sacrifice at Huixachtecatl, it would be unlikely to have been forgotten or ‘hidden’ in the source accounts. In this way, I am unconvinced that the Templo Mayor was the underappreciated central ritual stage for Xiuhmolpilli which Carrasco presents.

Carrasco’s extraordinary emphasis on the Mexica’s central ceremonial precinct and *tlahtoani*, in the face of sources which clearly emphasise other aspects, exemplifies the scholarly bias towards monumental, ‘central’ entities and actors at the expense of a more nuanced, precise interpretation which incorporates the reality and meaning of the sacred landscape which was explored, displayed and perhaps even manipulated during the festival. Rather than overstating the importance of the Templo Mayor (which actually played, I suggest, a remarkably minor role this state-sponsored festival), we must look instead towards the importance of Huixachtlan, on the so-called ‘periphery’. The Mexica elite’s decision to displace Xiuhmolpilli’s human sacrificial phase was an astute political move; a deliberate and

⁴³⁷ Carrasco, ‘Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor’, p. 139.

purposeful exploitation of the importance of mountains in the Nahua worldview, it is also asserted dominance over the recently subjugated city-state of Colhuacan.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁸ Colhuacan was an extremely important *altepetl* with which Tenochtitlan had an interesting history. This city was supposed to have been settled by the artistic Toltecs as their first settlement in the Valley of Mexico. When the Mexica had settled at Lake Tetzaco, they legitimised their political dominance by marrying into the royal house of Colhuacan. Susan Gillespie is the authority on Mexica dynastic political manoeuvrings. See: Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings*, pp. 19-21. See also Lori Boornazian Diel, 'Till Death Do Us Part: Unconventional Marriages as Aztec Political Strategy', *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 18 (2007), pp. 259-72.

The Xiuhmolpilli of 1507, an exceptional festival?

‘because it was always a difficult year for them, Motecuzoma changed it to two reeds’.
Codex Telleriano-Remensis, fols 41r-42v.

The 1507 celebration of Xiuhmolpilli has been analysed in depth with reference to its internal choreography, its dynamic display and purpose. So far, I have been emphasising ritual participation across social groups and geographical space with a view to arguing that Xiuhmolpilli was a ceremony which activated the landscape as a ritual space. We have also explored the issue of the sources and whether or not they can provide information on universal conformity. In this section, we will change our focus to explore ritual flexibility as there exists strong evidence that in 1507 Xiuhmolpilli was being celebrated in different ways to previous years. Central to my contention that we should locate Nahua ritual within specific historic conditions, we will consider the ways in which this particular festival evolved and had been adapted to suit contemporary conditions. By placing this Xiuhmolpilli within the specific conditions of the moment, this section will take us a step further to transforming our understanding of Nahua ritual as being sensitive and adaptable to political, social and ecological conditions, among other imperatives.

The number of Xiuhmolpilli festivals which took place over the course of Mexica history is debatable. The evidence for before 1507 is particularly difficult because of the paucity of records. In addition to the colonial destruction of pre-Hispanic records, the Mexica themselves destroyed and rewrote their mythical history when they threw off their Tepanec overlords in 1428. They then began imperial expansion under their fourth *tlahtoani* Itzcohuatl (r. 1428-1440) and wanted to promote themselves as a legitimate political power. Their previous, ‘barbarous’

history as a wandering tribe was incompatible with their new imperial ambitions. In this way, there is a lack of reliable evidence for the early pre-Hispanic years.

In keeping with the traditional scholarly position on Mexica ritual as inevitably sequential and inflexible, Hassig analyses several sources and deduces that the Mexica celebrated eight ‘New Fire Ceremonies’:⁴³⁹ 1143, 1195, 1247, 1299, 1351, 1403, 1455, 1507, at neat 52-year intervals.⁴⁴⁰ However, this timetable overlooks evidence that Xiuhmolpilli was, in fact, publicly celebrated at other times: most notably, at the foundation of Tenochtitlan in 1325 (the Mexica year 2 *calli*) and the dedication of the Templo Mayor in 1487 (8 *acatl*) under eighth *tlahtoani* Ahuizotl (r. 1486-1502), predecessor of Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin, the ruler who greeted Hernando Cortes.⁴⁴¹ This section will reach back beyond the 1507 Xiuhmolpilli to scrutinise the evidence that there was a change in the location and scale of the 1507 celebration. Can we say that Xiuhmolpilli had changed over time? If so, in what ways? Was the 1507 celebration described by Sahagun an exceptional festival? A conclusion that 1507 was indeed an exceptional, or at least transformed, Xiuhmolpilli will provide strong support for the notion that Nahua rituals were fluid, flexible and adaptable. This in turn will disconnect these people from understandings that they were caught in perpetual, unstinting ritualism.

Codex Telleriano-Remensis is particularly important to this section and therefore requires some introduction at this stage. This is a tripartite sixteenth-century pictorial document. Its first section is dedicated to the *veintena* ritual cycle; the second section is a *tonalamatl* (divinatory almanac of the day-signs); and the third section — the most important for this chapter — are annals which displays events between 1197 and 1563. Some colonial codices (such as the

⁴³⁹ This is the name often applied to Xiuhmolpilli by Anglophone scholars. See Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*; Elson and Smith, ‘Archaeological Deposits from the Aztec New Fire Ceremony’, pp. 157-74.

⁴⁴⁰ Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, pp. 45, 176 n. 73.

⁴⁴¹ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 39r; Sahagun, *Primeros Memoriales*, p. 187; also Hassig, *Time, History, Belief*, p. 180, n. 45.

Borbonicus) adhered to pre-Hispanic writing customs so closely that they were long considered to have been of pre-contact origin.⁴⁴² However, no such debate is possible for the *Telleriano-Remensis*. With twenty-five sheets of European paper folded in half to be read as a book — from left to right — the form of *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* is decidedly European. Unfortunately, there is no record of how, why or exactly when this composite pictorial came into being, although several scholars have attempted to pin down its city of origin. Eloise Quiñones-Keber studied the codex’s internal evidence for her important 1995 facsimile and argues convincingly that it was probably begun in Mexico City and completed in the nearby city of Puebla.⁴⁴³ She identifies friar Pedro de los Ríos as the principal compiler and commentator of *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*. The third section of *Telleriano-Remensis* — the historical chronicle — is particularly important as it allows us to detect change over time in the celebration of Xiuhmolpilli. As a sequence which displays activities within linear time, it allows us to discern differences between the years. Other sources we have been analysing, such as *Codex Borbonicus*, are particularly useful for displaying the ritual activity of one specific year (1507), but do not permit analysis of variation unless compared with another source. In this way, the *Telleriano-Remensis* is crucial to assessing the exceptional nature of 1507 Xiuhmolpilli.

The most notable development in the way that Xiuhmolpilli was celebrated was the displacement of the central human-sacrificial performance to a new temple, constructed at Motecuhzoma Xoyoctzin’s behest, at the summit of Mount Huixachtlan.⁴⁴⁴ Evidence from the pictorial *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* and Tezozomoc’s *Crónica Mexicana* suggest that before

⁴⁴² See the ‘Sources, Perspectives and Methodology’ section for my discussion of *Codex Borbonicus* and other important sources.

⁴⁴³ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, p. 128. Quiñones-Keber investigates in depth the many different theories concerning the codex’s provenance, see *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, pp. 127-32.

⁴⁴⁴ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 42r; Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, 1: 289.

1507 this dramatic phase of the ritual had been confined to Tenochtitlan's ceremonial precinct.⁴⁴⁵

Shift to Huixachtecatl

Careful examination of *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* reveals a dramatic increase in the size of the festival, and a change its location, between the celebrations of 1455 and 1507 [see figures 25 and 26]. By the Xiuhmolpilli of 1507, the sacrificial action took place some ten miles across Lake Tetzoco, close to Colhuacan.⁴⁴⁶ Huixachtecatl ('the place of thorns'⁴⁴⁷) was some ten miles southeast of Tenochtitlan's ceremonial precinct, at the Templo del Fuego Nuevo (the Temple of the New Fire).⁴⁴⁸ This mountain-top temple was supposedly built in the years between 1455 and 1507 celebrations. Evidence suggests that Motecuhzoma Xoyocotl (Mexica *tlahtoani* from 1502 to 1520) ordered that this temple be built of the Xiuhmolpilli celebrations of 1507.⁴⁴⁹

What evidence is there for this movement? The section of the codex under analysis usually displays three years per folio with red and blue year glyphs appearing at the top. Under each year glyph are painted the events considered important enough to be included, in a sort of

⁴⁴⁵ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 32v; *Crónica Mexicana*, 318-20; Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, pp. 47, 85-97.

⁴⁴⁶ Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, p. 332; *Codex Chimalpahin*, vol. 1, pp. 191, 193, 199, 221; vol. 2, pp. 25, 27; *Codex Chimalpopoca*, pp. 43, 77, 107, 121; *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fols 32v, 42r, pp. 217, 229; Durán, *History*, pp. 445-46; *Florentine Codex*, 7: chaps 9- 12; Motolinía, *History*, pp. 112-13.

⁴⁴⁷ Karttunen, *Analytical Dictionary*, p. 91.

⁴⁴⁸ Hereafter, I will use the term 'Templo del Fuego Nuevo' when referring to the entirety of the ceremonial architecture which is located at the summit of this mountain: the base, the platform and the plaza as a whole. I refer to each feature individually where relevant. Huixachtecatl is now known in Spanish as the Cerro de la Estrella ('the Hill of the Star') and is subsumed by the metropolis of Mexico City, lying in the Delegación de Itzapalapa.

⁴⁴⁹ See *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 42r and p. 229; Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, I, p. 289. It is interesting to note that Chimalpahin (1965: 201, 229) records a celebration of Xiuhmolpilli at Huixachtecatl in 1455 and 1507.

vertical ‘column’. For the folio 32v denoting 2 Acatl (in this case, 1455) we note the red and blue year glyph in the top left, the two dots signifying the number and the reed glyph denoting the *acatl* (reed) year-bearer. As we remember, reed years were enduringly positive. Immediately below, we notice the brown Xiuhmolpilli glyph: a smoking fireboard. The six budding plants painted below the fireboard indicate that the drought of the previous year 1 *tochtli* (1454) had ended. The Spanish annotation of this folio confirms this: ‘year 2 Reed and of 1455 was fertile and therefore they paint the green branches’.⁴⁵⁰ An examination of the folio for 2 Reed (1507) reveals an important change in the way that Xiuhmolpilli was celebrated during the period when the Mexica grew in political dominance. On this crowded folio, a 2 Acatl glyph is visible, again on the top left-hand side, denoting 1507. Importantly, in this depiction the Xiuhmolpilli fireboard glyph no longer appears as a separate entity, but is attached to the base of an impressive temple structure which does not feature in the 1455 illustration. This depicts Xiuhmolpilli occurring at the newly constructed temple at Mount Huixachtlan. In her facsimile edition of *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, Quiñones-Keber points out that the sprouting *huisache* plant indicates that this was indeed Huixachtecatl. No such plant is discernable on the simple drawing from 1455.⁴⁵¹ Between 1455 and 1507, the Mexica elites (and probably Motecuhzoma himself) decided to move the ceremony from the centre of Tenochtitlan in order to emphasise their growing militarism and power.

⁴⁵⁰ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 32v. This is my translation, the original Spanish is: ‘año de dos cañas y de 1455 fue fertil y así pintan los ramos verdes’.

⁴⁵¹ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, p. 229.



Figure 25: Xiuhmolpilli, 1455
 Codex Telleriano-Remensis, fol. 32v.



Figure 26: Xiuhmolpilli, 1507
Codex Telleriano-Remensis, fol. 42r.

The shift to Huixachtecatl is discernible archaeologically as a large temple base still sits at the top of this small mountain outside Mexico City. This architectonic complex comprises a platform, plaza and a base which supports the temple and a structure named the Western Terrace . On top of the platform lies the plaza and pyramid base — the setting for the ceremonies — where an altar was surrounded by a parapet.⁴⁵²



Figure 27: Huixachtecatl in the present-day
Photograph: Harriet Smart

At the base of the structure, the exposed walls clearly show three sequential construction stages.⁴⁵³ Indeed, there has been a man-made structure at the summit of Huixachtecatl since the Epiclassic period (650-1000 CE), when the Coyotlatelca (Toltec ancestors) laid the groundwork for a temple structure.⁴⁵⁴ This rudimentary structure evolved over time. While the

⁴⁵² ATCA, 8.390, p. 5.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.* See also Miguel Pérez Negrete, 'El templo del fuego nuevo en el Huixachtécatl (Cerro de la Estrella), Tesis profesional (Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2005).

⁴⁵⁴ ATCA, 8.478, Tomo VII, pp. 11, 22 and 54.

structure initially exhibits three phases, fieldwork in 2003 identified that the temple base was constructed in five stages.⁴⁵⁵ These investigations determined that the foundations were paved, elaborated and work first began on a platform to sit on top of the base during the Early Culhuacán phase (950-1100 CE). Apart from an apparent levelling of the paving some years later, there was no further construction at the Templo del Fuego Nuevo until the Mexica extended the paving at the platform for the 1507 Xiuhmolpilli celebration.⁴⁵⁶

In his discussion of the Templo del Fuego Nuevo, Ross Hassig concludes that ‘as the surviving ruins are quite modest, this appears to have been the first permanent temple and not the elaboration of an existing one’.⁴⁵⁷ But, Hassig’s interpretations rely on his own impressions of the site rather than not on empirical data. My own visit to the Templo del Fuego Nuevo (figure) confirmed that the remains are rather simple and unelaborate, although the structure is fairly large. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to base conclusions on sight alone. As I have shown above, we must compare the physical remains with the results of detailed archaeological research which is not immediately or necessarily visible at first glance. It is clear that this is an ancient temple which was elaborated over least five phases of construction by different ethnic groups over centuries.⁴⁵⁸ Even more importantly, unpublished archaeological evidence confirms that ceremonies involving fire took place at Huixachtlan’s summit for thousands of years before the Mexica rose to prominence in the Valley of Mexico. Archaeologist Raúl Arana uncovered burnt earth combined with carbon, ash and fragments of ceramics to form a crude altar on the bedrock, under the base of the Templo del Fuego Nuevo. Analysis of the shards

⁴⁵⁵ ATCA, 8.478, Tomo VII, p. 54.

⁴⁵⁶ It has been claimed that the temple was built explicitly on the orders of Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin. I can find no alphabetic or pictorial evidence that the *tlahtoani* ordered it directly, although it seems plausible that he did.

⁴⁵⁷ Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, p. 47; Chimalpahin, pp. 201, 229. Chimalpahin is highly unusual in having written that four Xiuhmolpilli were celebrated at Huixachtecatl, in 1351, 1403, 1455 and 1507.

⁴⁵⁸ ATCA, 8.390, p. 5.

revealed them to correspond to the Middle to Late Preclassic or Formative period (950 BCE–200 CE).⁴⁵⁹ These findings substantiate that, over a thousand years before the rise of the Mexica, Huixachtlan was a place of sacred significance. Not only did it play host to ritual activity, but fires blazed on a man-made pyramid structure. Within this understanding, the Mexica's decision to move their exceptional festival to the mountain is revealed. This movement would be interesting just for the fact that it demonstrates that Mexica ritual could be physical adaptable. However, archaeological evidence allows us to go further than simply noting ritual flexibility; in this case, we have evidence that this change was made in order to capitalise on pre-existing sacred connotations of this mountain. In moving the ceremony to Huixachtlan, the Mexica were linking their own dramatic ritual choreography to ancient activities.

The activities which were moved to Huixachtlan were the most important for the legitimacy and power of the state. Prior to this celebration, the sacrifice and fire drilling had been restricted to Tenochtitlan's enclosed ceremonial precinct. This meant that, by 1507, this phase had a larger, more watchful audience as it could be seen not just by the Mexica inhabitants of Tenochtitlan but by those in surrounding city-states, towns and villages. As I argued, the early phases of Xiuhmolpilli tipped the balance of the cosmic landscape dangerously in favour of what has been termed an 'apocalyptic view' of the world. The public sacrifice was, therefore, the fulcrum on which the success of the entire festival relied. Although Xiuhmolpilli was a process, each phase playing an essential role in the festival's choreography, it was the victim's immolation which unequivocally confirmed the calendar transition and displayed the power of the state to control time and the stars. The sacrifice and the burning of the body had to happen successfully and publicly to have any meaning or significance. It would have been awkward, to say the least, for this part of the festival to have failed. The priests' public sacrificial action had triple meaning: it ensured the success of this individual festival,

⁴⁵⁹ ATCA, 8.478, Tomo VII, p. 5.

the legitimacy of the Mexica state, and the continuation of the Nahuatl world. With commoners straining to see below, the fragile choreography of the scene — the transition of the stars, the victim's death and the successful drilling of fire — provided an unpredictable setting for the renewal and reinforcement of elite Mexica power.⁴⁶⁰ This tripartite sequence demonstrated the constructive relationship between natural forces and human activity which was considered necessary to redress the cosmic equilibrium. If the Tianquitzli constellation did not cross the sky at the expected moment or if the fire did not catch hold in the corpse, Xiuhmolpilli would not have been correctly performed, a cosmic imbalance would precipitate the end of the Fifth Sun and the state would have been humiliated and irretrievably weakened. Given the weight of this moment, it must be considered hugely significant that the Mexica elite were willing, in 1507, to transfer this activity within sight of most important city-states in the Valley of Mexico,⁴⁶¹ most notably the recently conquered, recalcitrant Chalca city-states which were only incorporated into the empire in 1464.⁴⁶² Thus we see both the Mexica appropriation of existing tradition and the deliberate deployment of the sacrificial cult for propaganda.

The movement of the human sacrifice from Tenochtitlan to Huixachtlan also had broader significance. While capitalising on Huixachtatl itself as a site of sacred significance relating to fire, the displacement of the ritual to a temple resting on a summit was also significant due to the importance placed on peaks in Nahuatl thought.⁴⁶³ With their religion predicated on the agricultural cycle, Nahuatl rituals petitioning for rain often took place on mountains as rain fell

⁴⁶⁰ Kay Read, 'Sacred Commoners', pp. 39-69.

⁴⁶¹ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 10: 28; *Florentine Codex* 4: Appendix: 143-44.

⁴⁶² Chimalpahin, pp. 92, 96, 101, 192-193, 198-99, Durán, *History*, pp. 110-11, 119-22, 125-31; Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, p. 150; Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 1: 200, 202-3, 207, 209, 226-27.

⁴⁶³ For the Templo Mayor as a physical manifestation of the Mexica worldview, see Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, *The Great Temple of the Aztecs: Treasures of Tenochtitlan* (London, 1988), pp. 130-35.

from the mist surrounding the peaks.⁴⁶⁴ As we shall see in the next chapter, the Templo Mayor itself was constructed as a replica of the mythical mountain Coatepec where the Mexica had rested during their legendary migration southwards from Aztlan. Hassig speculates at length that the move to the mountain was made in order to improve alignment between the sacrificial action and the constellation zenith which signaled a successful calendrical transition, ‘Moving the New Fire ceremony to the top of the hill of Huixachtatl... would produce a truer zenith passage of time than that available from the Great Temple’.⁴⁶⁵ While this could be one of the motivations for moving this phase of Xiuhmolpilli, I suggest that moving this dramatic display of sacrifice right out into, and above, sections of recalcitrant territory would have afforded the Mexica elite much political capital. To my mind, this was a practical rather than mythical decision. Although of course, these factors were not mutually exclusive. In the Nahuas’ interconnected world, a stronger association with the natural world would likely have reinforced power. Furthermore, the construction of a temple would have required the laboured movement of a significant amount of stone and involved significant, lengthy physical exertion. In this case, Dennis Ogburn’s theory regarding the Inka of Tawantinsuyu,⁴⁶⁶ that ‘elites of early empires... exhibit large-scale expenditure of labor for nonutilitarian purposes to reinforce their power over their subjects’ is applicable to the Mexica case.⁴⁶⁷ The construction phase, and the subsequent impressive sacrificial ritual were grand, and enduring, exhibitions of Mexica power. It was inevitable that those living in city-states close to Mount Huixachtlan would witness the Mexica prestige. The location of rituals held important, enduring meaning. As the Mexica

⁴⁶⁴ Johanna Broda, ‘The Sacred Landscape of Aztec Calendar Festivals: Myth, Nature, and Society’, in David Carrasco (ed.), *To Change Place: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes* (Niwt, 1991), p. 79-95; Richard Townsend, ‘The Mount Tlaloc Project’, pp. 26-30.

⁴⁶⁵ Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, p. 87.

⁴⁶⁶ Tawantinsuyu, meaning ‘the Four Regions’, is the Quechua name for the Inka Empire which dominated large parts of South America at the time of the Spanish conquest.

⁴⁶⁷ Dennis Ogburn, ‘Dynamic Display, Propaganda, and the Reinforcement of Provincial Power in the Inca Empire’, *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*, 14 (2005), pp. 225-39, here p. 228. Also, Dennis Ogburn, ‘Power in Stone: The Long-Distance Movement of Building Blocks in the Inca Empire’, *Ethnohistory*, 51.1 (2004), pp. 101-34.

manoeuvred Xiuhmolpilli, they were linking it to a pre-existing ritual stage. This highlights the importance of location and landscape as important components in the ritual drama. The sites contained physical and imaginative reminders of the sacred activities which had taken place within their boundaries. The actual ritual activity itself could be transient and short-lived. However, their infamous nature lived on within the stages. The temples, mountains and altars retained their sacred character and could remind participants and observers of previous sacrifices and other offerings.

Shift in timing

In addition to the physical movement of Xiuhmolpilli to a new location outside of Tenochtitlan, there was flexibility concerning its timing. As a festival signalling the transition between two calendar rounds, Xiuhmolpilli should have ‘bound’ 13 Calli to 1 Tochtli years. These were the last and first years in a calendar cycle, respectively. In this way, a Xiuhmolpilli should have been recorded under 1 Tochtli (1454) in the histories. However, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* shows that Xiuhmolpilli was shifted on a year. In fact, it took place in 2 Acatl (1455). It seems as though this was a permanent shift; the following ceremony also took place in 2 Acatl (our ceremony of 1507). Indeed, on the folio for 1 Tochtli (1506), the annotator remarks that ‘in this year they usually tied the years according to their count, and because it was always a difficult year, Motecuhzoma commanded 2 Reeds [1507]’.⁴⁶⁸ The famous *Codex Borbonicus* representation also shows Xiuhmolpilli taking place in 2 Acatl (1507). The reed year glyph is clearly visible on the top left-hand corner of the folio.

⁴⁶⁸ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 41v. This is my translation; the original Spanish is: ‘en este año se solian atar los años según su cuenta y por que siempre les hera año trabajoso, lamado Monteçuma dos cañas’.

Why move such an important ceremony which was based emphatically on the calendar cycle? The most prominent argument relates to ecological factors. Xiuhmolpilli was shifted, scholars such as Enrique Florescano have argued, to 2 Acatl because the usual, preceding, year of 1 Tochtli saw one of the worst famines to strike pre-Columbian America.⁴⁶⁹ Given the Nahuas' understanding of cyclical time, a celebration in the next 1 Tochtli year was undesirable and inappropriate.⁴⁷⁰ Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, such a celebration might have precipitated another famine. As we know, *tochtli* years were particularly unfavourable. The Mexica elite were responding to the ecological and political imperatives brought about by the implications of cyclical time. Not wishing to associate their festival of state glorification with a phase of natural disaster, the elites moved the ceremony to a more suitable moment. Another prominent theory suggests that the shift to 2 Acatl was undertaken in order to coincide with Huitzilopochtli's birth date.⁴⁷¹ As the Mexica patron, it was this deity's temple brazier which was markedly the first to be relit following the drawing of new fire in the victim's chest.⁴⁷² Associating Xiuhmolpilli their titular deity would have sent an unequivocal message of Mexica political and religious power to surrounding towns and villages.

There is significant scholarly debate surrounding this temporal shift. Hassig, for example, finds the 'bad harvest' theory unconvincing; he suggests that the effects of it would still have been felt in the subsequent months when Xiuhmolpilli was recorded to have been celebrated. He is more concerned with the physical displacement to Huixachtlan and conflates this change with the temporal shift:

⁴⁶⁹ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 41v, pp. 228-29; *Florentine Codex*, 12: 5-6; Enrique Florescano, *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico: from the Aztecs to Independence* (Austin, 1994), p. 28; Hassig, *Time, History and Belief*, p. 59.

⁴⁷⁰ *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, p. 229.

⁴⁷¹ Caso, *Los calendarios prehispánicos*, p. 135.

⁴⁷² Motolinía, *History*, p. 113.

When the Aztecs shifted the New Fire ceremony from the year 1 Tochtli to 2 Acatl, then, they also took advantage of that change to move the ceremony to a more socially conspicuous location that would produce a more accurate celestial timing for the event and simultaneously reinforce their political action with a supernatural justification would make it more acceptable to the populace and the priesthood.⁴⁷³

Hassig sits within the school of thought which emphasises the archaeoastronomical importance of Mexica ritual landscape. Within this understanding, rituals were moved in order to allow for structural alignment between constructed temples and natural forces. David Carrasco and Anthony Aveni have been strong proponents of this argument with their discussions of astral symbolism and the Templo Mayor.⁴⁷⁴

My own opinion on this contested matter is that Xiuhmolpilli was shifted on by a year because of the politically and ecological sensitivities associated with 1 Tochtli. While the archaeoastronomical ideas related to celestial timing are intriguing, they are tenuous as it is not clear which lines could be matched. I am not persuaded by them as they ignore the evidence of what the Mexicas themselves said about Xiuhmolpilli. All the evidence — particularly from *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* — refers back to the famine of 1 Tochtli and it seems blinkered to ignore these claims. The Nahuas were skilled astronomers and it seems that, if celestial timing *was* the reason, they would have made more of this in their accounts. If it was to create a truer astronomical alignment, why did they not say that? Whatever the reason for the timing, it is indisputable that the ceremony was shifted both in time and location. This underscores the principal argument of this study: that Nahua ceremonies, and even the calendar itself, were adaptable to external pressures. That even an exceptional festival which was supposed to bind

⁴⁷³ Hassig, *Time, History and Belief*, p. 87, see also p. 180, n. 45.

⁴⁷⁴ Carrasco, 'Star Gatherers and Wobbling Suns'; A. F. Aveni, E. E. Calnek, H. Hartung, 'Myth, Environment, and the Orientation of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan', *American Antiquity*, 53. 2 (1988), pp. 287-309.

two cycles together could be moved on by a year into the next cycle, is extremely telling about the flexibility of Nahua ritual.

With this in mind, just how were the Mexica elite able to get away with the temporal shift? If, as has been argued, Xiuhmolpilli provided the crucial, sustaining link between expired and current calendar cycles, how could it be moved? How could the elites justify the change? It is important to note the emphasis which all the accounts place on the influence of the elite class on Xiuhmolpilli. The performance, timing and nature of the public phases of the ceremony in 1507 were all decreed by an elite class of priests: ‘The elders who were in charge of these things advised Motecuhzoma that it was the year of the end of the cycle’.⁴⁷⁵ With this in mind, priests who governed and maintained the *xiuhpohualli* and *tonalpohualli* were able to manipulate the festival’s occurrence in accordance with the wishes of the Mexica *tlahtoani*. I suggest that the level of Mexica elite control exerted over ritual ceremony is crucial to understanding how it could have been moved with apparent facility. Moreover, it underscores that the drama of Xiuhmolpilli was a display of imperial power. The festival was integral to a calendar whose internal mechanisms were known largely only to elite priests and soothsayers who, as I argued in the first chapter, exerted impressive control over its use and interpretation. Ordinary people might not have their own personal schedule of rituals in mind, especially those which were sanctioned and decreed by the state. In this way, the ordinary men and women of Tenochtitlan would, perhaps, not have been conscious of their place in the march of time and would probably not have been aware of when exactly Xiuhmolpilli was meant to be celebrated. In this way, we see that in practice rituals could be flexible. However, this flexibility was not boundless or unlimited. In public, rituals certainly would have had to conform to those fixed

⁴⁷⁵ Durán, *History*, p. 445.

ideals in order to fulfil their purpose. However, behind the scenes, rituals could be adaptable — to a degree — at the behest of elite decision-makers.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the Mexica's manipulation of Xiuhmolpilli, the 'binding of years' festival, as an exhibition of their elite's political ideology. An exceptional series of ceremonial processes, this activity was decreed by a privileged class of 'wise men', shedding light on how the Mexica elite shrewdly deployed overwhelming demonstrations of their power throughout their vast territory. The suspension of the normal order of time took advantage of a widespread fear of darkness, which provoked anxiety in the minds of their vassals that their world was sure to end. In this way, darkness — fear of it, control of it — permits an interpretation of this ritual as an efficient and dynamic mechanism through which the Mexica displayed imperial control. It was in this manner that the Mexica manipulated their vassals' fatalistic worldview to achieve their imperial aims.

However, while this ceremony was coordinated by an elite class, ordinary people were not excluded from the action. In a significant departure from the existing scholarship concerning this ceremony, this chapter has demonstrated that ordinary men and women played active and important roles in the ceremony's success. I propose that, in the destruction of household utensils, people activated their own homes as ritual spaces and connected them to the outlying sacred landscape. In so doing, I have shown that the early phases of Xiuhmolpilli were not merely preparatory, but fundamental to the success of the latter stages and by extension, the entire festival.

Xiuhmolpilli was a dynamic festival in which many different actors participated with the aim of bringing about a calendar transition. Motecuhzoma himself, elite priests, swift warriors, ordinary fathers, mothers and even children were all involved in this ceremony in different ways. Every 'type' of person was an active participant. The elite priests and the valiant warriors were physically dynamic, saturating and tracing the landscape with their movement and the fire they carried to and from the mountain. Motecuhzoma's authority covered the entire ceremony with his selection of Xiuhtlamin, the sacrificial victim. Ordinary men and women kick started this ceremony by casting away all their worldly possessions and vigorously sweeping their living quarters, and they were just as involved in the public sacrifice. Intently watching the night sky for the signal, they were crucial actors in this drama. As the gazing throng stood waiting for the sign that the calendar transition had been successful, they held enormous power. In theory, this group could have accepted or rejected the transition. However, such a reaction would have been extremely unlikely. In the highly collective experience of life in Tenochtitlan, the cultural and social pressures to react appropriately — excitedly rejoicing — would probably have been intense. More important, then, was their presence at the Mexica elite performance of legitimation, charisma and power. While we have certainly seen that ritual spectators were active, critical participants, I suspect that social pressure was greater than any power for individual decision-making.

While the Mesoamerican 365-day year was clearly based on the earth's orbit of the sun and clearly governed the seasons, the 52-year cycle was an apparently artificial division of time, without foundation in a 'natural' cycle. This section has suggested that, by linking this 52-year period to a human sacrifice which followed to the successful appearance of a constellation, the celebrants gave the impression that this was a natural cycle which was endorsed by their deities. Inomata's suggestion for the classic Maya is as applicable to the Nahua context: 'The passage

of time was viewed not as monotonous or homogeneous but as punctuated by heightened emotional experiences of extraordinary events.⁴⁷⁶

This chapter makes an important contribution to my overall argument of ritual fluidity and adaptability by re-examining the evidence relating to changes in Xiuhmolpilli choreography between celebrations. Close scrutiny of unpublished archaeological evidence makes it clear that the Xiuhmolpilli of 1507 was markedly different to ones that had gone before. The examples of flexibility which I analysed — physical displacement, temporal shift, and increased scale — typify the diverse Nahua religious behaviour which remains underappreciated and underexplored by scholars in the field. The colonial narrative on which we rely often paints a static picture of formulaic ritual, caught in time and perpetuated by imitation. In this way, scholars have often hitherto discussed Nahua ritual within a ‘structural’ theoretical model, on the assumption that ritual practice was the precise and unchanging enactment of a set of fixed religious beliefs, which remained anachronistic. Within this paradigm, scholars have often tried to reconcile different accounts of the ‘same’ ritual into a prototypical version. My analysis clearly shows that Mexica rituals were not inert sequences but were susceptible to human influences and adaptable to prevailing conditions. With this in mind, I suggest that when thinking about Mexica ritual, a ‘practice-oriented’ approach which ‘emphasize[s] the experiential aspects of ritual and the effects of ritual on social relations between ritual participants’,⁴⁷⁷ might be particularly helpful in the analysis of different ritual experience between social groups of differing status. As has been explored above, we should interpret Aztec rituals as dynamic acts, directed by the agency of the individuals who performed them. It is not necessary, or helpful, to shoehorn a variety of versions into one generic account.

⁴⁷⁶ Inomata, ‘Plazas, Performers, and Spectators’, p. 809.

⁴⁷⁷ Fogelin, ‘The Archaeology of Religious Ritual’, p. 58.

I contend that, far from being unchanging rites presented without thought or agenda, Aztec rituals could be adapted to suit the socio-political conditions of the time.

As an essential part of the Mexica way of life, human sacrifice was not restricted to temples or ceremonial precincts. Indeed, the spectre of a sacrificial death overshadowed every life and dramatically affected domestic ritualism (a point which is developed further in the final chapter). The sequential phases of the dramatic, public, state-sponsored ceremony of Xiuhmolpilli exemplify the principles which underpinned Nahua ritual behaviour across the sacred landscape. While clearly each person had their own rituals in their own spaces, we cannot dissociate the activity of the home or patio from the temple or the mountain; the interconnectedness of the Nahua world meant that these *loci* of ritual were mutually enforcing. Here, I hark back to the quotation which opened this section: ‘we cannot adequately understand the ordinary without considering its dialectic relation with the extraordinary’.⁴⁷⁸ This study will show that, here in the Nahua world, what happened in the home and on the mountain had consequences for what happened in the temple.

⁴⁷⁸ Inomata, ‘Plazas, Performers, and Spectators’, p. 809.

IV

CASE STUDY 2: CONSTRUCTED AND NATURAL LANDSCAPES IN A PUBLIC FESTIVAL, HUEY TOZOZTLI

As we have seen, Nahua ceremonies were wide-ranging performances which moved around cities and out into the countryside. They involved ordinary people in their houses and neighbourhoods, the *tlahtoani* in his palace and sacrificial priests who probably felt the sanguine duty most heavily. Building on this understanding, this chapter will use Xiuhmolpilli and the *veintena* festivals Huey Tozoztli and Tlacaxipehualiztli to show how the urban and natural environments provided important stages for ritual performance. Investigating the natural environment as a ritual stage is difficult, given the chroniclers' focus on pyramids and temples. In this respect, the concept of 'sacred landscape' provides an important point of entry, allowing us to move beyond Eurocentric ideas of the natural world as a static backdrop to human activity. Instead, I look to cast the natural world as an active participant in ritual experiences. Such an approach rests on the Nahuas' understanding of their human position as playing a supportive part to a larger cosmological whole. The interdependency with which Nahuas viewed their fragile existence with the natural world meant they understood features such as caves, rivers and mountains to be active entities in need of veneration. Moreover, this approach requires a deeper understanding of how rituals felt to the Nahuas. This chapter, therefore, uses sensory theories of synaesthesia to grapple with how Nahuas physically experienced ritual processes. In so doing, this chapter will take us a step further away from the Templo Mayor and other official structures, arguing that, from the Nahuas' perspective, the natural environment could be just as important to ritual choreography. This approach advances the core argument of this study that Nahua ceremonial practices were variable, flexible and

dynamic, and were not restricted to public displays of human sacrifice in Tenochtitlan's temple precinct.

In discussing the sacred landscape as a ritual actor, I follow in the tradition of David Carrasco, Johanna Broda, Anthony Aveni and Doris Heyden who have used ideas of sacred space by theorists of ritual such as Paul Wheatley and Victor Turner.⁴⁷⁹ The important collection, *To Change Place*, cast the environment as an important part of the Nahua ritual experience and therefore contributed much to our understanding of their ceremonial landscapes. Most importantly, it emphasised how Nahua ritual celebrants affected their environment as 'priests, warriors, rulers, and commoners changed social and symbolic place through movement and ritual action'.⁴⁸⁰ However, I disagree with this position as it casts the landscape as a passive scene which was acted *upon*. In his discussion of Tlacaxipehualiztli, Carrasco explains sacred landscape as constituting 'a worldview in which spatial order and transformations of spatial order (local and regional) are dynamic and fluid and constantly reinvigorated and legitimated through a series of ritual performances'.⁴⁸¹ Elsewhere, Johanna Broda also argues that the dynamic sacred landscape was activated during the *veintena* cycle.⁴⁸² I would go a step further than Carrasco and Broda who argue the natural environment was a recipient of human action. I wonder whether features of the sacred landscape had, conversely, also have had the potential to affect the ritual activity to which it played host. In examining the springtime festival Huey Tozoztli, this section will suggest that the natural world was a far more active, influencing ritual actor than has so far been discussed.

⁴⁷⁹ David Carrasco, 'Introduction: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes', in David Carrasco (ed.), *To Change Place: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes* (Niwot, 1991), p. xx; Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* (Chicago, 1971).

⁴⁸⁰ Carrasco, 'Introduction' in *To Change Place*, p. xv.

⁴⁸¹ Carrasco, 'Give me some skin', p. 3.

⁴⁸² Broda, 'The Sacred Landscape of Aztec Calendar Festivals', pp. 74-120.

As I have discussed, it has been assumed that the Templo Mayor was the most important religious centre of the entire Triple Alliance Empire.⁴⁸³ But, was this the case for the millions of peasants who fell under this political sway? The notion of an active sacred landscape is a useful way to test this idea. Here, I will challenge traditional understandings of Nahua religiosity which have positioned the temple-top public sacrificial moment as exemplary of their ritual practices. In fact, the moment of sacrifice, while clearly significant, was often (as we have seen) but one of a series of stages which gave meaning and purpose to an entire ceremony. Carrasco, using the example of Tlacaxipehualiztli, highlights the inadequacy of casting the sacrificial moment as a bookend which simply produced or completed a ceremony.⁴⁸⁴ He argues that interpretations based on this approach will be confined to the perspectives of the elites.⁴⁸⁵ This issue is compounded by the colonial context within which the sources were produced. As has been discussed in the methodological section, it was the (male) elites of Mexica society who were allowed to tell their stories to the European friars and they largely spoke of other noble people and their activities. Our tenuous link to the pre-Hispanic past is further constrained by the elitist, androcentric sources, meaning that many different sections of Nahua society have been left underexplored. Analyses of ritual practices must take into account the varying experiences of ceremonial participants, or we risk merely reproducing a picture which disproportionately emphasises the elite priest. In the words of Carrasco, we must ‘change perspective from that of the priest to that of the observer, deity impersonator, mother carrying child, teenager in the street, or novice in training’.⁴⁸⁶ I suggest that we push a step further than even Carrasco suggests in reorienting our perspective. Rather than simply

⁴⁸³ Carrasco, ‘Myth, Cosmic Terror and the Templo Mayor’, p. 138; Matos Moctezuma, ‘The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan: History and Interpretation’, p. 57.

⁴⁸⁴ The famous ‘Feast of the Flaying of Men’ which was the second *veintena* in the cycle. This is an outstanding ceremony for its shocking brutality. I compare this ceremony to Xiuhmolpilli later in this chapter.

⁴⁸⁵ Carrasco, ‘Give me some skin’, p. 26.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

listing celebrants inside Tenochtitlan, my study seeks to uncover what ceremonies *meant* for different types of people in different spaces and locations. This chapter considers the importance and variation in the use of sacred landscape in the imperial core before the next chapter moves fully towards the provinces to assess what Xiuhmolpilli might have meant for its inhabitants.

The Nahuas understood themselves to be living in the age of the fifth sun, in a world composed of three sections which sat on a vertical axis: a nine-part celestial level, a terrestrial layer of the living and a three-part underworld below.⁴⁸⁷ The ancient Mesoamericans' understanding, and recreation, of this fundamental cosmological principle is routinely discussed by scholars, as we have seen in discussions regarding the structure of the Templo Mayor.⁴⁸⁸ However, away from formal public architecture, the Nahuas' appreciation of their world order was keenly reproduced in their appreciation and veneration of the environment when it was transformed into a ritual stage. As I have discussed, the ritual cycle was linked to the seasons and it is clear that the Nahuas recognised they existed at the mercy of their natural environment, which they appeased through their deities. But, this anxiety also motivated the veneration of natural features themselves. A land of smouldering volcanoes, snowy peaks, creeping mist and thundering rain showers, it is not a stretch to imagine why the Mexica considered their land in need of worship and appeasement.⁴⁸⁹ It will be shown here that, rather than acting as a passive, but impressive, backdrop, the hills, springs and caves of central

⁴⁸⁷ *Florentine Codex*: 10: 29: 169; *Annals of Cuauhtitlan*, 4: 45. The number of layers of the cosmos is, however, contested by scholars due to conflicting sources, see Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, pp. 504-5.

⁴⁸⁸ For specific analysis of the relationship between 'Aztec' ceremonial architecture, sacred landscape and cosmology (understood as 'cosmovision'), see: Broda, 'The Sacred Landscape of Aztec Calendar Festivals' pp. 74-119; Carrasco (ed.), *To Change Place*. For interpretations from a broader 'Mesoamerican' perspective, see: Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*; Elizabeth P. Benson (ed.), *Mesoamerican Sites and World Views* (Washington, D.C., 1981); Richard Townsend (ed.), *The Ancient Americas Art from Sacred Landscapes* (Chicago, 1992), esp. pp. 29-48.

⁴⁸⁹ Nicholas J. Saunders and Elizabeth Baquedano, 'Introduction: Symbolizing Tezcatlipoca', in Elizabeth Baquedano (ed.), *Tezcatlipoca: Trickster and Supreme Deity* (Boulder, 2014), p. 5.

Mexico could affect ritual choreography. These activities paralleled the ancient Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula who worshipped their rain deity Chaac at sacred wells called *cenotes*.⁴⁹⁰ These features provided imaginative connections to alternative planes of existence and were, therefore, duly honoured. As Broda persuasively argues, ‘the point of departure was the observation of nature, and its basic motivation was control of the contradictory manifestations of natural phenomena’.⁴⁹¹ It was this fundamental pan-Mesoamerican ceremonial tradition which was built upon by the state-making Mexica and developed into a state cult based on human sacrifice.

The Landscape of the Templo Mayor

This section will demonstrate that the Nahuas used both constructed and natural spaces for their ceremonies. The Templo Mayor, the most notorious formal ritual pyramid in history, was itself, after all, a reconstruction of Coatepec (‘Snake Mountain’). This was the mountain where the Mexica supposedly camped during their lengthy migration from Aztlan. More importantly, as I explained in the introduction, Coatepec was Huitzilopochtli’s birthplace. Springing from Coatlicue’s womb, he attacked his rebellious sister Coyolxauhqui, pushing her off the mountain once she had been dismembered. The enormous, striking monolith — depicting a mutilated Coyolxauhqui — which was uncovered from the Templo Mayor’s ruins in 1978 is strong evidence that the Templo Mayor was an artificial mountain [see figure 6].

⁴⁹⁰ *Cenote*, a Spanish word from the Yucatec Mayan *dzonot*, meaning ‘well’. These small lakes resulted from collapsed bedrock which left subterranean water exposed. The geological composition of the Yucatán means that it lacks natural watercourses and so *cenotes* were especially important to the Maya as their primary water resources.

⁴⁹¹ Broda, ‘Templo Mayor as Ritual Space’, p. 70.

The Nahuas cosmological principles were mapped on the Templo Mayor. In this world, each cardinal direction had its own particular deity, colour, name and influences.⁴⁹² As Durán wrote in his *Ancient Calendar*, ‘East, West, North, and South. In each of these were to be found, according to these people, great omens, signs and the forecasting of events by astrologers’.⁴⁹³ As was the case for most pyramid-temples of the time, the Templo Mayor faced west,⁴⁹⁴ with Tlaloc’s shrine lying on the southern façade and Huitzilopochtli’s on the northern side. Let us first investigate the positioning of Tlaloc’s shrine, which was the smaller. The southern position of Tlaloc’s shrine connoted it with agriculture, fertility and, by extension, vitality and life.⁴⁹⁵ The positioning within the city was also important. The great avenues extending southwards from Tlaloc’s shrine have also yielded artefacts related to fertility.⁴⁹⁶ Larger than Tlaloc’s, Huitzilopochtli’s adjacent shrine sat in front of the infamous *techcatl* (sacrificial stone) where many brave victims met their end at the hands of dextrous priests. Huitzilopochtli’s northern situation linked him and his temple with death as this was the direction of Mictlampa, the afterlife and ‘place of death’. These associations were reinforced by the nature of Huitzilopochtli’s offerings: skulls, masks, sacrificial knives and even animal bones.⁴⁹⁷ One of the most important discoveries relating to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli by the Proyecto Templo

⁴⁹² Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, pp. 217, 219; Carrasco, ‘Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor’, p. 140.

⁴⁹³ Durán, *Ancient Calendar*, p. 391.

⁴⁹⁴ With the exception of shrines dedicated to the wind deity Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl, which faced east, as this was the deity who correctly identified the rising sun at the drawing of the first fire at Teotihuacan. See Matos, ‘Templo Mayor: History and Interpretation’, p. 56.

⁴⁹⁵ Broda, ‘Templo Mayor as Ritual Space’, p. 88. Broda has classified the offerings uncovered from this shrine as belonging to three categories: representations of Tlaloc, animal sculptures or species, and objects such as jade which bore symbolic relevance to the cult of Tlaloc.

⁴⁹⁶ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, interview with Salvador Rueda [radio], *Eduardo Matos: Proyecto Templo Mayor* (Radio INAH, 16 November 2017) accessed 20 November 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PELCYbrHKDU&t=1621s>.

⁴⁹⁷ Broda, ‘Templo Mayor as Ritual Space’, p. 88. Although, Broda herself emphasises that some offerings were also found in the Tlaloc context and so we cannot conclude that sacrificial death was considered exclusive to Huitzilopochtli. See Matos Moctezuma, ‘Templo Mayor: History and Interpretation’, pp. 40-47 for a list of offerings situated in historical context and phase of temple development.

Mayor was the excavation of the *tzompantli*. The adornment of this altar with over 240 skulls makes its association with death clear. However, most interesting is that, as Matos Moctezuma revealed, ‘contrary to our expectation that a shrine similar to this might appear on the south side, no equivalent temple was found’.⁴⁹⁸ Huitzilopochtli’s shrine was, in this way, overwhelmingly associated with death. Much has been made of the fact that the Templo Mayor sat on the intersection of the four roads into Tenochtitlan. However, Aveni, Calnek and Hartung revealed that, in fact, the axis intersected at Huitzilopochtli’s shrine, and not through the middle of the temple. This, they suggest, highlights the subordination of this ancient, widespread deity to the Mexica’s own patron god.⁴⁹⁹ The symmetry which typically characterised Nahua ceremonial architecture was, therefore, not reflected in the shrines of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. Huitzilopochtli was, therefore, the more important shrine of the Templo Mayor.

Although I am undermining the dominance of the Templo Mayor as the active ritual stage for all Nahuas, its structure is vital to understanding the imperial religious strategies. This pyramid was the archetypal monumental expression of Mexica high-level ideological dualism. The Templo Mayor was not simply a religious structure but a glorious monument to Mexica power. Broda has positioned her interpretations of the Templo Mayor as a ritual space firmly within the context of Mexica empire building as: ‘The cult of Templo Mayor expresses the ideology of a rapidly expanding conquest state’.⁵⁰⁰ In short, Broda is firmly of the view that the Templo Mayor ‘was the place where politics and ideology blended into a single structure’.⁵⁰¹ Building on Broda’s conclusions, I argue that, in the Templo Mayor, neither religious ideology nor political display held sway over the other. For the Mexica, these two

⁴⁹⁸ Matos Moctezuma, ‘Templo Mayor: History and Interpretation’, p. 56.

⁴⁹⁹ Anthony F. Aveni, Edward E. Calnek, and Horst Hartung, ‘Myth, Environment, and the Orientation of the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan’, *Ancient Antiquity*, 53 (1988), pp. 287-309; López Luján, *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor*, p. 68.

⁵⁰⁰ Broda, ‘Templo Mayor as Ritual Space’, p. 66.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

could never be divorced. Neither made sense without the other; they were inextricably linked. Human sacrifice was religion and political display was human sacrifice.

Broda, Carrasco and Matos Moctezuma have argued persuasively that the Templo Mayor was the religious expression of the Mexica's political ambitions. However, these scholars were concerned with the 'major religious, political and economic strategies used by the Aztecs to effectively organise the center and peripheries of their empire'.⁵⁰² But this view can only take into account how the Templo Mayor was understood from the point of Tenochtitlan and its elites, people who would have been attuned to the great temple's high-level meanings and purpose. Commoners in Tenochtitlan certainly would have understood its uses. The universal education system meant that ordinary Mexica folk would have had some grasp of the symbolism of the mighty temple. Moreover, they would clearly have seen it used as a bloody ritual stage at regular intervals throughout the year. But, as I have suggested, it is hard to know whether provincial peoples would have considered the Templo Mayor to be the centre of their religious world. Broda, Carrasco and Matos Moctezuma, writing at a time when provincial *altepemeh* were poorly understood, saw a model where generic settlements were controlled and administered from a central point. Since the 1980s, there have been significant changes in our understanding of Tenochtitlan and the Triple Alliance Empire. Most importantly, regional and household archaeology has shown that, in reality, the Empire was a much more complex, multi-layered network of exploitative tribute-paying relationships between Tenochtitlan, other conquest-states and city-states and their dependent settlements and villages.⁵⁰³

⁵⁰² Carrasco, 'Introduction' to *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery*, p. 3.

⁵⁰³ Michael E. Smith has been an important proponent of household archaeology and his fieldwork forms the basis for much of the archaeological evidence in this thesis. However, he was not the first to investigate 'Aztec-period' houses. Sanders excavated some houses in the Teotihuacan Valley. There had been no published excavations of a provincial 'Aztec-period' house until William T. Sanders and

We might consider the Templo Mayor as a religious, political and economic symbolic monument to the Mexica's vast empire. Certainly, I concur with Matos Moctezuma in his conclusion that: 'It is absolutely clear that the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan was the place, real or symbolic, where Mexica power was centered'.⁵⁰⁴ But this symbolic representation does not necessarily translate smoothly into the lived experience of those people, settlements and provinces incorporated into the Triple Alliance empire. The idea that the Templo Mayor represented the *axis mundi* of the Mexica world is persuasive. But, this interpretation considers exclusively the perspectives of the Mexica elites resident in Tenochtitlan who certainly would have wished their great temple — a planned material union of religious ideology and political power — to be seen as the centre of the world.

In light of fresh evidence and insights away from Tenochtitlan, we must reconsider whether people other than the Mexica elites would have considered the great temple to be the centre of *their* world, or even have fully understood its symbolic value. It is likely that many of the Mexica's vassals never set foot in Tenochtitlan. There were of course, exceptions, the *pochteca* (merchants) would have travelled through the city to the enormous market at Tenochtitlan's sister city, Tlatelolco. Moreover, provincial elites (depending on their status) would certainly have visited the city for ritual display and to petition the law courts. But ordinary men, women and children — the mass of ordinary folk — living in the provinces would, I argue, have been largely ignorant of the structure's existence, its importance and most certainly the symbolism of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. There is no evidence of mass provincial participation in rituals at Tenochtitlan.

Susan Toby Evans (eds), *The Teotihuacan Valley Project Final Report*, vol. 5, *The Aztec Period Occupation of the Valley* (Pennsylvania, 2000).

⁵⁰⁴ Matos Moctezuma, 'The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan: History and Interpretation', p. 25.

Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that these ordinary people might not even have been the intended recipient of these monuments' ideological messages. It would not have been efficient or sustainable to continually coerce provincial peoples into coming to Tenochtitlan to witness the Templo Mayor and its drama. There was little need for such an effort if the local rulers could be controlled and organised. The system of elite social integration by means of marriage and kinship ties were much more efficient. The existing, layered system of hegemonic and economic control — based on reciprocal tribute — only really needed the loyalty of the local ruler. The rural commoners were accustomed to this system; before Mexica dominance, commoners had generally been paying their local overlord. When the Mexica conquered an area they placed their own demands over these existing, coercive relationships. Provided that tribute demands did not increase haphazardly or dramatically, the commoners probably needed little coercion to comply as it was a system they already understood. There would have been little of the 'economy of force' for which the Mexica are renowned if they had wasted resources in luring commoners in Tenochtitlan to watch dramatic display. Much more effective was the targeting of selected, influential elites. Of course, this is not to say that the system was not coercive. Clearly the Triple Alliance Empire extracted vast amounts of textiles, metals and food from its provinces. However, there is very little evidence that the structure of the Templo Mayor needed to play a role in this exploitation at the level of rural commoners.

It seems, then, that the intended audiences for the Templo Mayor's messages were the Mexica. With their cultural and educational advantage, they were much better placed to understand the purpose of this magnificent temple. Where the Templo Mayor was intended to target 'foreign' or provincial people, it is highly likely that this was directed towards the elites, nobles and rulers of these places and not ordinary folk who had little opportunity or knowledge to understand its meanings. Here we see, therefore, that the Templo Mayor cannot really have been understood as the active religious centre of all the Mexica's vassals. With this in mind,

what role did the wider, ‘peripheral’ landscape play in these practices and actions? How might we circumvent the difficulties of historical and material traces to assess how ordinary Mexica and Nahuatl practiced their religious devotion? I suggest that a consideration of dynamism across the ceremonial landscape offers a fruitful avenue to access ritual experiences across geographical distance and social spectra. This next section will suggest that the concept of ‘synaesthesia’ might provide a lens through which to view ritual experiences. Once I have explained this complex idea, I will then explore how it played out in two rituals. This discussion of synaesthesia will demonstrate that it is possible to explore variations in ritual experiences once we accept that the Templo Mayor was not the most important monument in everyone’s lives.

Accessing ritual participation across boundaries

We might reflect on how rituals could affect different people by considering the process of ‘synaesthesia’. This is a neurological phenomenon meaning ‘union of the senses’ but has been used by theorists to examine effects of rituals on participants. It therefore provides an extremely fruitful avenue for our analysis on ritual participation across space and time. Synaesthesia is the connection between a person’s sensory perception of the action and the moral understanding of their responsibilities which it invokes.⁵⁰⁵ For anthropologist theologian Lawrence Sullivan, synaesthesia is ‘the unity of the senses enabling the unity of meaning to be understood and internalized’.⁵⁰⁶ While it is a broader scientific concept, in ritual theory synaesthesia refers to how a person’s senses allow them to become susceptible to the messages which the ceremony hopes to convey. Carrasco, in direct reference to the *veintena* ceremony

⁵⁰⁵ The term, derived from Ancient Greek, is composed of *syn* (‘together’) and *aesthesis* (‘sensation’).

⁵⁰⁶ Carrasco, ‘Give me some skin’, p. 19. See Lawrence Sullivan, ‘Sound and Sense: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance’, *History of Religions* 11 (1986), pp. 1-33.

Tlacaxipehualiztli as an ‘ideal battlefield’, takes the definition a step further. He suggests that ‘synesthesia awakens one to the controlled environment so that a controlled message of right conduct, or right performance of duty and meaning, can be held together.’⁵⁰⁷ Carrasco’s understanding of this sensory process is influenced by his use of Jonathan Z. Smith’s definition of ritual as ‘a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.’⁵⁰⁸ In this way, synaesthesia opens up both participants and witnesses to the ritual’s controlled, intended message. While the visual impact of rituals is commonly explored, the effects of smell, touch, hearing and taste remain undiscovered. However, I suggest that these senses — particularly smell and touch — played crucial roles in the ritual drama.

Exploring how synaesthesia operated during Tlacaxipehualiztli will allow us to draw thematic comparisons with our principal ritual case study, Xiuhmolpilli. The second *veintena* Tlacaxipehualiztli (‘the Flaying of Men’) was celebrated during the spring equinox before the onset of the rains. Even for a religion marked by human sacrificial rites, Tlacaxipehualiztli has stood out for its shocking brutality; the drama and dynamism of its choreography makes it a productive ceremony for the study of synaesthesia.⁵⁰⁹ The ceremony was an 80-day assault on the senses. Tlacaxipehualiztli’s activities spread over up to four 20-day *veintenas*, likely starting during the seventeenth *veintena* Tititl. These other *veintenas* were themselves dedicated to different deities and ritual activities. This intermingling of ceremonies across *veintena* boundaries is an interesting aspect of Nahua ritual which is not commonly appreciated by scholars who usually treat ceremonies as discrete 20-day phases. Recognising this overlap

⁵⁰⁷ Carrasco, ‘Give me some skin’, p. 20.

⁵⁰⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘The Bare Facts of Ritual’, in his *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, 1982), p. 63.

⁵⁰⁹ The most comprehensive account of this astonishing ceremony is found in the *Florentine Codex*, 2: 3-4; 22: 57-60.

is crucial to understanding rituals as Nahuas themselves would have experienced them. While each ceremony would have had a discrete phase, it seems unlikely that an ordinary person — without intricate knowledge of the complex calendar — would have been able to discern transitions between *veintenas*. The organisation of time, then, would have been much subtler than modern scholarship or colonial chroniclers describe.

The ceremony honoured agriculture-deity Xipe Totec (‘Our Lord the Flayed One’) who was especially associated with the south-western reaches of the Mexica’s empire: ‘He was the god of the seashore people, the proper god of the Zapotecs’.⁵¹⁰ These people, the architects of Monte Albán, were very newly incorporated into the Empire, having only been subjugated under Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (Motecuhzoma II). This indicates that Xipe Totec — and Tlacaxipehualiztli — might have been fairly recently incorporated into the Mexica ritual repertoire. It was also apparently an important ceremony for the Coateca people of Tenochtitlan’s Coatlan *calpulli*. According to Sahagún they ‘made offerings to their deity called Coatl icue or Coatlan tonan’, the mother/earth deity complex.⁵¹¹ 80 days before the sacrifice, war captives were selected and adorned as Xipe Totec *ixiptlah*.⁵¹² These men lived as this deity for 40 days, being paraded around the neighbourhoods. When the time came for the sacrifice, the captors dragged them by their hair, the humiliating sign of defeat, to the *temalacatl* in front of Xipe Totec’s platform temple in Tenochtitlan’s ceremonial precinct.⁵¹³ The *Florentine Codex* provides the most comprehensive and evocative descriptions of the rites: ‘After having torn their hearts from them and poured the blood into a gourd vessel, which the master [captor] of the slain man himself received’, the limp body was cast down the steps of

⁵¹⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 1: 18: 39.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2: 22: 57. See also *Florentine Codex*, 2: Appendix: 190.

⁵¹² *Ixiptlah* is a contested feature of Nahuatl ritual practices. For my own stance on this complex phenomenon, refer back to the first chapter. See also Harriet Smart, [review], ‘Diana Magaloni Kerpel, *The Colors of the New World: Artists, Materials, and the Creation of the Florentine Codex* (Los Angeles, 2014)’, *Sixteenth Century Journal* (Winter, 2015), pp. 548-49.

⁵¹³ Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (Oxford, 2006), p. 229.

Xipe Totec's temple where the flesh was portioned and most of it carried off to his captor's *calpulli* for a ritual cannibalistic feast.⁵¹⁴

The victims' corpses were then skinned. This flaying directly associated Tlacaxipehualiztli with its titular deity, Xipe Totec, whose name translates as 'our lord the flayed one' (from *xipehua*, 'to flay, skin, peel'; *totec*, 'our lord').⁵¹⁵ Xipe Totec was associated with agricultural renewal, curing and craftsmen. A transformational, productive act of self-sacrifice had provided sustenance for humans. His association with flayed skin was, therefore, an allusion to the regenerative process of a snake shedding its scale or, specifically in a Mesoamerican context, when maize seeds cast off their outer shell during germination.⁵¹⁶ In Tlacaxipehualiztli the victim's skin was flayed and worn by his captor and by 'youths who had wished to, to whom it had been pleasing, who had wanted to...'.⁵¹⁷ The captors and youths roamed Tenochtitlan, the presence drawing the urban landscape into their movements. They went along 'garbed like Xipe Totec, wearing human skins, [they] then went everywhere from house to house'.⁵¹⁸ The mob's obnoxious activities — fighting street battles against plucky challengers and demanding gifts — are often referenced by scholars.⁵¹⁹ The gang also played an important role in curing which has gone ignored; while being aggressive, the gang was also intimately linked with the health of the houses they visited. Disorders of the skin or eyes were associated with Xipe Totec and women would make offerings for curing to the mob when they visited her house.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 2: 3.

⁵¹⁵ Karttunen, *Analytical Dictionary*, p. 325.

⁵¹⁶ In material culture, Xipe Totec represented as being covered in small beads flayed skin. These beads represented the pockets of fat which appear as bubbles when skin is flayed and turned inside out.

⁵¹⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 22: 58.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 18: 40. Brackets mine.

⁵¹⁹ Carrasco, 'Give me some skin', p. 15.

⁵²⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 1: 18: 40.

Sacrifice, flaying and the roaming warriors provoked a sensory overload for celebrants, participants and spectators alike. The action moved around Tenochtitlan's crowded urban landscape, awakening everyone who came into contact with its drama. Tlacaxipehualiztli's dynamism, sound and fury make it a ripe case study to examine ritual synaesthesia. As we have explored, synaesthesia is the process by which people become alert to the purposes of a ritual via their five senses of perception. During this festival, the city's neighbourhoods were saturated with an overpowering smell: '[the stench] verily wounded the head. It could not be endured'.⁵²¹ This was in stark contrast to the 'normal' urban environment which was remarkably clean and ordered. The smell was intense and, as the *Florentine Codex* mentions, almost unbearable. Several days before the sacrifice, the captors, their families and their captives 'had never bathed themselves. They had soiled themselves as the twenty days had passed, together with those of their household'.⁵²² This period of communal filth would have certainly produced a foul odour. This smell would have intensified after the sacrificial moment when the flayed, decaying skin was paraded around the neighbourhoods. The people and their dwellings were only cleansed once the captors had hurtled throughout the entire city with the dead victim's skins.⁵²³

The filth which accumulated by not bathing, the movement of rotting skin through the city and crusting blood was crucial in how both celebrants and bystanders experienced the Tlacaxipehualiztli ritual process. This synaesthetic experience must have been most acute for those who went unclean for 20 days (an entire *veintena*). These people were not necessarily the elites. Rather they were likely 'ordinary' people — warriors, their families and enemy captives — who were compelled to make sense of their participation through feeling the dirt on their

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 2: 22: 58.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 2: 22: 59.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*

bodies and experiencing a pungent, lingering smell. *Tlazolli*, therefore, was extremely important in the way this *veintena* was celebrated.

In his influential examination of Tlacaxipehualiztli, Carrasco explores the manner in which Tenochtitlan became a ceremonial reconstruction of a perfect battlefield. For him, perfection was achieved via the ritualised transferral of charismatic objects, namely the skins of enemy warriors.⁵²⁴ Carrasco argues that Tenochtitlan became ‘a militant ceremonial center’, where charisma was relocated via the careers of the *ixiptlah* skins and the centre of the action was relocated ‘to a number of different locations, which results in controlled and random contacts with charismatic energy and prestige’.⁵²⁵ While Carrasco rightly highlights the significance of physical contact between ritual actors, my analysis shows that the odour of the participants was important in its own right. An ephemeral ritual participant itself, the foul smell travelled around the urban ritual landscape and crossed boundaries. Physical contact between participants was restricted to individual, staged and deliberate interactions. However, the stench that ‘wounded the head’ was not restricted in this way. The potent odours of blood and flesh would have instead permeated social and structural boundaries, lingering in the city for days, if not weeks. As bodily fluids and elements which had been cast off and ‘used up’, the skin, blood and flesh distributed during this festival constituted powerful *tlazolli* elements. Its synaesthesia allowed charisma to saturate and infiltrate physical and even imaginative boundaries. In other words, during Tlacaxipehualiztli the smell would probably have travelled further around the city than the sight of the flayed skin or the roaming mob.

Synaesthesia made sure that everyone, regardless of sex or status, could participate, to a degree, in Tlacaxipehualiztli. The movement of the mob, the skins and the victims meant that, in this festival, ritual human sacrifice played out in Tenochtitlan’s homes, patios and streets.

⁵²⁴ Carrasco, ‘Give me some skin’, p. 3. See also Smith, ‘The Bare Facts of Ritual’, p. 63.

⁵²⁵ Carrasco, ‘Give me some skin’, p. 12.

This ritual was, in Clendinnen's brilliant words, 'more street theatre than museum piece'.⁵²⁶ While all types of people would have been drawn into the drama, this movement would not have affected all ritual participants in the same way. As the rowdy mob roamed the streets — pushing their way into homes and patios — small children would have had a rare glimpse of a warrior in full regalia and intimidating splendour. Likewise, women who generally remained close to their children, working within the home, were directly confronted by the human sacrificial cult. The sensory overload of Tlacaxipehualiztli is likely to have lingered in their minds longer than that of a seasoned warrior or training youth.

Tlacaxipehualiztli and Xiuhmolpilli were both regenerative ceremonies during which control of *tlazolli* and movement of charisma were particularly important. As we have seen, the 'binding of the years' ceremony began when household objects were destroyed, acts which challenged the established order. The abundant *tlazolli* (discarded household goods) which had accumulated during Xiuhmolpilli contrasted starkly with the cleanliness and order in which people went about their lives. In a wider sense, it provided a disastrous metaphor for the end of the world precipitated by the expiration of a 52-year calendar cycle. In Tlacaxipehualiztli, abstinence from bathing left the warriors, their families and their captured enemies in a state of filth. This physical, mental and emotional state would presumably have been hard to bear for people living in a society which extolled the virtues of cleanliness and balance. In Tenochtitlan, sacrificial priests were trained at the municipal *calmecac* ('the House of Tears') to tolerate this desperation. The nature of his training meant that a priest was much better prepared to endure deprivation and physical discomfort.⁵²⁷ But 'ordinary', uninitiated people would likely have found it extremely difficult to endure. Of course, this state would not just have affected the

⁵²⁶ Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 5.

⁵²⁷ *Calmecac* training was notoriously physically and psychologically brutal for novices. Priests were, after all, required to perform Mexica culture's bloodiest acts; they needed to be properly prepared for their role. For more on this severe training, see Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, pp. 75-81.

warriors and their immediate relatives, given the nature of the dwellings in close-knit patios and neighbourhoods. All residents would have been made aware, by smell, touch and sight, of the part which their warrior resident and his family had played in the ensuing ritual. This process created a heightened sense of awareness that an important moment of renewal took place during Tlacaxipehualiztli.

Xiuhmolpilli activities meant that the ceremony's central drama moved swiftly around dwellings to the ceremonial precincts and out into to the empire. In my second chapter, I demonstrated that this 'binding of years' festival comprised a series of ceremonial processes, each phase dependent on the success of its predecessor. In this section I build on this analysis to establish how filth and fire were the focus around which Xiuhmolpilli sacred activity 'pivoted'. As we saw, ordinary people opened Xiuhmolpilli in their own homes when they broke and discarded their worldly possessions. From there, the sacred energy travelled with the fire priests to Huixachtecatl. A captive warrior was publicly sacrificed by professional priests as commoners gazed up from the base of the mountains. The central participants then swiftly returning to the capital's ceremonial precinct and the landscape was saturated with the 'new fire' which had been started in the victim's chest. The ritual activity was drawn through the sacred landscape by these entities. My suggestion that these forces were key ritual actors in Xiuhmolpilli finds an intriguing, and instructive, parallel in Carrasco's argument that Tlacaxipehualiztli produced an aesthetic which was 'marked and linked by the passage of and contact with charismatic objects'.⁵²⁸ In this, the Feast of the Flaying of Men, the ambition of the ritual — for Tenochtitlan to be transformed into a perfect ceremonial battlefield — was achieved by the saturation of the landscape with filth and by the movement of hapless victims' flayed skin. Filth and skin were the bare essentials of this ceremony and Tlacaxipehualiztli's

⁵²⁸ Carrasco, 'Give me some skin', p. 25.

phases were traced through these ‘charismatic objects’. In Xiuhmolpilli the sacred pivoted, to borrow Carrasco and Wheatley’s terminologies, around the inundation of filth and the career of the new fire.⁵²⁹ Captured warriors’ skin bookended Tlacaxipehualiztli in different guises. During Xiuhmolpilli, it was not blood and flesh which transferred charisma. Rather, fire — with all its creative and destructive properties — provided the ceremonial beginning and ending for Xiuhmolpilli. Its flames traced the ceremonial landscape, being present at each important, transitory moment of the ritual process.

This section has explored how *tlazolli* and fire activated the sacred landscape as a ritual participant, crossing physical boundaries and incorporating all types of people, from women, young children and glorified warriors. The case studies of Tlacaxipehualiztli and Xiuhmolpilli exemplified the synaesthetic power of Nahua ritual. During Tlacaxipehualiztli, a *veintena* which happened every year, flayed skins were paraded around an urban landscape. By comparison, Xiuhmolpilli was an exceptional calendar festival where dangerous forces of filth and fire pivoted the sacred landscape. My analysis of these festivals has demonstrated that, for commoners, rituals did not just mean gawping at temple sacrifices. Ritual permeated their physical boundaries by entering, and altering, their homes, and ordinary men, women and children were important participants in this display. The synesthetic experience of smell, touch and sight meant that these rituals lingered in the neighbourhoods and landscape long after the fury had ended.

⁵²⁹ Carrasco, ‘Give me some skin’; Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*.

Sacred landscape in Huey Tozoztli

Nahua festivals performed in honour of mountains provide a clear lens through which to consider the importance of cosmology to their veneration of natural landscape through ritual practice. Huey Tozoztli, celebrated during springtime ‘when the corn was waist-high’,⁵³⁰ is particularly intriguing in this respect. In 1507, the fourth *veintena* Huey Tozoztli was celebrated during the dry season when temperatures were at their highest, shortly before the annual storms.⁵³¹ Rulers from city-states friendly to Tenochtitlan: Tetzaco, Xochimilco, Tlacopan, and also interestingly, as I discuss below, the enemy rulers of Tlaxcala and Huexotzinco, made the arduous journey to the summit of the imposing Mount Tlaloc to petition this deity for the rains.⁵³² There are many examples of friendly and enemy rulers participating in, or witnessing, spectacles.⁵³³ During Tlacaxipehualiztli, for example, the Tenochca and Tlatelolca danced slowly in strict formation before Motecuhzoma himself joined the throng and brought forth ‘great rulers’ Nezahualpilli of Tetzaco and Totocuihaliztli of Tlacopan who ‘came each following him, went facing him’.⁵³⁴ In Huey Tozoztli we see extremely revealing political dynamics through ritual choreography. During the mountaintop ceremony, there seems to have been no explicit ‘host’ city or ruler. The Tenochca’s enemy, subordinate and allied rulers travelled as a group to venerate the shrine. This was a different type of ceremony — a monthly

⁵³⁰ Motolinía, *History*, p. 120.

⁵³¹ Iwaniszewski, ‘Archaeology and Archaeoastronomy’, p. 160. For more analysis on Huey Tozoztli: Richard Townsend, ‘The Renewal of Nature at the Temple of Tlaloc’, in his *The Ancient Americas Art Sacred Landscapes* (Chicago, 1992), pp. 171-85; Broda, ‘The Sacred Landscape of Aztec Calendar Festivals’, pp. 74-119. Townsend, ‘The Mount Tlaloc Project’, pp. 26-30 analyses the mountaintop setting for part of this ritual.

⁵³² Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 157.

⁵³³ During Tlacaxipehualiztli representatives from enemy states were ‘secretly summoned’ to watch the drama. See *Florentine Codex*, 2: 21: 55.

⁵³⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 21: 55. Very interestingly, this passage draws a distinction between Tenochca and Tlatelolca, and does not refer to them collectively as the Mexica. This is particularly unusual for colonial accounts which are not known to be sensitive to differences between ethnic and social groups. This revealing separation might indicate that the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco did not celebrate every ritual collectively. Elsewhere, it might indicate that some colonial Tlatelolca informants wished to assert to the colonial chroniclers their independence from mighty Tenochtitlan.

veintena — which took on political meanings. Although there was no ‘inviting’ ruler, the political overtones of the ceremony became very clear when the retinue reached the temple. The rulers did not crowd around the effigy at random. Each ruler stepped forward to venerate the shrine in organised hierarchy according to political status and lavished as much food and cloth upon the Tlaloc effigy as possible.

Evidence suggests that, similarly to Xiuhmolpilli, Huey Tozoztli was an adaptable ceremony. Certainly, it was celebrated in a different way to ‘normal’ in 2 Acatl (1507, a Xiuhmolpilli year).⁵³⁵ The *Florentine Codex* and Durán’s *Ancient Calendar* would usually be the starting point for accounts of the *veintena* ritual cycle. These sources are not anchored in linear time and tend to present ceremonies in an ahistorical manner. They present Huey Tozoztli as a maize veneration ceremony where each person, noble and common, plucked stalks of corn and left them at the temple of maize deity Chicomecoatl-Centeotl.⁵³⁶ By contrast, the pictorial *Codex Borbonicus* and Durán’s *Book of the Gods and Rites* speak of a completely different type of ceremony.⁵³⁷ In these accounts, Huey Tozoztli was when rulers undertook a pilgrimage to Mount Tlaloc to supplicate the deity for rain in acts which coincided with public celebrations in front of the Templo Mayor. This activity was followed by a child sacrifice on the shore of Lake Tetzaco. Some scholars have assumed, having read Durán’s *Book of the Gods and Rites*, that this celebration happened every year in this format.⁵³⁸ By contrast, DiCesare takes a much more nuanced view. Comparing *Codex Borbonicus* version of Huey Tozoztli, DiCesare argues that the ritual described in *Book of the Gods and Rites* was the Huey Tozoztli ceremony which took place in 1507. It is important to remember the exceptional nature

⁵³⁵ DiCesare, ‘Tlaloc Rites’, pp. 683-706.

⁵³⁶ *Primeros Memoriales*, fol. 250v. The *Florentine Codex* account of Huey Tozoztli is found in *Florentine Codex*, 2: 3: 6-7; 2: 23: 61-65. Durán’s *Ancient Calendar* description is pp. 418-21.

⁵³⁷ It would have been interesting to compare other pictorial descriptions of Huey Tozoztli from the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, for example. Unfortunately, this codex’s folios containing the first six *veintenas* have been lost: *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, p. 137.

⁵³⁸ Nichols, ‘Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State’, p. 282.

of the evidence provided in the very early colonial *Codex Borbonicus*.⁵³⁹ This pictorial source depicts ‘a unique, historically specific set of rituals whose contents should be anchored in linear, reckoned time and interpreted in light of the particular associations of the year Two Reed, probably 1507’.⁵⁴⁰ Its evidence shows the rulers travelling, carrying a sacrificial victim, to a blue structure: Tlaloc’s temple.

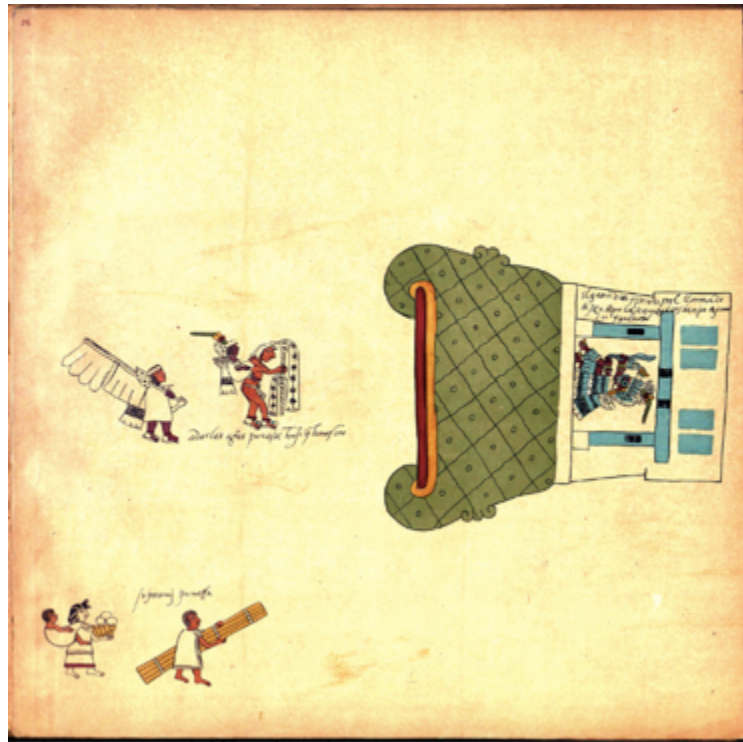


Figure 28: Huey Tozoztli
Codex Borbonicus, p. 25.

There are, therefore, conflicting accounts of Huey Tozoztli. I strongly agree with DiCesare that we do not need to resolve all accounts. In fact, we must actively resist the easy temptation to reproduce the friars’ method which, while laudable in some respects, produced a narrative in which the Nahua round of rituals was described as static, self-perpetuating and (largely) inert to contemporary pressures or circumstances. In fact, the points of difference

⁵³⁹ See the ‘Sources, Perspectives and Methodology’ section for my discussion of this source.

⁵⁴⁰ DiCesare, ‘Tlaloc Rites’, p. 684. See also DiCesare, *Sweeping the Way* especially the excellent introductory section on sources for Postclassic Nahua culture and chapter five on the *Codex Borbonicus* representation of the eleventh *veintena* festival, Ochpaniztli.

between sources can shed light on the ritual lives of Nahua people. We should not be satisfied with just pointing out that ceremonies could be flexible in timing or nature. Interrogating the *reasons* for this flexibility allows us both to explore the ‘real’ lived experience of ordinary Nahua people and to recognise the importance of certain historic events through which they lived. With this goal in mind, why might the 1507 Huey Tozoztli have been exceptional? First, the unique coincidence of day-signs during that *veintena* and, secondly, the special nature of the year in which it fell. Rafael Tena’s reconstruction of the Mexica calendar reveals that in 1507, days which associated with Tlaloc and Chicomecoatl — agricultural deities of maize and rain — fell during Huey Tozoztli.⁵⁴¹ In the year of 2 Acatl, the final day of the Huey Tozoztli *veintena* was also 2 Acatl.⁵⁴² This meant that the *veintena*’s most important feast day held the same day-sign as the year-bearer promoting it in importance. Moreover, the characteristics of the year itself were hugely significant. Associated with the East, the ‘most important area’, Acatl years were ‘always thought of as the best, the most fertile, fruitful, and abundant’.⁵⁴³ Acatl’s positive, productive significance sits in stark contrast to the preceding year, Tochtli, which was ambivalent ‘for in some years things went well and in others badly’.⁵⁴⁴ 1 Tochtli preceded 2 Acatl in the 52-year cycle and held disastrous connotations as a historically difficult time of famine and agricultural failure.⁵⁴⁵ Moreover the age which preceded the Mexica’s current one had ended in a 1 Tochtli year when the sky had collapsed.⁵⁴⁶ Lastly, since 1455, 2 Acatl was, of course, the year when the exceptional festival of Xiuhmolpilli, which sat outside the usual *veintena* round, took place.⁵⁴⁷ Given that this festival only occurred every 52 years,

⁵⁴¹ DiCesare, ‘Tlaloc Rites’, p. 701.

⁵⁴² Rafael Tena, *El calendario mexica y la cronografía* (Mexico City, 2008), p. 105; DiCesare, ‘Tlaloc Rites’, p. 702.

⁵⁴³ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 393. The others being Tochtli, Calli and Tecpatl.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁵ Archaeological and ethnohistorical data confirm that one of the worst famines to strike pre-Columbian Mesoamerica occurred in 1454, a 1 Tochtli year: *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, p. 217.

⁵⁴⁶ Umberger, ‘Aztec Sculptures, Hieroglyphs, and History’, p. 201.

⁵⁴⁷ Given that Xiuhmolpilli celebrated the binding of two calendar cycles, it seems logical that this ceremony would have taken place in 1 Tochtli which was, after all, the first year in the round of 52.

the year in which it took place would likely have taken on more importance itself. Thus, the noble venerations at Mount Tlaloc during Huey Tozoztli in 1507 took on special meaning as exceptional acts petitioning Tlaloc for a fruitful harvest at a very specific moment in time beyond the usual round of ceremonies. It is clear that in 1507, a particular set of circumstances meant that Huey Tozoztli coincided with important day-signs related to both the maize and nature deities, producing a ceremony at odds with the generic, static ritual descriptions.

The following description of Huey Tozoztli relies on Durán's account in his *Book of the Gods and Rites*, found under his description of Tlaloc. It likely relates to the 1507 ceremony depicted in *Codex Borbonicus*, the only other source which privileges the position of the deity in the ceremony.⁵⁴⁸ Durán wrote two accounts of this festival. As I have discussed, the other, ahistorical account, is found in his *Ancient Calendar*. By contrast, the *Book of the Gods and Rites* account of this specific ceremony is particularly compelling as he claims that his informants 'are men who actually saw these things'.⁵⁴⁹ In addition to showing ritual flexibility, I analyse this festival here to demonstrate how sacred landscape was venerated during a *veintena*, further substantiating my claim that Nahua rituals involved the natural environment as an active ritual participant.

In 1507, the springtime ritual of Huey Tozoztli ('Great Vigil') honoured the nature deity Tlaloc.⁵⁵⁰ It was a festival honouring the harvest; as Durán explained, 'The purpose of this feast was that of asking for a good year, since all the maize which had been sown had now

This festival was celebrated in 1 Tochtli initially (and at other important times) and evidence suggests that it was moved to 2 Acatl in 1455 because of the devastating famine of that cycle's 1 Tochtli, 1454. See chapter 2 of this study for discussion of this displacement.

⁵⁴⁸ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, pp. 156-65.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.158. The friar's claim that his informants had first-hand experience of Huey Tozoztli is not a guarantee of this fact and so we should treat his statement with caution.

⁵⁵⁰ León García Garagarza, 'The 1539 Trial of Don Carlos Ometochtli and the Scramble for Mount Tlaloc', in Amos Megged and Stephanie Wood (eds), *Mesoamerican Memory: Enduring Systems of Remembrance* (Norman, 2012), p. 197.

sprouted'.⁵⁵¹ The fourth *veintena*, this festival took place towards the end of a prolonged dry spell and sought to ensure a productive transition to the rains.⁵⁵² Rulers from friendly and allied cities climbed the mountain together to venerate an effigy of Tlaloc, 'the provider'.⁵⁵³ Sahagún wrote that Tlaloc 'showered down the rain and the hail. He caused the trees, the grasses, the maize to blossom'.⁵⁵⁴ At the mountain, the priestly retinue sacrificed a young child and smothered his gushing blood over food and other rich offerings which the rulers had placed inside Tlaloc's shrine. The rulers then descended the mountain to join celebrations which were taking place in a man-made forest in front of the Templo Mayor, before the climax of the ceremony at Lake Tetzaco. At a whirlpool called Pantitlan, a young child was sacrificed, her blood drained into the lake and precious stones were hurled into the water.⁵⁵⁵

Political relationships took centre stage during this Huey Tozotli as rulers from friendly, allied, subordinate and enemy states took part: 'the mighty King Moteczoma, together with all the great men of Mexico — knights, lords, and nobles — came to the celebration on the great mountain' named in honour of Tlaloc to the east of Tenochtitlan.⁵⁵⁶ The allied states of Tetzaco and Tlacopan, the subordinate Xochimilco and the Mexica's principal adversaries Tlaxcala and Huexotzinco took part in Huey Tozotli. It was essential that each locality was represented on the mountain and, in a particularly revealing aside which demonstrates that immediate political considerations could interrupt appropriate ritual practice, Durán stated that

⁵⁵¹ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 156.

⁵⁵² As I hope this study demonstrates, Nahuatl ceremonies could be flexible in nature and in timing. I am, therefore, reluctant to attach them on a specific date in the Western calendar (as some other scholars choose). However, for context, Durán states that the phase of Huey Tozotli which is under examination took place on 29 April. See Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 156.

⁵⁵³ *Florentine Codex*, 1: 4: 7.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 164.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Brackets in the Heyden and Horcasitas translation.

if a ruler was not able to participate in this ceremony ‘(because of some urgent matter), he sent his envoy or delegate with all the pomp and offerings described’.⁵⁵⁷

So far, we have given the sense that the 1507 veneration of Huey Tozoztli must have been a unique event, one of only times in which Tlaloc took precedence over Centeotl-Chicomecoatl. It seems to have been an exceptional event where rulers venerated Tlaloc because of the coincidence of the day-signs. However, on very close reading, Durán’s crucial statement about who could replace a ruler on political matters seems to imply that the rulers’ activities at Mount Tlaloc might have, while clearly rare, occurred more than once. Given that Durán freely mentions each polity by name in his account, and if his informants really were the eyewitnesses he claims, then surely they would have said which ruler was unable to attend that specific time in 1507? Durán’s statement certainly highlights that attendance at rituals, even ceremonies as important as Huey Tozoztli, was dependent on immediate political necessities.

The harsh terrain of Mount Tlaloc provided the backdrop for the first sacrificial moment and the veneration of the nature deity’s effigy. Rising 13,500 metres above sea level,⁵⁵⁸ this peak, the northern-most summit of the Sierra Nevada, soars on the eastern side of the Basin of Mexico as part of the volcanic mountain range which includes Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl [see figure 29]. These rugged mountains were of central importance to the Huey Tozoztli choreography. The festivities performed during this particular *veintena* were so astonishing for their physical exertion that they caused an impressed Durán to reflect on Christian commitment,

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁸ Townsend, ‘The Mt. Tlaloc Project’, p. 27.

which he described as ‘grievously disturbing to us to behold the laxity and lukewarmness, the cracks and failings with which we serve our True God’.⁵⁵⁹



Figure 29: View from the southwest facade of Tlalocan
Iwaniszkeski, ‘Archaeology and Archaeoastronomy of Mount Tlaloc,’ p. 161.

Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin, Nezahualpilli and the other rulers stayed the night on the mountain in shelters so sturdy it was ‘as if they had been meant to be permanent’ with their entourages. At sunrise, the rulers set off.⁵⁶⁰ On reaching a modest temple called Tetzacualco at Mount Tlaloc’s summit, the priests seized a young boy who had travelled with the retinue, efficiently sacrificing him in Tlaloc’s honour and collecting his spilled blood. Following the sacrifice, rulers entered the long passageway at the neck of the shrine to pay homage.

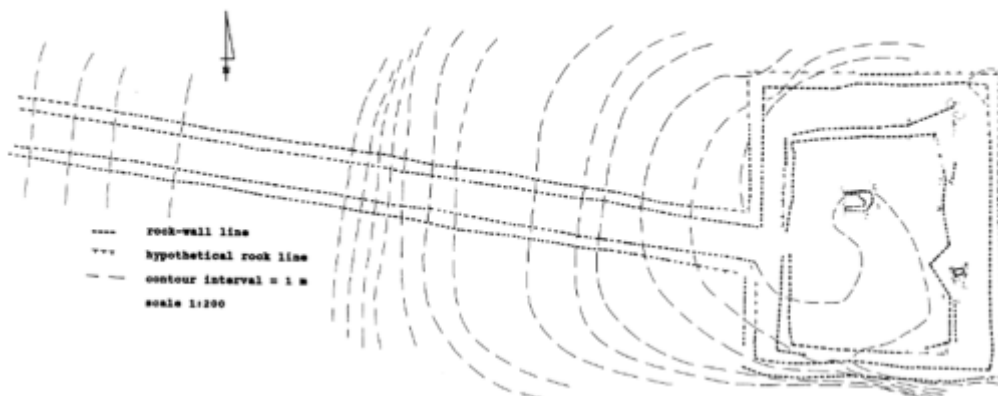


Figure 30: Archaeological remains of the shrine and passageway at Tlalocan
Iwaniszkeski, ‘Archaeology and Archaeoastronomy of Mount Tlaloc,’ p. 163.

⁵⁵⁹ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 169.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

Motecuhzoma, the most senior ruler, entered the inner sanctum first and lavishly dressed the idol: ‘with his own hands placed a headdress of fine feathers on its head. He then covered it with the most costly, splendid mantle to be had... Rich earrings of gold and stones were placed upon him’.⁵⁶¹ He also presented regalia to the smaller effigies: Tlaloc’s assistants, the Tlaloque. Once the supreme Mexica ruler had completed his act of worship, the lesser rulers were permitted to enter to add their offerings to the scene. The order of precedence appears to have been decided according to the polity’s relationship with Tenochtitlan. Moreover, Durán hints that this was a competitive enterprise, each ruler seeking to present more lavish offerings than the last. Perhaps this was a rare occasion when the established political hierarchy could be challenged. At this moment, a more junior ruler could impress Motecuhzoma and overawe their peers. Nezahualpilli, the *tlahtoani* of Tetzococo, one of the Mexica’s Triple Alliance partners, is the only other ruler Durán mentioned by name. Nezahualpilli entered the shrine and arrayed the effigy after Motecuhzoma Xoyoctzin, he ‘carried a similar garment; and if it was superior [to that offered by Moteczoma], so much the better’.⁵⁶² The ruler of Tlacopan, the third partner of the Triple Alliance, was then permitted entry, and the representative from the smaller *altepetl* of Xochimilco paid homage last.

With the effigies arrayed, the rulers came back inside the shrine and portioned out the food and drink — turkey, bread, chocolate — they had brought to sustain the gods, in the same order of hierarchy as they had dressed the effigies. Motecuhzoma Xocoytzin presided over this section of the ceremony; ‘acting as steward’, he served the deities from special ceramic pots, in a humbling role reversal for a man who bowed to no one. After Nezahualpilli of Tetzococo came the ruler of Tlacopan, ‘who did likewise’,⁵⁶³ and the ruler of Xochimilco. Durán’s rich description of this rite indicates that frugality was certainly not the order of the day. Just as the

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 156-57. Brackets in the Horcasitas and Heyden translation.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

rulers had given over the most expensive cloths to dress the effigy, their offerings of food were so bountiful that ‘most of the courtyard was crowded, and it was a sight to see’.⁵⁶⁴ The sacrificial priests went about the temple pouring the child’s blood all over the food and, if any remained, smearing it over the effigies. In a stark reminder of the brutality of Huey Tozoztli, Durán explained that even more children could be killed if the first’s blood was not sufficient to saturate the food in an attempt to bring on the rains.⁵⁶⁵ A sumptuous feast ended this phase of the ceremony. However, ‘since they could not eat in that place because of their pagan superstition’,⁵⁶⁶ the shrine was sealed and the rulers returned to the base camp to dine and then each returned to their own city.

Given the clear political overtones of this phase of Huey Tozoztli, we must interrogate further the presence of sworn enemies of the Mexica during certain parts of this ceremony. While Durán emphatically mentions rulers from Tlaxcala and Huexotzinco coming from the other side of ‘the snowy mountain’ (Iztaccihuatl) to camp at the base of Mount Tlaloc, the enemy nobles disappear from his description after the rulers set off from their camps to climb to the shrine at the summit. As they are not mentioned at all during the hierarchical veneration sequence of Tlaloc’s effigy, we can only speculate whether they were reduced to bystanders in this phase or if they never journeyed to the summit at all. Moreover, it is unclear who made this decision. Were they forbidden from attending? Did they choose not to participate? Perhaps they left to conduct their own rituals, or perhaps they did participate but they are not recorded as having done so. Even the closest reading of Durán’s account does not yield answers to these intriguing questions. What *is* made clear, however, is that the Mexica believed that, given half a chance, Tlaxcalans and Huexotzincans would sack the temple, stripping the statue and stealing the cloth and food. To avoid potential destruction, the Mexica selected one hundred of

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

‘the most courageous and valorous’ warriors to guard the shrine in six-day shifts. Guarding the shrine was an onerous task because, if the shrine was sacked, not only would Tlaloc not have been properly honoured but the incompetent guard would be killed.⁵⁶⁷ Durán comments that ‘more often than not, while pretending to be asleep, they allowed the enemies to enter with the riches as bait’ upon which time the guards embarked on ‘an assault which left no man alive’.⁵⁶⁸

Tlaloc’s position as a supposedly pan-Mesoamerican deity makes the intention to desecrate his monument particularly astonishing. Tlaloc was a primeval deity which patronised the most basic aspects of the natural world, worship of which brought on rains for successful crops. Tlaloc was not a culture hero like the enigmatic Toltec deity Quetzalcoatl or the Mexica’s titular deity Huitzilopochtli. While Tlaloc’s cult was thought to have emanated from the Gulf Coast, his worship was not tied to any one ethnic group. Might their eagerness to defile his most important ‘natural’ shrine at the top of his mountain indicate that enemies from Tlaxcala or Huexotzinco did not value Tlaloc in the same way? Perhaps they had their own natural deities of rain and fertility, which competed with Tlaloc and his consort Chalchiuhtlicue. While we should be careful not to overplay the significance of Durán’s brief passage, the suggestion is that veneration of Tlaloc might have been restricted to the lands in which the Mexica held sway: he recorded that ‘the Mexicas and all the other provinces of the Mexica country were greatly offended’ in the event that the shrine was defiled.⁵⁶⁹ Perhaps another, more likely, interpretation of the sacking of Tlaloc’s most sacred temple by enemy rulers would have been intended as a political act of superiority. Burning of a temple symbolized a polity’s defeat; it is the glyph used in part one of *Codex Mendoza* to denote an *altepetl*’s incorporation into the empire [see figure 31]. As I have described earlier, the defeated city’s deity was thought, itself, to have been overcome by Huitzilopochtli’s Mexica. The defeated deity was removed

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

from the temple and taken back to Tenochtitlan, to have what power remained appropriated and incorporated into the Mexica pantheon.



Figure 31: Codex Mendoza frontispiece
The two burning temples indicate that these *altepemeh* have been defeated. Vanquished captives are dragged by their head by their victors.

Huey Tozoztli did not end with the sealing of the shrine; the activities at Mount Tlaloc were just part of the ceremony. While the rulers had been occupied on the mountain, parallel ceremonies were taking place in Tenochtitlan at ‘the lake, streams, springs, and cultivated fields’.⁵⁷⁰ The rulers hurried down the mountain to join the rites. An intriguing part of this ritual was the man-made ‘forestscape’ of trees, bushes, mounds and rocks which was set up in Tenochtitlan’s ceremonial precinct, right in front of Tlaloc’s shrine. Priests and youths had sought out ‘the tallest, the fullest, the most beautiful tree that could be found, the straightest and the thickest’ at Huixachtlan (the peak south-east of Tenochtitlan where the Xiuhmolpilli sacrifice took place in the city-state of Colhuacan).⁵⁷¹ The youths and their teachers sung and danced as they brought the magnificent tree back to Tenochtitlan, having tied up its branches so as not to damage it. The tree was named Tota (‘our father’), and was raised in the centre of

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.

the artificial forest supported by four smaller trees in a quincunx arrangement. The characterisation of the tree as male is particularly intriguing given that connections to earth and nature were typically female (deities such as Toci and Tonantzin, for example were ‘Earth Mothers’). This quincunx formation reproduced the five-part division of the terrestrial plane of the cosmos and finds a notable parallel in the five boulders similarly arranged at the celestial level at Mount Tlaloc. The ‘tall tree of luxuriant foliage’ which Durán described, was carefully chosen for its height and beauty; the celebrants were sent to Huixachtlan to return with ‘the most beautiful tree that could be found, the straightest and the thickest’.⁵⁷² Figure 33 shows a present-day impression of the trees which grow at Cerro de la Estrella (Mount Huixachtlan).



Figure 32: Trees at the Cerro de la Estrella (Mount Huixachtlan)
Delegación Ixtapalapa, Mexico City, Mexico
Photograph: Harriet Smart

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*

Tota was joined in front of Tlaloc's shrine by 'many bushes, little hills, branches and rocks, all of which seemed the work of nature, yet [were] not arranged in imitation of nature'.⁵⁷³ Durán explained that the shrubs, rocks and mounds positioned inside the ceremonial centre were not supposed to recreate a natural scene. Rather, this was a reconstruction of a 'perfect' sacred landscape where Huixachtlan's sacred power was appropriated inside the capital city. By taking this perfect tree and re-positioning it in front of Tlaloc's shrine, the Mexica refocused the ritual not only on their imperial city, but most importantly on their ceremonial precinct.⁵⁷⁴ Placing the tree inside the urban space provided a tangible link between Tlaloc's temple and the natural mountain- and forest-scape of Huixachtlan. This was a crucial aspect of the worship of agricultural and natural fertility, the aim of this *veintena* festival. In this way, the artificially arranged foliage superseded the Templo Mayor in importance for this ritual as Tlaloc's shrine sat behind the spectacle. However, while it was not the active ritual centre used during Huey Tozoztli, the Templo Mayor was crucially important to this phase of the maize-veneration festival. It would have taken significant effort, on the part of many celebrants, to fashion the forestscape inside Tenochtitlan. It was certainly not a coincidence that the trees and bushes were placed in front of the Mexica's most important temple. This constructed ritual stage had subtle meanings. In her illuminating doctoral research, Virginia King notes that the tree embodies the horizontal and vertical axes of the Mexica's cosmic structure, 'Tota's branches stretched to the heavens and its trunk represented the earthly domain', its roots reaching down into the underworld.⁵⁷⁵ But more than that, this tree was placed directly in front of another *axis mundi*; a fact which created multiple layers of cosmic meaning. With its tri-layered physical structure, the tree embodied the Mexica's imagined cosmos; it represented an *axis mundi* and

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.

⁵⁷⁵ King, 'Malinalco: Mexica Political and Religious Dominance in a Subject Territory', p. 154. See also: León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, pp. 46-48; Matos Moctezuma, *Life and Death in the Templo Mayor*, pp. 24-34.

was positioned in front of another iconic central structure, in a direct challenge to its dominance. This tree, therefore, demonstrates that the Mexica used, interacted and were influenced by their own natural world. If they had wanted to demonstrate a tri-partite, cosmic structure during Huey Tozotli, they could have used the enormous Templo Mayor. It is extremely telling of their mutually influential relationship with the natural world that they instead used a simple, but perfectly beautiful, tree to embody their cosmos.

Let us return to the second part of the Huey Tozotli celebrations. When those inside Tenochtitlan got word that the rulers were on their way back, the ritual participants who gathered around Tota moved the enormous tree and placed it, with a young girl, inside a convoy of canoes. This fleet travelled from Tenochtitlan out to the south-eastern shore of Lake Tetzaco to meet the returning *tlahtoqueh*.⁵⁷⁶ They converged at Pantitlan, a mysterious and powerful location. Durán refers to it as the place ‘where the lake had its drain... Occasionally a tremendous whirlpool appears when the water is sucked down.’⁵⁷⁷ This was a dangerous place where nature’s destructive forces were most potent. It was



Figure 33: Pantitlan
Florentine Codex, book 1

also a liminal space which connected the earth to subterranean waters and, by extension, the underworld. The child who travelled with the celebrants was dressed entirely in blue ‘representing the great lake and other springs and creeks’; her hair was adorned with a feather

⁵⁷⁶ Meaning ‘the place between the flags’ in Nahuatl, Pantitlan seems to have been an enigma. Durán explained the controversy over the nature of this intriguing water feature: ‘Some say that it was a drain. Others disagree, that it was a spring...’ (Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 166).

⁵⁷⁷ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, 8: 164.

garland.⁵⁷⁸ Once all the ritual participants converged at the lake's edge, Tota was divested of its ties and cast into the whirlpool's murky waters. The girl was grabbed, her throat slit and her body held under the water, allowing her blood to course with the lake's current. Her corpse was then hurled into the lake, 'right into the whirlpool', and its powerful current consumed her body.⁵⁷⁹ Mirroring the lavish offerings of cloth, feathers and jewels, they had made at Tlalocan, the rulers threw into the lake 'such quantities of gold, stones, and jewels... that it was a marvellous thing to see'.⁵⁸⁰



Figure 34: An artist's impression of Lake Tetzaco in 1520
<https://clas.berkeley.edu/research/mexico-city-lakes-searching-pantitlan>

As well as providing a physical connection to the subterranean water, this sacrifice demonstrates that this enigmatic whirlpool might have provided an imaginative gateway from the earthly realm down into the nine layers of the underworld, just as Mount Tlaloc reached up

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Durán himself was skeptical that a whirlpool existed that could have been powerful enough to consume a girl's body. He speculated that the priests weighed her down so that commoners would fear Tlaloc's destructive power.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

to the celestial ‘heavens’ and the forestscape at the Templo Mayor represented the central, terrestrial plane. In most Mexica human sacrifices, blood was reserved before the victim’s body was discarded in order to be held aloft to the sun. However, this was not the case during Huey Tozoztli. The blood of both the boy and the girl was used for nourishment, not of the sun, but of mountains and underwater caves in order to propagate a successful harvest by encouraging the rains. In the case of the boy sacrificed at Mount Tlaloc, his blood had been decanted and poured all over the food provided for the earth deity’s effigy in order to nourish it. At Pantitlan, no effort was made to collect any of her blood because it was already in the right place. The blood which gushed from her throat coursed with the rapids as she was held under the water for a few moments before she was cast into the whirlpool. The fate of both victims’ blood distinguishes this festival from ‘routine’ sacrifices which appeased the movement of the sun. Huey Tozoztli was a celebration of the natural world and, in this ritual process, both male and female victims’ blood was used to fertilize the different representative levels of the cosmos in order to secure the arrival of the rains and generate a productive, fruitful harvest.

The official part of the festivities which involved political figures and public acts then finished and all the participants returned to their places in silence. Away from the ceremonial stage, ‘the peasants and the common men continued them [the festivities] in their tilling and sowing in the fields, in the rivers, springs, and streams’.⁵⁸¹ Durán highlighted reports of agrarian rites as ‘a most important warning, which must be given so that the ministers and confessors will be on their guard’.⁵⁸² However, exactly what these agricultural rites entailed is, unfortunately, not mentioned in Durán’s account. Nonetheless, we might speculate that these rituals were supremely important to ordinary people. Doubtless, their rites would not have stretched to tossing jade or gold into a stream. Whatever their particular choreography or

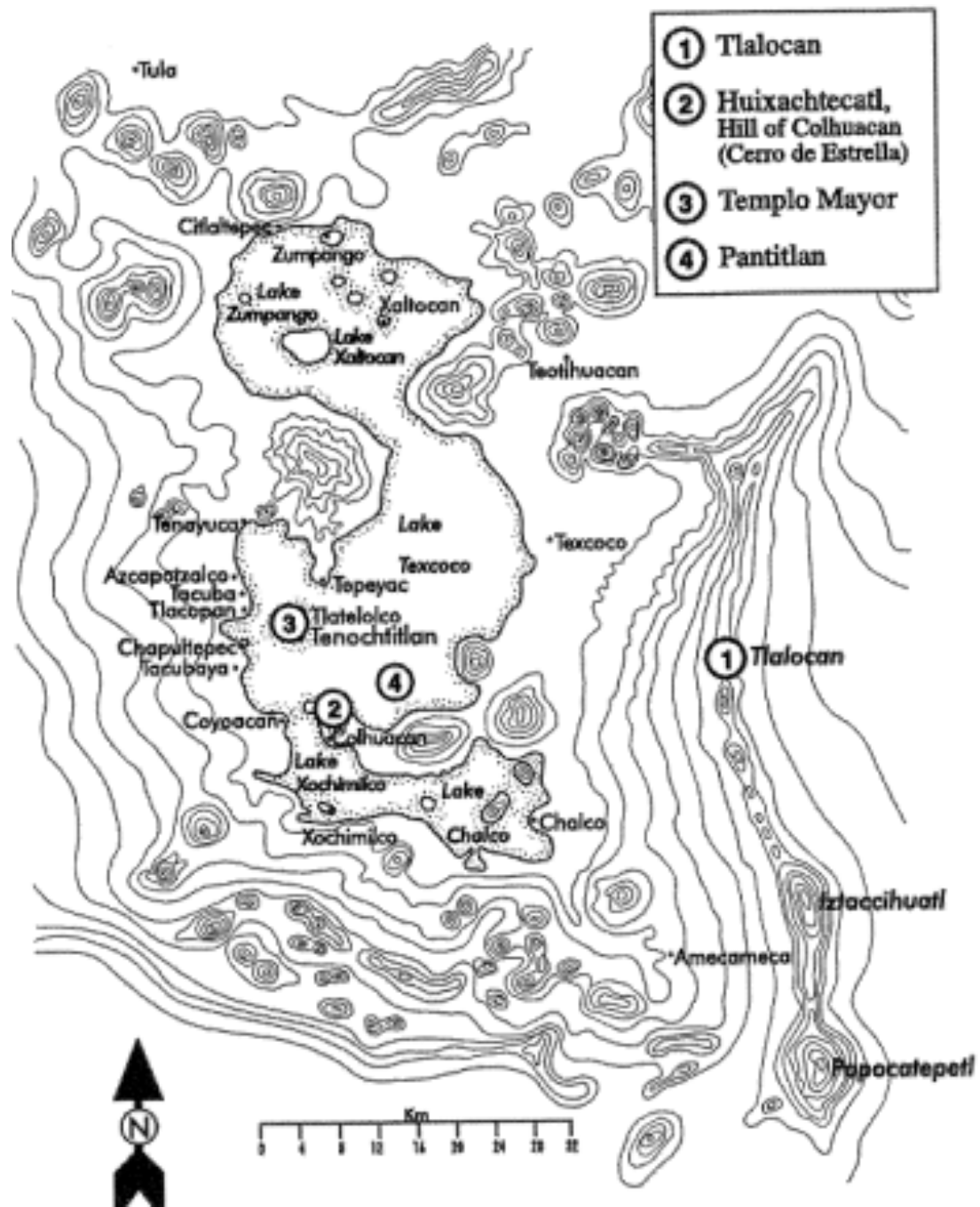
⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*

meaning, farmers and their families would have petitioned for rain and expressed gratitude for their harvest in their own way.

Mapping the cosmos in Huey Tozoztli

Huey Tozoztli was, for all its political overtones, an agricultural rainmaking ceremony which venerated Tlaloc. *Codex Borbonicus* shows that in 1507 the ceremony's choreography was changed to include the participation of local rulers, both friendly and antagonistic. While the political nature of the choreography was certainly hugely significant, the sacred landscape remained a principal actor in this ritual process and this was a ceremony which celebrated a budding harvest. The manner in which the celebrants moved between sacred locations might also allow us to displace, or at least test, the notion of the Templo Mayor as the archetypal, principal, ritual stage for all Nahuas. Map 7 shows the fairly substantial distances, and terrains, covered by the ritual actors during Huey Tozoztli; this festival was certainly not confined to Tenochtitlan. In this next section, I use this *veintena* ceremony to undermine the city's ceremonial precinct as an exceptional *axis mundi*.



Map 7: Huey Tozotli ceremonial locations
 Arnold, *Eating Landscape*, p. 34.

Archaeological evidence offers particularly useful context for our understanding of the sanctuary at Mount Tlaloc,⁵⁸³ which Durán described as:

a great square courtyard with a series of merlons and plastered with stucco. It could be seen from a distance of many leagues. On one side of this courtyard was a wooden chamber neither large nor small, with a flat roof. It was stuccoed both within and without and possessed a beautifully worked and handsome [castellated] crown. In the middle of this room, upon a small platform, stood the stone idol Tlaloc... Around [Tlaloc] were a number of small idols, but he stood in the center as their supreme lord. These little idols represented the other hills and cliffs...⁵⁸⁴

In 1989, archaeologist Richard Townsend undertook investigations at the summit. His aim was to assess the remains of the Tetzacualco sanctuary where the rulers adorned Tlaloc's effigy with the child's blood. Townsend describes the summit as a small, irregular plateau which affords a dramatic view of the Sierra Nevada.⁵⁸⁵ At the site, the visual impression is that Tetzacualco's remains comprise a rectangular precinct enclosed by a wall. The structure which Durán describes was nowhere to be found. Townsend reported that 'no significant building remains are presently seen'.⁵⁸⁶ There was only a modern shrine containing candles and copal incense, evidence that this site remained in use as a ritual space at the time of Townsend's investigations. However, an aerial view shows the 125 metre-long processional corridor which led into the shrine [see figures 29 and 30].⁵⁸⁷ At the site, Townsend recovered potsherds, figurines, obsidian fragments and beads from surface excavations.⁵⁸⁸ Among the more intriguing artefacts was a Teotihuacano pectoral and pottery vessel fragments dated to the

⁵⁸³ Anthony Aveni has explored the archaeoastronomical connection between the shrine at Mount Tlaloc and the dimensions of the Templo Mayor. See Aveni, Calnek and Hartung, 'Myth, Environment, and the Orientation of the Templo Mayor', pp. 287-309.

⁵⁸⁴ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 156. All square brackets in the Heyden and Horcasitas translation.

⁵⁸⁵ Townsend, 'The Mt. Tlaloc Project', p. 27.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ Johanna Broda, 'Processions and Aztec State Rituals in the Landscape of the Valley of Mexico', *Occasional Papers in Anthropology*, 33 (2016), pp. 189-90.

⁵⁸⁸ Townsend, 'The Mt. Tlaloc Project', p. 29.

Formative period (2500 BCE to 200 CE).⁵⁸⁹ The recovery of objects from the era of Teotihuacan's dominance, coupled with the modern copal fragments, provides compelling evidence that Mount Tlaloc has been an important sacred site since Preclassic times. The Mexica were certainly not the first to use Tlalocan for their ritual activity petitioning for rain. Capitalising on pre-existing sacred locations was characteristic of Mexica ritual practice. We saw earlier how the Mexica elites used the enduring associations of Huixachtatl with fire ceremonies for their sparking of the new fire in 1507. The archaeological evidence, then, corroborates that the Mexica exploited existing natural sacred spaces for their rituals.

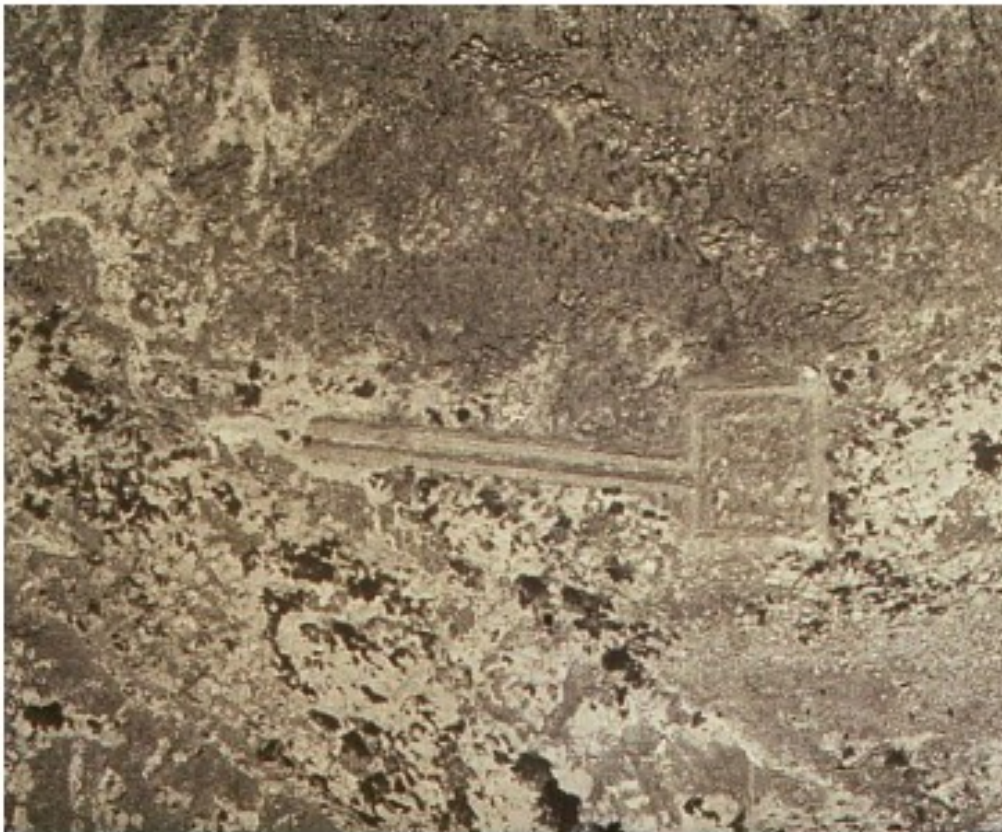


Figure 35: Aerial view of the shrine and passageway at Tlalocan Broda, 'Processions and Aztec State Rituals', p. 190. Original photo Cia. Mexicana Aérofoto, S.A., 1941

⁵⁸⁹ Townsend, 'The Mt. Tlaloc Project', p. 29.

Townsend suggests some intriguing hypotheses regarding the summit's five large boulders. Four are situated at the cardinal points, with two at east and west, and a fifth boulder in the central position. He suggests that these rocks, which 'project upwards from the matrix of the mountain', were not haphazardly placed but were, in fact, important ritual structures which had been deliberately organised in this arrangement.⁵⁹⁰ Because there are no other sizable rocks at the precinct, it seems that the natural geological profile of the plateau was, at some stage, altered in order to produce cosmological symmetry. Townsend suggests that 'the remaining natural boulders are the "idols" of which Durán spoke'.⁵⁹¹ This quincunx formation was also, as we saw earlier, important in the forestscape positioned in front of Tlaloc's shrine in the ceremonial precinct of Tenochtitlan. The arrangement of four corners surrounding a central position was an important material trope in pre-Hispanic iconography, particularly in relation to the earth deity.

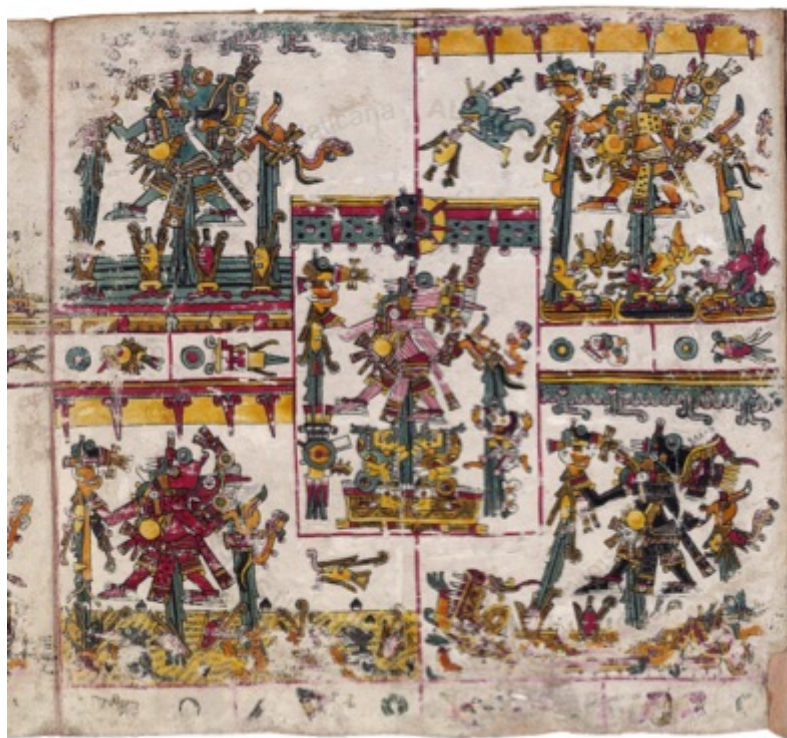


Figure 36: *Codex Borgia*, fol. 28.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

For example, the pre-Hispanic pictorial *Codex Borgia* depicts Tlaloc in this central location, surrounded by his four *tlaloqueh* assistants at each corner [see figure 36].⁵⁹² In its *tonalamatl* section, *Codex Borbonicus* depicts the earth deity, embodied by Tlazolteotl, giving birth. The large left-hand side of folio 13 depicts this deity in the crouching, parturient position. The legs are bent upwards and a figure is seen emerging from underneath [see figure 37]. This pose is reminiscent of the enormous monolith of Tlaltecuhтли ('Lord of the Earth'), uncovered in 2006, which demonstrated this natural deity giving birth [see figure 38]. These examples demonstrate the importance of fertilisation and fertility in Nahua thought. They provide a stark reminder that the purpose of the Tlaloc rites of Huey Tozoztli was to bring on the rains to fertilise the earth to ensure a productive harvest.



Figure 37: *Codex Borbonicus*, fol. 13.

⁵⁹² *Codex Borgia*, fols 28-29; Stanislaw Iwaniszewski, 'Archaeology and Archaeoastronomy of Mount Tlaloc, Mexico: A Reconsideration', *Latin American Antiquity*, 5.2 (1994), p. 159



Figure 38: Tlaltecuhтли
Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City, Mexico
Photograph: Harriet Smart

The Mexica understood their world to have been completely permeated with water. Huey Tozoztli was the moment when the Mexica supplicated their ancient deity for fertilization with rains. Most starkly, we see this as the male rulers processed along the walled corridor they were given privileged access to an enclosed temple. In Mexica ritual practice, temples were conceived as man-made caves and carried with them all the primal forces of creation and destruction which were associated with the earth. In order to understand the crucial importance which these natural features held in ritual practice, we must look back to Nahuatl mythical history to recognise caves as places of origin associated with fertilization and regeneration. The most important mytho-historical cave was Chicomoztoc ('the place of seven caves'), located in the mythical ancestral land of Aztlan. The most important representation of Chicomoztoc is found in the sixteenth-century Nahuatl manuscript *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, where it is a single round cave with seven lobes: illustrative of the seven tribes which were said to have

migrated southwards to the Valley of Mexico from the eleventh century onwards [see figure 1 in the introduction].⁵⁹³ This depiction bears striking similarity to a womb, not least because of its thick red lining and a single, columnal opening. This alludes to the earthy, life-giving force and creative potential which was encapsulated in caves as moist, dark spaces. Furthermore, as enclosed spaces with shadowy entrances, caves were exceptional portals to another metaphysical realm: the underworld. In this way, it has been suggested that Chicomoztoc, with its seven U-shaped lobes, represents a chthonic womb.⁵⁹⁴

Let us apply these ideas to the ritual choreography of Huey Tozoztli, during which time the rulers each processed down an extraordinarily long, walled corridor of over one hundred metres in length to a round, inner sanctum. While, as I have discussed, no visible archaeology remains at the level of the surface at Mount Tlaloc, an aerial view we saw previously affords an impressive, and stark, illustration of the site [see figure 36]. This view reveals that Mount Tlaloc's ceremonial architecture was unmistakably phallic in design. At the site, the lengthy walled corridor protruded directly from the angular shrine walls at a very direct, erect angle. Bearing in mind the significance of temples as reminiscent of primal caves such as Chicomoztoc, I am in full agreement with Townsend when he suggests that Mount Tlaloc's long processional corridor leads directly into a figurative and 'diagrammatic womb of the earth, containing the source of water and regenerative forces'.⁵⁹⁵ However, rather than restricting my conclusions to the architecture of the site as Townsend does, I extend my discussion to capture

⁵⁹³ These seven ethnic groups who emerged, at different times, from the same 'cave' were said to be the Mexica, Acolhua, Tlaxcalan, Tepaneca, Chalca, Tlahuica and the Xochimilca who went on to settle in the Valley of Mexico. The idea that these seven 'tribes' came from the same place of origin, even sharing a cave, is an important one in the exploration of the shared cultural historical traditions of the Valley of Mexico. However, it has been suggested that this communal heritage might have been exaggerated by the Mexica in their quest to legitimise their political dominance and exploitation in the region.

⁵⁹⁴ Carolyn E. Tate, *Reconsidering Olmec Visual Culture: the Unborn, Women, and Creation* (Austin, 2012), p. 226. 'Chthonic', from the Greek for 'beneath the earth', refers to the earth and underworld within the specific context of a religious cult.

⁵⁹⁵ Townsend, 'The Mt. Tlaloc Project', p. 29.

how its features provided a stage which influenced the ritual choreography of Huey Tozoztli. On the basis of the site's phallic design, I venture to argue that the male rulers were penetrating this inner sanctum, the 'diagrammatic womb', in acts of fertilization which produced the misty clouds around Mount Tlaloc which began the rainy season. In this sequence, then, we see the use of the natural environment as a crucial, active ritual participant. During Huey Tozoztli, the mountains, forest and whirlpool affected ritual performance. This was an alive, sacred landscape which was much more important than simply providing an inert or static backdrop to human activities.

Huey Tozoztli demonstrates that Nahua cosmological understandings were not just expressed within the architecture of the Templo Mayor but were mapped at different levels throughout the natural landscape. In 1507, the Huey Tozoztli celebrants journeyed through the three layers of the cosmos by moving through the natural environment: from mountain, through the forestscape, to the water. During the veneration at Mount Tlaloc, the Basin of Mexico's rulers gained access to the cosmos' highest, celestial level. In terms of the Mexica's own local horizon, Mount Tlaloc was the highest peak in the region that could have been routinely climbed. The towering Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl lie to the south but do not appear in ritual accounts; their terrain was probably too challenging to have been summited regularly. In this way, the rulers who climbed Mount Tlaloc moved as close as they physically could to the deities and ancestors who inhabited this upper world. The importance of the natural landscape to ceremonial practice resonates still further once we remember that Tlaloc actually had his own magnificent temple, right in the heart of Tenochtitlan. The *tlatoqueh*'s arduous journey in this Huey Tozoztli is reminiscent of the priestly retinue's excursion to Huixachtecatl to conduct the human sacrificial phase of Xiuhmolpilli in that same year. While they had a perfectly good temple platform to conduct this sacrifice in an easier, more public location in their capital city, they chose instead to perform this ritual at a mountain. These considered choices make it clear

that the natural landscape was certainly not superseded in importance by impressive, constructed temples. In some ways, Tlalocan might have been a more important ritual stage as, during a difficult year, the rulers turned to the impressive mountain to venerate their nature deity and not the Templo Mayor which lay in the middle of Tenochtitlan's ceremonial precinct.

Conclusions

This section has developed the core arguments of the study — that rituals were fluid and flexible — by exploring key ceremonial landscapes and ritual structures. In so doing, I have demonstrated that the natural environment was an important agent of Nahuatl ritual processes. Here, we have seen that hills, forests and mountains were ceremonial protagonists. The influential notion that the Mexica's Templo Mayor was the most important, active centre of religious fervour for all Nahuas has been scrutinised. I have argued that, while the Mexica might have wished their grand precinct to represent the centre of the world, in reality, its messages may not have reached ordinary people living in the provinces. By reconsidering outdated scholarly models of sophisticated 'centre' versus arcane 'periphery', we have seen that in the mind of a local, temples at neighbouring cities might have seemed far more influential and significant than Tenochtitlan's imposing, but bewildering, central temple. In this way, the notion of the static, imposing Templo Mayor as the Nahuas' exclusive ritual stage has been contested and overturned.

I have used the neurological phenomenon 'synaesthesia' to explore how ceremonies could affect many more people, through smell, sound and sight, than has thus far been appreciated. In so doing, we have glimpsed how rituals might have been experienced by ordinary people. I have demonstrated that these sensory concepts can be applied to Xihuimolpilli by extending Carrasco's influential analysis of Tlacaxipehualiztli. This section

establishes that a ritual stage was hardly ever fixed. Rather, Mexica rituals moved swiftly around the city through neighbourhoods, houses and plazas. Xiuhmolpilli, of course, took this geographical dynamism a step further to penetrate the imperial provinces. These conclusions contribute substantially to the key aims of the thesis by demonstrating that ritual stages themselves could be changed, altered and adapted to suit the Mexica's requirements. This debunks the notion that their ritual practices were a set of unchanging performances based on a set belief system.

I have demonstrated in this section that the Huey Tozoztli of this solar year was performed completely differently to 'normal'. In 1507, local rulers from Tenochtitlan, Tetzaco and Xochimilco undertook an exceptional pilgrimage to supplicate Tlaloc during a difficult year. As we have seen, 1507 was a 2 Acatl year, historically a time of agricultural renewal following the deprivation usually wrought during the preceding 1 Tochtli. This provides a very clear example that decisions could be made regarding ceremonies. Performances could be adjusted in content, performance and purpose in response what was happening at the time. This might not have been strictly exclusive to 1507 (this specific year is the best documented by means of *Codex Borbonicus*). However, we see strong evidence that Huey Tozoztli was sensitive to external circumstances. Aside from this important flexibility, Huey Tozoztli provides incontrovertible evidence regarding the importance of the landscape as an active participant in Nahua ritual practice.

This section has argued that the Mexica explored, changed and built on their natural environment by means of their ritual spectacles. While they also made use of formal, man-made structures such as the sanctuary at Mount Tlaloc and the same deity's shrine atop the Templo Mayor, the landscape was by no means ignored in favour of grand ceremonial architecture. King has argued that during Huey Tozoztli the beautiful tree, Tota, was a tripartite

structure, emblematic of the Mexica's cosmovision.⁵⁹⁶ I have expanded this argument to relate it to *axis mundi*. Tota was placed in front of Tlaloc's shrine at the Templo Mayor and arrogated this structure in ritual importance, during this ceremony at least. Here is a crucial example of the natural world superseding a structure during a ceremony which was supposed to petition for rain. The Mexica did not simply use the natural environment as an inert ritual stage but integrated it into their celebrations. My analysis of the movement of the ritual activities from mountain-top, through the forestscape to the lake, shows that the celebrants were venerating and nourishing each layer of their universe. Thus, this section has established the sacred landscape as an active participant in ritual drama in both urban and rural contexts. My analysis has undermined the notion that the Templo Mayor was an archetypal, primordial and exclusive ritual stage.

⁵⁹⁶ King, 'Malinalco: Mexica Political and Religious Dominance in a Subject Territory', p. 154

V

CASE STUDY 3: AGENCY AND VARIATION IN LIFECYCLE
RITUALS

‘And if they had their own reasons they might yet pass over it’
Florentine Codex, 4: 20: 74

Leaving aside formal plazas, ceremonial precincts, and temples, we will now turn our focus to the supernatural forces of the home to explore the domestic ceremonies and ritualism of ‘ordinary’ people in Tenochtitlan and the provinces. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first part analyses birth and naming rituals inside Tenochtitlan, mainly using alphabetic and pictorial sources. The internal choreography of these rituals has been well-drawn elsewhere;⁵⁹⁷ my examination rather focuses on variation in ritual practice and the space for ordinary people to exert their own agency within set-piece lifecycle rituals. The second part develops these ideas in the assessment of provincial homes as ritual spaces. This latter section draws much more heavily from the archaeological record and explores how the structure of the home, and its associated paraphernalia, affected ritual practice.

Hitherto, scholars have largely understood these domestic practices to be repetitive and fixed, but to what extent were lifecycle rituals variable to personal circumstances or taste? In particular, this part will examine the intersection between social customs and individual parental agency in the naming and bathing of a Mexica child. The ritualism marking out important moments in an ordinary Nahua’s life allows for an analysis of how and why ‘private’ family rituals could be adapted to prevailing concerns. My focus here is squarely on the

⁵⁹⁷ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, pp. 36-40, 41-61; Joyce, ‘Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy’, esp. pp. 476-81.

ceremonies associated with pregnancy and birth. While I do not wish to reduce all ‘household’ ceremonies to these two events, these were the most universal of human experience. They provide an excellent way to analyse variations in practice between families of different social standing.

One of this section’s most important, original contributions is to demonstrate how concepts such as the blood debt and humble service to capricious deities were introduced and normalised within the household and family, an issue which has not previously been considered by historians. While I have been demonstrating that public religious violence did not form the entirety of Nahua religion, it has become clear that household rituals went some way to underpinning the sacrificial cult. But there were different actors here. The scale, choreography and celebrants were unlike temple-level spectacle; the most important participants were the mother, her midwife, the *tonalpouhqui* and the family. Nevertheless, the themes of reciprocal blood debt, warfare and duty were the same as those spectacles and go some way to showing how these brutal performances were accommodated by ordinary Mexica. This is not the place to track the entire lifecycle of a Nahua person from birth through death. Indeed, this would conjure up precisely the generic picture which obscured the nuances of lived experiences which I am seeking to unravel. In this analysis, I focus principally on the birth ceremony as it is representative of the most fundamental of human experiences. In this respect, birth ceremonies were universal — both rich and poor were welcomed into Tenochtitlan — and they offer a unique way to assess variations in household rituals.

The second part of this chapter uses archaeological evidence and material culture to examine variation in domestic ritual between Tenochtitlan and the imperial provinces. Houses varied in size and composition between the imperial capital and its tributaries. These differences allow us a window into how ritual behaviour might have differed between elite and commoner houses, and from place to place. So, I will analyse how dwellings’ layout created

space for the home as an important *locus* of ritual activity. This section will build on my earlier discussions regarding distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the Nahua world, with particular focus on the role of the patio. I will discuss how the position of the patio affected the ritual of the home. So far, I have shown that public state-sponsored rituals were adaptable to the requirements of the time, place or people. This section will continue in this spirit by demonstrating that ‘domestic’ activities were not monolithic or identical in different contexts.

In addition to building significantly on the core theme of my study — ritual flexibility — these two parts, taken together, permit a deeper understanding of the roles of women and children in Nahua ritual. The profound militarism of Nahua society has meant that the experiences and contributions of women and children used to be concealed, both in colonial writings and modern scholarship. In recent years, however, serious efforts have been made to integrate gendered perspectives. Most important has been the research on Nahua gender roles and relations with regard to social and economic prosperity.⁵⁹⁸ This chapter represents an important step forward in integrating their experiences into discussions of ritualism.

Before diving into questions and issues surrounding the details of domestic ritual, it is important to scrutinise the possibilities of our sources for the study of non-elite and domestic ritual. I will then explain the ways in which my interdisciplinary method of integrating textual

⁵⁹⁸ See, for example: Susan Kellogg, ‘From Parallel and Equivalent to Separate but Unequal: Tenochca Mexica Women, 1500-1700’, in Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood and Robert Haskett (eds), *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (Norman, 1997), pp. 123-43; Susan Kellogg, ‘The Woman’s Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre-Hispanic Period’, *Ethnohistory*, 42.4, Women, Power, and Resistance in Colonial Mesoamerica (1995), pp. 563-76. From archaeological sources: Elizabeth Brumfiel, ‘Weaving and Cooking: Women’s Production in Aztec Mexico’, in Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey (eds), *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 224-51. There has been a proliferation of cultural studies on Aztec gender roles since the 1980s and 1990s. The historiography on this topic is therefore a burgeoning one. Some particularly notable examples include: Louise M. Burkhart, ‘Mexica Women on the Home Front: Housework and Religion in Aztec Mexico’, in the same volume, pp. 25-54; Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, esp. pp. 153-209. Dodds Penneck, *Bonds of Blood*.

and material culture sources can mitigate these limitations and bring us closer to an understanding of domestic ceremonial in and away from Tenochtitlan.

The problem of sources for domestic ritual

This chapter will demonstrate that close analyses of different types of sources - alphabetic, pictorial and archaeological — can bring us closer to painting a more vivid picture of Mexica life. The challenge of the ‘ethnographic present’ which I discussed in the methodology section and confronts my research most directly in the study of domestic ritual. In this section I argue that combining archaeological and textual sources can mitigate this issue by building the ‘bridging arguments’ that Brumfiel suggests. My study of birth below draws heavily from the *Florentine Codex* and *Codex Mendoza*. Of the former’s encyclopaedic thirteen volumes, *Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy* is most important to this chapter as it contains the *huehuetlahtolli* which allow us a glimpse of ordinary people’s concerns and priorities. These ‘speeches of the elders’ or ‘ancient word’ comprised discourses which were delivered at important moments and rites of passage. These lengthy orations were collected from Sahagún’s informants and recorded by the Franciscan and his scribes. Many of the speeches, especially those delivered at important life events such as pregnancy, were set dialogues. Before the conquest, these speeches were learned by heart in order to be delivered by many types of people — noble and ordinary — in front of friends and family. The Nahuas transmitted their principles and their history through these formal discourses.⁵⁹⁹ In this society, eloquence was greatly valued and was associated with authority and power; the Nahuas referred to a leader as *tlahtoani*: ‘the person who speaks’. As we shall see in the sections relating to the birthing ceremony, a woman took on the mantle of public oration: when she officiated at the naming of

⁵⁹⁹ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 43;

a male baby, ‘the midwife spoke man’s talk’.⁶⁰⁰ Sahagún, or his scribes, were impressed with the lifecycle discourses, particularly the female voices. They wrote that ‘Much is mentioned which is memorable — very good discourses of the sort which women say; and very good are each of the metaphors’.⁶⁰¹ This collection of formal speeches also provides insights into how Nahuas perceived themselves as part of a larger ritual cycle. Also important to this analysis is the *Florentine Codex*’s fourth book which speaks about the *tonalpouhqui* (readers of days) who entered Nahua homes with their painted books to advise families on auspicious dates. Book Five, regarding the ‘omens’ is an extremely useful gateway into the home as a ritual space.

Pictorial sources are also useful for this section. As I have explored in some detail in the introduction, the colonial *Codex Mendoza* is a unique source for Mexica daily life. The third part of the sixteenth-century manuscript illustrates the complementary nature of Mexica gendered upbringing very clearly which makes it an extremely important source for the subsequent discussions of pregnancy and birth. Folio 58r of the codex shows [see figure 11] the gendered division of children’s upbringing from the age of three years old. It is particularly interesting that gendered division did not start until this age, perhaps indicating that children were treated the same regardless of their sex until this age. While it would clearly be simplistic to deduce that all four-year-olds ate a ration of only one tortilla, these pictorial insights tell us what was expected of an average Nahua childhood. As we have seen, this source is extremely useful for the ideal or ‘normal’ experience but there is little here to tell us of individual choices, perspectives or any variation from the average. So, this source is valuable when used in

⁶⁰⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 37: 204. ‘Midwife’ is Dibble and Anderson’s translation of *ticitl*. In her dictionary, Karttunen translates this more broadly as ‘physician, prognosticator, healer’: Karttunen, *Analytical Dictionary*, p. 240. In my analysis, I use ‘midwife’ for this very specific, powerful female role. While this is perhaps not the way Nahuas would have conceived this person’s responsibilities, I use it here in the broad sense, for reasons for readability and style.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 6: 27: 151.

conjunction with alphabetic sources which can add a more varied picture to these pictorial representations.

The alphabetic sources central focus upon metropolitan, public and official practices.⁶⁰² The sources provide comparatively less information on daily life, ordinary customs and domestic activities. The difficulties of the evidence are compounded by the fact that the European and Nahua worldviews were dramatically different with regards to religion and spirituality. The interconnectedness of the Nahua landscape meant that activities such as sweeping or tending the hearth were not separated by binary notions of sacred or profane. Friars did not understand this worldview as, in their understanding, these were just household chores. However, for the Nahuas these domestic tasks held important spiritual value which featured in many of their ceremonies.⁶⁰³ The Nahuatl verb ‘to sweep’ is *ichpana* which has been related to both *chipahua* (‘to cleanse’) and to *ichpochtli* (‘young girl’).⁶⁰⁴ This linguistic association indicates that purificatory sweeping and womanhood were very closely linked. Of course, as I have indicated, men also assumed sweeping responsibilities in the temple and so household tasks held importance in the public, male sphere. But day-to-day, it was women who swept their homes for both practical and spiritual reasons. The *Florentine Codex* indicates that a woman was implored by her elders to ‘Attend to the sweeping, the picking up’; ‘arise quickly... size the broom, attend to the sweeping’; ‘take charge of the sweeping... arise in the deep of

⁶⁰² This has led to a lack of research on domestic and non-elite ritual, particularly the activities inside Tenochtitlan. Most of the scholarship on domestic ritual uses archaeological sources and refers to those activities of the provinces. See, for example: Michael E. Smith, ‘Domestic Ritual at Aztec Provincial Sites in Morelos’, in Patricia Plunket (ed.), *Domestic Ritual in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Los Angeles, 2002), pp. 93-114; Lisa Overholtzer, ‘So that the baby not be formed like a Pottery Rattle: Aztec Rattle Figurines and Household Social Reproductive Practices’, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 23.1 (2012), pp. 69-83.

⁶⁰³ Inga Clendinnen has made similar arguments regarding the difficulties of converting a native population, who venerated the natural landscape, to Christianity. She argues that, ‘The Maya read their landscape very differently... Only the forests, the waterholes and the gods of the World Directions were constant’, and that Christianity made little sense to them within their worldview. See Clendinnen, ‘Landscape and Worldview’, p. 393.

⁶⁰⁴ Burkhart, ‘Mexica Women on the Homefront’, p. 34.

night'.⁶⁰⁵ When her husband was away, sweeping became even more onerous as her diligence in the housework would spur on her husband to military glory.⁶⁰⁶ Sweeping was important to public ritual. During the eleventh *veintena* Ochpaniztli ('the Sweeping of Roads'), for example, an *ixiptlah* ritually cleansed all the pathways leading to the marketplace by sweeping before being decapitated.⁶⁰⁷ Thus, the everyday religious practices are not neatly labelled as such in the documentary sources. Where the friars did record household tasks as being connected with spirituality, they were reduced to being 'superstitions', as in Book Five of the *Florentine Codex* which is dedicated to these activities.

The personal and emotional are notoriously difficult to access from the available sources which privilege the public and the dramatic.⁶⁰⁸ The lifecycle is a useful entry point into non-elite experiences because every boy and girl underwent certain, seemingly fixed, rites of passage. Communal rituals relating to pregnancy, birth and naming are valuable hooks by which to draw out differences in experience, particularly across social statuses. These rituals were not isolated, parochial acts which only held significance to those performing or participating in them. Rather, they were important to reinforcing the values and priorities of the family, kinship group and wider society. As Inomata writes of the large-scale, public performances of the classic Maya, citing Bourdieu: 'Even daily practices on a small scale can be highly political, reflecting and re-creating the power relations of the society at large'.⁶⁰⁹ I

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶⁰⁷ DiCesare, *Sweeping the Way*, p. 66.

⁶⁰⁸ Even Clendinnen's influential text of cultural history, *Aztecs: an interpretation*, which seeks to reinvest the 'Aztecs' of Tenochtitlan with their humanity, heavily emphasises public drama over personal interactions. See in particular the chapter 'Ritual: the World Transformed, the World Revealed', *Aztecs*, pp. 236-63. For other texts which privilege public ritual over private or domestic activities: Hassig, *Time, History and Belief*; Read, *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos*.

⁶⁰⁹ Inomata, 'Plazas, Performers, and Spectators', p. 807. See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1977).

analyse how ordinary men and women's rituals might have been linked to the ideology of the state, with particular focus on the importance of the blood debt and human sacrifice.

This chapter will demonstrate that, despite the difficulty of the sources, it is possible to look beyond the static picture presented by some of the texts. The sources make it extremely difficult to access any *individual* Nahua experiences or perspectives and I am certainly not suggesting that it is possible to trace any single, named person on their path through life (with the exception of a few nobles). However, I reject the notion that these sources make it impossible to conjure a vivid, varied picture of Nahua life. Reproducing the colonial friars' fixed, repetitive ritual model is not inevitable when investigating 'unofficial' practices and, most importantly, it is possible to access some of the ways in which different people made choices about their lives. These arguments are hugely important to my overall hypothesis that Nahua ritualism was more varied, flexible and responsive to individual circumstances than has previously been understood or proven in any detail. This chapter demonstrates that ritual flexibility was as much a feature of domestic ritual experiences as it was of lavish, state-sponsored sacrifices.

Part I

Variations in Domestic Ritual within Tenochtitlan

Tenochtitlan seems patriarchal. This was a warrior society which glorified both male and female achievements in militaristic terms. Men were revered for their bravery in battle with lavish and public rewards. The pinnacle of female achievement was reproduction, where a woman excelled by taking on a manly role: parturient women were compared to warriors and the birth scene was conceived of as a battlefield. A woman's place seems to have been in the home, sweeping, cooking and teaching her daughters about women's work. June Nash, for one, has argued that Mexica society was one which 'glorified the cult of male dominance', highlighting that the patrilineal state administration was relied on male privilege.⁶¹⁰ For Nash, the Mexica's conquest aims led to the inevitable subjugation of women as household drudges and powerless war captives.⁶¹¹ However, scholars such as Nash fall into the trap of taking the early colonial textual sources superficially. As we are only too aware, the friars interpreted their findings with their own assumptions, prejudices and mental frameworks. These were men of their time and, unsurprisingly, they tended to downplay or ignore the ways in which women were socially, culturally, and productively valuable.⁶¹² Moreover, Betty Ann Brown poses a provocative question, which I seek to interrogate in my work, 'It appears the native informants

⁶¹⁰ Nash, 'Aztecs', p. 359.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 361-62. Nash even suggests the Mexica's departure from the 'egalitarian traditions of a wandering tribe' led to the Mexica defeat at the hands of the Spanish.

⁶¹² These omissions and distortions were not limited to the questionnaires. Betty Ann Brown has shown that the illustrations of women's ritual activities and roles in Sahagún's work went largely ignored and the content of the illustrations is not developed in the descriptions: Betty Ann Brown, 'Seen but not Heard: Women in Aztec Ritual — the Sahagún Texts', in Janet C. Berlo (ed.), *Text and Image in Pre-Columbian Art: Essays on the Interrelationship of the Verbal and Visual Arts* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 119-53.

and scribes Sahagún employed were all male. Were Aztec men privy to the knowledge of women's ritual activities?'⁶¹³

A subtler reading of the historical record, in conjunction with archaeological excavations, conjures up a remarkably different picture of Mexica society from Nash's 'ideology of male dominance'. Rather, it is clear that women were respected and valued for their contributions to a society predicated on responsibility, balance and reciprocity. In this understanding, which scholars have labelled 'gender parallelism', men and women operated within separate spheres of influence.⁶¹⁴ While it does not necessarily follow that both sexes were considered precisely *equal* in this set up, the ideal model of gender relations was that their cultural and productive value was recognised with equal vigour. Women were not helpers or second-class citizens in Tenochtitlan; men and women were partners in life and work. This model of gender relations was proposed by scholars such as Susan Kellogg, Louise Burkhart and Inga Clendinnen.⁶¹⁵ These ideas have been expanded and developed since they were first suggested in the 1990s. Caroline Dodds Pennock, for example, has since argued that the household model of gender relations can be scaled up to apply to Tenochtitlan's public institutions. Women's space was confined to the domestic sphere but, in this understanding, the domestic sphere extended outside of the home. Here, domestic 'should be read in the broadly political sense, implying an opposition to "foreign", rather than "public", spaces'.⁶¹⁶ In this way, Dodds Pennock has shown that women's influence was not restricted to its four walls

⁶¹³ Brown, 'Seen but not Heard', p. 133.

⁶¹⁴ Powers, *Women in the Crucible*, pp. 10-11.

⁶¹⁵ Kellogg, 'From Parallel and Equivalent', pp. 123-43; Burkhart, 'Mexica Women on the Home Front', pp. 25-54; Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, esp. pp. 153-209. For a broader, but very useful, exploration of pre-Hispanic gender roles among the Aztecs and Incas, see Karen V. Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest: the Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society* (Albuquerque, 2005), pp. 1-38. While a binary system is certainly the dominant paradigm of Nahua gender relations, Cecelia Klein argues that the Nahuas viewed gender as inherently unstable and in need of delineation: see Cecelia F. Klein, 'None of the Above: Gender Ambiguity in Nahua Ideology', in her *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America* (Dumbarton Oaks, 2001), pp. 183-254.

⁶¹⁶ Dodds Pennock, "'A Remarkably Patterned Life'", p. 530.

of the home. The aforementioned analyses have largely been based on the documentary and pictorial accounts. Elizabeth Brumfiel and Sharisse and Geoffrey McCafferty have pioneered the investigation of gender relations in the archaeological record, largely by looking at implements of women's work and their meaning for female identity.⁶¹⁷ This gendered division has confirmed that, by and large, men and women held responsibility for separate tasks within discrete domains in their daily lives. In the model of married partnership — considered the 'norm' for Nahua adults — women were responsible for the home, for the childhood education of any daughters and caring for their unweaned infants. Men were responsible for farming, trading and warfare.

As my focus is on the agency of the parents and other ritual actors within the home, I will not rehearse the gendered nature of the birth rituals. Their internal choreography and cultural purposes have been well-drawn and discussed in great depth elsewhere.⁶¹⁸ Instead, I focus specifically on the naming portion of the ceremony in order to spotlight the intersection between parental control and responsibility. Analysis of this illuminates how Nahuas were shaped to conform to the ideal life and death expected of them. Now that we have established

⁶¹⁷ Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, 'Asking About Aztec Gender: The Historical and Archaeological Evidence', in Cecelia F. Klein (ed.), *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America* (Washington, D.C., 2001), pp. 57-85; Sharisse D. McCafferty and Geoffrey G. McCafferty, 'Spinning and Weaving as Female Gender Identity in Post-Classic Central Mexico', in Margot Schevill, Janet Catherine Berlo, and Edward Dwyer (eds), *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes: An Anthology* (New York, 1991), pp. 19-44; Sharisse D. McCafferty and Geoffrey G. McCafferty, 'Textile Production in Postclassic Cholula, Mexico', *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 11 (2000), pp. 39-54.

⁶¹⁸ For these discussions see especially: Clendinnen, *Aztecs*; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, chap 2, esp. pp. 46-52; Susan Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture* (Norman, 1995), pp. 88-91. Some of my previous research considered the social and cultural power of the birth and naming ceremonies in the education of young boys in Tenochtitlan, and how this 'constructed' them as future warriors: Harriet Smart, 'Constructing the Aztec Warrior: Birth to Battlefield', MA Thesis (University of Sheffield, 2014). See also Rosemary Joyce, 'Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy', pp. 473-83, esp. pp. 475-8. Joyce is useful for thinking about the performative, constructed nature of birthing rituals. However, her conclusions should be read very closely because she makes a pan-Mesoamerican argument. Although she does use some evidence that refers specifically to the Mexica, her conclusions refer to Mesoamerica generally and her methodology is to 'juxtapose discussion of early village sites in Mesoamerica... with the Aztec material'.

the sources, the problems and the motivations for studying domestic ritualism, let us move to explore what happened at the birth of a Nahua baby.

Parental choices and official intervention in birth rituals

In Tenochtitlan, pregnancy and childbirth were joyful times. Extended family and neighbours flocked around to honour the mother-to-be and, provided all went well, welcome the new addition very soon after birth. The *huehuetlahtolli* made clear that her family and friends supported and cared for her during the pregnancy. Pregnancy and childbirth were an intriguing combination of both private and communal activities involving both sexes. Relatives, particularly the future grandparents, were not just proud onlookers but were actively involved in caring for the new parents. We see this support during the early stages of pregnancy when the expectant father's relatives visit the couple to address them.⁶¹⁹ The *Florentine Codex* also hints that it was normal for the new grandparents to wait anxiously for news. Following the birth the midwife exhorted them saying 'Without sleep ye have remained awaiting'.⁶²⁰ Here, then, we see a caring and supportive community. The whole neighbourhood — and particularly the family — were actively involved in pregnancy and preparing for the birth.

However, this was not just a cosy, family moment. The birth rituals had other, societal purposes. The sacrificial cult was revealed, normalised and reinforced continually through the *huehuetlahtolli* performed at each birth. Birth rites were particularly conservative and, as performative acts, they were witnessed by wider family and neighbours.⁶²¹ Aside from the

⁶¹⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 24: 135-36.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6: 33: 180.

⁶²¹ Joyce has studied figurines and bodily ornaments, finding that 'the Mesoamerican *longue durée* was shaped... [by] conservatism in the reproduction of social personhood'. See Joyce, 'Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy', p. 474. See also C. R. Cobb, 'Social Reproduction and the *longue durée* in the prehistory of the midcontinental United States', in R. W. Preucel (ed.), *Processual and Postprocessual Archaeologies* (Carbondale, 1991), pp. 171-74; Michael E. Smith, 'Rhythms of

family, there were external actors during these moments in the form of the midwife and the reader of days.⁶²² The role of the midwife is crucial to my analysis as it was through her that the baby and the family were informed of its gendered fate. The birth rituals are an excellent case study to analyse the balance between central structures and ideals and personal involvement and decision-making. This is when ‘official’ institutions collided most emphatically with the individual and the family.

Midwifery came under the broader profession of *ticitl* which is usually translated as physician, doctor or healer but also encompassed diviners and sorcerers.⁶²³ These people, men and women, were sages (learned people).⁶²⁴ The midwife was summoned by the family when the labour pains began. She did not reside with the family during pregnancy as she must have had a number of families which she was attending at any given time. However, a noble woman’s experience was very different. She had several midwives who were around her constantly during the final stages of pregnancy; a commoner woman had to wait her turn and request that her midwife attend her.⁶²⁵

As we shall see, the midwife was an impressive character. She was physically and psychologically strong. Midwifery was her full-time occupation and she would have been dealing with pregnant women and newly delivered mothers on a regular basis within their homes and the *temazcalli*. As labouring women were invested with potentially devastating energy, by virtue of their association with Earth Mother Cihuacoatl,⁶²⁶ a midwife had to have the power to withstand Cihuacoatl’s devastating power unprotected. To take gendered

Change in Postclassic Central Mexico: Archaeology, Ethnohistory and the Braudelian Model, in A. B. Knapp (ed.), *Archaeology, Annales and Ethnohistory* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 51-74.

⁶²² It is interesting that there is not the same evidence relating to payment as there was for the *tonalpouhqui*.

⁶²³ Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 27.

⁶²⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 10: 8: 29-30.

⁶²⁵ A noble or wealthy woman could have as many as two or three midwives: *Florentine Codex*, 6: 30: 167.

⁶²⁶ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 37.

responsibilities first, as a woman in charge of the most exclusively female of all activities, childbirth, the midwife seems to fit nicely into the framework of gender complementarity. While family were involved in pregnancy, the actual labour was clearly a female business, taking place within the home — the traditional locus of female responsibility — and conducted by the midwife and the new mother. However, if we delve a little deeper the midwife actually seems to trouble neat distinctions between public/masculine and domestic/feminine. This woman took on masculine characteristics to fulfil her female tasks. Most importantly, the midwife spoke in a public forum to advise, encourage and inform the expectant mother and her family. She was the principal ritual officiant during the rites. As we saw with the Nahuatl word for ‘ruler’, *tlahtoani*, speaking well was a sign of authority and public oratory was a masculine task. It is particularly interesting that, in order to conduct her work, the midwife is referred to as engaging in ‘man’s talk’ (*oquichtlatoa*).⁶²⁷

Scholars have rightly highlighted her knowledgeable and authoritative speech as ‘an intriguing counterpoint to more homely ideals of femininity expressed in motherhood and conveyed at the birth of a female child’.⁶²⁸



Figure 39: The midwife extols the baby as she places it in the cradle
Florentine Codex, book 6

This chapter will demonstrate that the midwife was a liminal figure in many ways as

she straddled male and female roles and the divine and mortal spheres. The midwife was a woman with a talking, performative role in a domestic, family ceremony. As such, she complicates many of our assumptions related to Nahua ritual and provides an exemplary way to assess differences between public and private ritual.

⁶²⁷ Florentine Codex, 6: 37: 204.

⁶²⁸ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 42.

It was the woman's parents who sought out the particular midwife to assist their precious daughter during labour.⁶²⁹ This is evident when the chosen midwife performs her humility by asking 'How indeed can you have chosen me... For there are, there exist, there dwell the skilled ones...'.⁶³⁰ The agency of individuals is powerfully demonstrated in the family's influence on decisions during the process of childbirth. This was a shared experience marked by excitement but also a clear preoccupation with doing things 'properly' to ensure successful reproduction. It is interesting that the midwife could not be any female relative or associate but it had to be a professional person. In the *Codex Mendoza* representation of the naming ceremony, the midwife is depicted as an old woman with wrinkles. The midwife's persona and authority seems to be similar that of her male counterpart, the *tonalpouhqui*, who would enter the home to prognosticate, advise and warn about dates to name the baby.⁶³¹ Both characters were 'professional' people with an important, learned set of skills. While they were community authority figures, they sat outside of political hierarchies or religious structures as independent actors. While there is no indication that these roles were directed by religious authorities, we must not be too quick to divorce them from official structures. As we shall see, both midwife and reader played crucial ritual roles which were closely tied to the expectations of the official cult. By means of their profession, they bolstered and disseminated the official ideologies and calendrical information. While they clearly played their part in promoting the state-sanctioned ideologies, there is no indication, however, in the sources that these roles were *directed* by local or central religious authorities.

When a screaming baby arrived into the world, the midwife's was the first voice he or she heard. In an imposing reminder of the centrality of warfare to all Mexica lives, the midwife

⁶²⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 26: 149.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6: 27: 153.

⁶³¹ It seems as though their influence was also not necessarily restricted to calendrical interpretations. An amusing aside from Durán explains that the readers might also advise about how to have one's hair cut: Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 420.

exhorted the mother by screaming battle cries. These penetrating shrieks were in honour of the new mother as she ‘had become a brave warrior, had taken a captive, had captured a baby’.⁶³² The birthing scene was a feminine metaphor for this masculine arena with the mother as the warrior and the midwife the key officiant. Binary pairings were a fundamental feature of almost all experiences in Nahua culture. They were productive because of their opposing yet complementary nature, typically the pairing of the two sexes.⁶³³ Here, the birthing ritual was performed by two women and their dynamic pairing was characterised by opposing ages. Close inspection of figure 46 shows an old woman, with the two-pronged hairstyle of married women, holding the baby as it is bathed. In this way, the typical midwife was clearly not usually of reproductive age. By contrast, the younger woman is often referred to as ‘the little woman’ (*cihuatzintli*) or addressed as ‘my beloved child’ (*noconetzin*) and seems to be cast as something of an ingénue: when her parents greet her in-laws she is referred to as ‘the child, the girl, the maiden’ (*in piltontli, in conetontli, in ichpuchtontli*).⁶³⁴ The guiding hand of the reassuring midwife was seemingly universal and the relationship between the two women seems to have been close and trusting. Crucially, men had no formal role at the actual childbirth; this was an emphatically female space centred on an authoritative older woman and the labouring mother.

⁶³² *Florentine Codex*, 6: 30: 167.

⁶³³ Caroline Dodds Pennock, ‘Aztec Life Cycles’, in Deborah L. Nichols and Enrique Rodríguez-Alegria (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs* (Oxford, 2016), p. 393.

⁶³⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 26: 149.

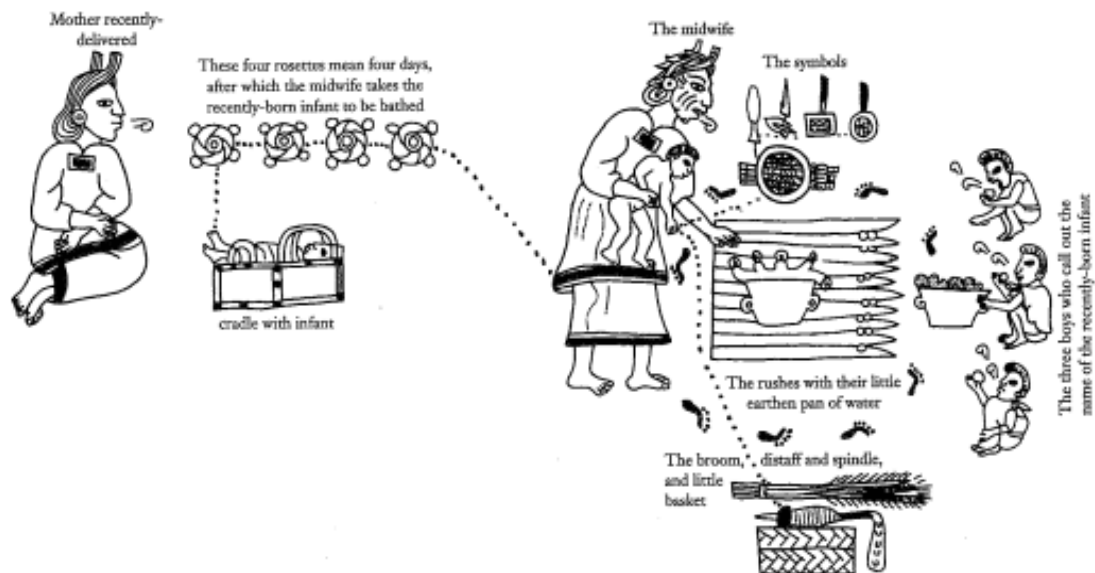


Figure 40: The naming of a baby
Codex Mendoza, fol. 57r.

By virtue of the rites which took place in it, the home was always a ritual space. However, the days between the birth and the official naming were considered to be the most perilous for the newborn, and this meant that the home became a locus of ritual activity. During these moments, the midwife was the key officiant. When it was still covered in birth fluid, the skilled woman cut the umbilical cord and addressed it directly in front of its anxious parents and grandparents. Clearly, the child would not have understood these words. The intended audience for these speeches is glossed by Sahagún; he explained that ‘although [the baby] did not hear it; thereby he consoled only those who were the mothers, the fathers of the baby’.⁶³⁵ While the midwife spoke softly so as not to disturb the little baby, her words were not necessarily cosy or comforting. While the infant was welcomed lovingly as a ‘precious necklace, precious feather’, their fate was not sugar-coated, even at this early stage. A girl was

⁶³⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 24: 183. Square brackets are in the original Dibble and Anderson translation from the Nahuatl.

informed unequivocally in her life ‘there will be pain, there will be affliction, there will be misery... work, labor, for daily sustenance’.⁶³⁶ While a girl’s duty was ‘to prepare drink, to prepare food, to grind, to spin, to weave’,⁶³⁷ a male infant was told that he had been born to die an honourable death. Sahagún’s annotation to this speech says that ‘she told him that it was all affliction... that he would die in war, or would die in sacrifice to the gods’.⁶³⁸ The wise woman blew on the tub of water and washed the baby carefully. This act serves to underline the birthing scene as a ritual space. Breathing upon things was an important way of ‘bringing them to life’ as ritual objects and remains an important practice among contemporary Nahuas.⁶³⁹

The ritual dialogues continued and gave meaning to the spectacle. These words created a synaesthetic experience, by which all bystanders received the meaning of the drama. The purpose of these rites were to convey to the newborn and attendant family that the child’s destiny was preordained. Everyone saw the midwife pronounce to a boy: ‘thy home is not here... here is only the place of thy nest... Thou belongest out there: out there thou hast been consecrated’.⁶⁴⁰ A girl was informed that ‘Thou wilt be in the heart of the home, thou wilt go nowhere... thou art to provide water, to grind maize, to drudge; thou art to sweat by the ashes, by the hearth’.⁶⁴¹ The midwife then cut the umbilical cord — physically separating mother from baby — telling it to ‘Approach thy mother Chalchihuitl icue [sic]’ (*ximaxiti in monantzin in chalchivilt icue*).⁶⁴² The new mother acknowledged her subjection to the will of the omnipotent deities. Whenever she placed the baby in the cradle, the mother exhorted Chalchihuitlicue: ‘its

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6: 30: 168.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6: 31: 173.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6: 31: 171.

⁶³⁹ Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*.

⁶⁴⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 31: 171.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6: 31: 172.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*, 6: 32: 175.

mother, receive the baby!’⁶⁴³ The baby — and the mother’s — fate lay in the hands of the divine.

A brutal culture?

While, in many ways, the midwife was an independent actor, we see in these speeches and acts that she was clearly working within official religious structures which promoted a gendered system of responsibility. One of the most striking aspects of the birthing rituals is the midwife’s constant reminders to the exhausted mother that the baby she has laboured valiantly over did not belong to her. The midwife directed the birthing scene to reinforce society’s gendered expectations and social norms. Here, we must remember that all those who lived in the patio gathered at this scene. Old and young, they watched the midwife address the baby in such a way that their gendered fate seemed inevitable: boys would become warriors and girls would work in the home. The meaning of the midwife’s incantations was plain: mother and baby were no longer a single entity. The physical separation of the mother from her child is a prevalent theme throughout the birthing and naming rites. As her family jostled around her offering words of advice, the midwife told her that ‘thou hast separated thyself from and left the jeweled necklace... you are not indivisible; you will not be joined together’.⁶⁴⁴ Clendinnen incisively recognises that ‘Few societies think to challenge the bond between mother and neonate’.⁶⁴⁵ In a way, doing so could be perceived as an act of violence. Nahua culture certainly stands out for the harsh, almost cruel, nature of its rites of passage. Physical separation and corporal violence were central features of Mexica rites of passage.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, 6: 38: 206.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4: 35: 114.

⁶⁴⁵ Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 175.

Izcalli (the last *veintena* in the yearly round) provides an instructive example of a complex rite of passage which unified violence with compassion. This ritual, therefore, exemplifies the dynamic which we are exploring here: how rituals might have been used to indoctrinate, or the very least, persuade the Nahuas that bloodshed and human sacrifice were necessary and useful. More broadly speaking, it provides a useful lens through which to explore the relationship between domestic and public, and individuals and the collective, and personal agency and choice in Nahua ritual.

Izcalli was a vibrant ceremony which fell in the eighteenth *veintena*, the last period of every solar year, which was followed by the timeless *nemontemi* period. Every four years, this ceremony presented boys and girls to religious service and incorporated the child even further into their family's kinship circle.⁶⁴⁶ All children born during the intervening four years were said to be stretched, 'grasped... for growth that they might quickly grow tall' (Figure 2.2).⁶⁴⁷ This was a different celebration to birthing and naming, where the child's participation was needed but not active. Participant children were pasted with yellow and white feathers and had their ears pierced. A thorn attached to a piece of cotton was drawn through the freshly pierced hole.⁶⁴⁸ This ceremony further distanced the child from their blood family and from the cosy home life they were enjoying beside the hearth. Parents sought out 'perhaps a seasoned warrior or a leader of youths... might wish to be as a parent'.⁶⁴⁹ This person could not be an immediate relation and parents could choose who they liked from their friendship and kinship circles. This was, for want of a better word, a type of 'godparent'. This is particularly interesting as it is a rare example of individual agency in public ritual. It is clear that the parents would wish to

⁶⁴⁶ Alejandro Díaz Barriga Cuevas, 'Ritos de paso de la niñez nahua durante la veintena de *Izcalli*', *Estudios de cultura náhuatl*, 46 (2013), pp. pp. 199-211. For more on Izcalli see: Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 155; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, pp. 63-65; Joyce, 'Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy', p. 477.

⁶⁴⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 37: 166.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

seek out the most illustrious or talented warrior they knew in order to act as kinsman and mentor to their precious child. In making this decision, the parents hoped to ensure the best possible start for their son in his first forays into the swirling battlefield.

More importantly, this kinship relationship further integrated (boys at least) into the warrior life. After being held over a smoking fire, the exhausted children were taken home to remain awake in vigil. As dawn broke, they were taken back to the public arena with their mentors for dancing and feasting. One of the most intriguing aspects of Izcalli was the collective consumption of *pulque*.⁶⁵⁰ Usually, on pain of death, only distinguished elders were permitted it. However at this ceremony: ‘The pulque ran like water’.⁶⁵¹ Here we see a child’s introduction to public ritual. Until now it is likely that their ritual experiences had been restricted to their family’s own domestic activities. At Izcalli, children were introduced to those rites which would characterise their ritual participation for the rest of their lives: feasting, drinking, dancing and, most importantly perhaps, collective ritual bloodshed.⁶⁵² The burden to provide bloody sustenance to almost insatiable deities rested heavily on all Mexica people, in particular male warriors whose duty it was to provide enemies as sacrificial victims. As Clendinnen observes, the Nahuatl word *tequitl* translates roughly as ‘debt’ or ‘tribute’, and ‘was used most insistently... to describe the offerings made of one’s own blood, in the routine daily offerings, or on the battlefield or the killing stone’.⁶⁵³

For Rosemary Joyce, Izcalli was an important rite of passage during which time children left the cosy home and began to take on more responsibilities. She argues that this

⁶⁵⁰ An alcoholic drink made from fermented agave sap. Its consumption in this ceremony is particularly interesting as it was usually highly restricted.

⁶⁵¹ *Florentine Codex*, 2: 38: 170.

⁶⁵² Elizabeth Morán has explored another under-appreciated aspect of Mexica rituals: food and feasting. Morán has argued, for the naming ceremony, that feasts allowed ‘guests and host to carry on social interactions crucial to the workings of a larger society’. Moreover, she demonstrates that assessing food in rituals permits us to detect variation between rich and power and to access gender roles. See Morán, *Sacred Consumption*, in particular pp. 19-22.

⁶⁵³ Clendinnen, ‘The Cost of Courage’, p. 85.

ritual process ‘marked the transition from the freedom of infants to the structured training of older children’.⁶⁵⁴ Alejandro Díaz Barriga Cuevas has shed further light on what Joyce refers to as the ‘bodily materiality’⁶⁵⁵ imposed on children at different stages of childhood. His analysis of the *Florentine Codex* illustrations has shown that Izcalli began the gradual production of the adult body. Díaz notes that the children are dressed in the *maxtlatl* (adult loincloth) in the scene where the new mentors took the children home after the piercing of the skin.⁶⁵⁶ He concludes that it was after the Izcalli ceremony that boys started wearing the miniature versions of adult clothes.⁶⁵⁷ His conclusions would seem to suggest, therefore, that Izcalli was a rite of passage to the adult body.

To my mind, this ritual was a moment of social integration into kinship circles and the *demands* of adult religious festivals, rather than introduction to formal education or adult responsibilities. Given that the ceremony occurred only every four years, children taking part were not all of the same age. Many could have been as young as one or two years old and would certainly not be mature enough for formal education. Furthermore, even if the child had been four years old at Izcalli, the *Codex Mendoza* showed serious training beginning at least seven years later (although for noble children this could be younger). This was not a harsh society where children were forced to participate in labour or onerous tasks.⁶⁵⁸ After the parents had chosen a temple to which to dedicate their baby, the newborn remained at home with their parents until they went to school at early puberty. López Austin has argued that ‘unlike the Maya, the Nahuas [Aztecs] do not seem to have celebrated an important ritual that marked

⁶⁵⁴ Joyce, ‘Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy’, p. 477.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 479.

⁶⁵⁶ Díaz Barriga Cuevas, ‘Ritos de paso de la niñez nahua’, p. 209.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁶⁵⁸ This does not mean, however, that children were not expected to be useful where they were able. For example, even very small children were sent to pick up spilled grain and produce from the market: *Codex Mendoza*, fol. 57r; Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 67. While still a fairly dull task, the Nahuas clearly did not burden children with more responsibilities than their age allowed.

transition from childhood to youth'.⁶⁵⁹ For the Mexica, then, acculturation was gradual, sustained and unavoidable. This was an enduring, lengthy process brought about through ritual acculturation. I propose that the Izcalli festival was the last in a series of childhood rites of passage that progressively and gradually introduced all Mexica children to wider circles of kin, who had all been brought up to appreciate the gendered expectations of their society.⁶⁶⁰ However, parents and relations were allowed some space within which to make their own personal mark on their child. They could select their own friend, neighbour or acquaintance to act as a mentor to their offspring and they were able — in theory — to decide which the school to which to dedicate their son.

These moments of brutality — such as in the initiation rites explored here — were dramatic, violent spectacles. However, these were far from an uncaring people. These apparently callous acts were juxtaposed with intimate moments where eager family gathered to welcome a new addition. When the baby was formally named, ‘There was jostling and crowding. And the old men and old women greeted the small boy and his newly delivered mother’.⁶⁶¹ Recognising that the mother and baby had been separated forever, elders attempted to calm her, telling her to watch over the baby carefully and to take care of herself.⁶⁶² While Izcalli represented a further step in the child’s integration within their family’s kinship circles and participation in ritual bloodshed, it was also the time when parents found an experienced elder to protect them from harm. For boys this was especially important for their first forays into battle. This is precisely the type of contradiction between violence and compassion which

⁶⁵⁹ Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología. Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas*, v. I, p. 326; quoted in Díaz Barriga Cuevas, p. 200. This translation is mine. Original Spanish: ‘A diferencia de lo que sucedía en el mundo maya, no parece haber existido entre los nahuas una ceremonia verdaderamente importante de tránsito entre la infancia y la juventud’.

⁶⁶⁰ I have argued elsewhere ‘that participation in religious ceremonies gradually and repeatedly acculturated young Aztec boys to the concept of blood-debt, one of the primary motivating factors for warfare’. See Smart, ‘Constructing the Aztec Warrior’, pp. 40-44.

⁶⁶¹ *Florentine Codex*, 4: 35: 114.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*

has confounded modern scholars in their studies of the Nahuas (and more specifically, the Mexica). It has been difficult for scholars to reconcile how a culture which glorified warfare and fostered a cult of human sacrifice could in any way be at once loving, generous or protective of its people.

A baby's fate needed to be introduced and normalised as early as possible among the entire family. The understanding of the mother was particularly important. The birth ceremony was the first step in a series of rituals which gradually acculturated babies into the gendered expectations which would govern their life. I suggest that ritual provided the mechanism through which the midwife exposed the family to these ideals. Of the male and female fates, the boy's was unavoidable in Tenochtitlan. As Clendinnen wrote memorably, 'To be born a male in Tenochtitlan was to be designated a warrior'.⁶⁶³ Success was publicly and lavishly rewarded, while failure to comply meant humiliation and infamy. Warriorhood in pre-Hispanic central Mexico was a daunting endeavour which could very well end with ritual death in another city far from home. The physical and psychological separation we see even as early as the birth ceremony — reinforced and extended at Izcalli — prevented young males from being too dependent on their comfortable home life. These early rites were mental preparation so that they, and their families, could accept that their fate lay on the battlefield. It was particularly important that mothers understood that the ideal death for their son would be by the obsidian knife. While, in theory sources such as the *Codex Mendoza* presented childcare as a gendered

⁶⁶³ Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 112. All Mexica men were compelled towards warriorhood with the very rare of exceptions of priests, merchants and the *tlalmaitl* (literally, 'the hand of the earth', these were landless peasants who might have been considered the 'original' inhabitants of the land underneath Tenochtitlan). In some ways, priesthood was a harsher life than warrior activities. It required total and complete obedience, rather than the part-time, seasonal obligations of warfare. The fate which awaited 'effeminate' men, or boys who did not fit into the warrior model has not been given due scholarly attention. Of course, the sources' focus on the 'typical' or 'desirable' way of life make such an investigation problematic. It remains that Clendinnen's famous phrase glosses over variations and distinctions in lifestyles. Simply drawing male/female distinctions excludes some of these interesting ambiguities.

responsibility [see figure 48], I speculate that mothers would have shouldered the heaviest burden. Mexica men and women endured hard, long days of labour out in the fields and lakes. While a boy of five years old might have sometimes accompanied their father in their daily work, warfare was a seasonal, often long-distance, obligation, meaning that men would have been away from the home for fairly lengthy periods of time. During the season of war, it seems highly likely that women would have been responsible for the couple's children. Profession was also important. While a farmer might have had the freedom to take their child to work, this does not seem to have been the case for the *pochteca* (merchants). It seems logical that children would have remained closer to their mothers than the *Codex Mendoza* would have us believe. In this way, mothers played a crucial role in shaping their sons to conform to the brave warrior masculine ideal during their formative years. Here, then, we see that the entire family — both male and female — were crucial in a child's upbringing. Father and mother both introduced the child to their gendered fate. However, as we have seen, this was not a unique family responsibility. The ritual system made sure that children were initiated into the society by ever-increasing circles of kin, who all could have reinforced the society's gendered norms and values. At birth, they heard the midwife's wild battle cries, soon after the *tonalpouhqui* read the day-signs to explain the child's fate and thereafter mothers, fathers and kinsmen (the Izcalli godparents, for example) would have reinforced expectations. Moreover, these rituals and events did not happen once. They happened with each and every child born in Tenochtitlan, and most importantly, these rituals were observed and witnessed by close family in the patio and passers-by. This, then, was an extraordinarily powerful, self-perpetuating system which engendered these norms in society's very foundations.

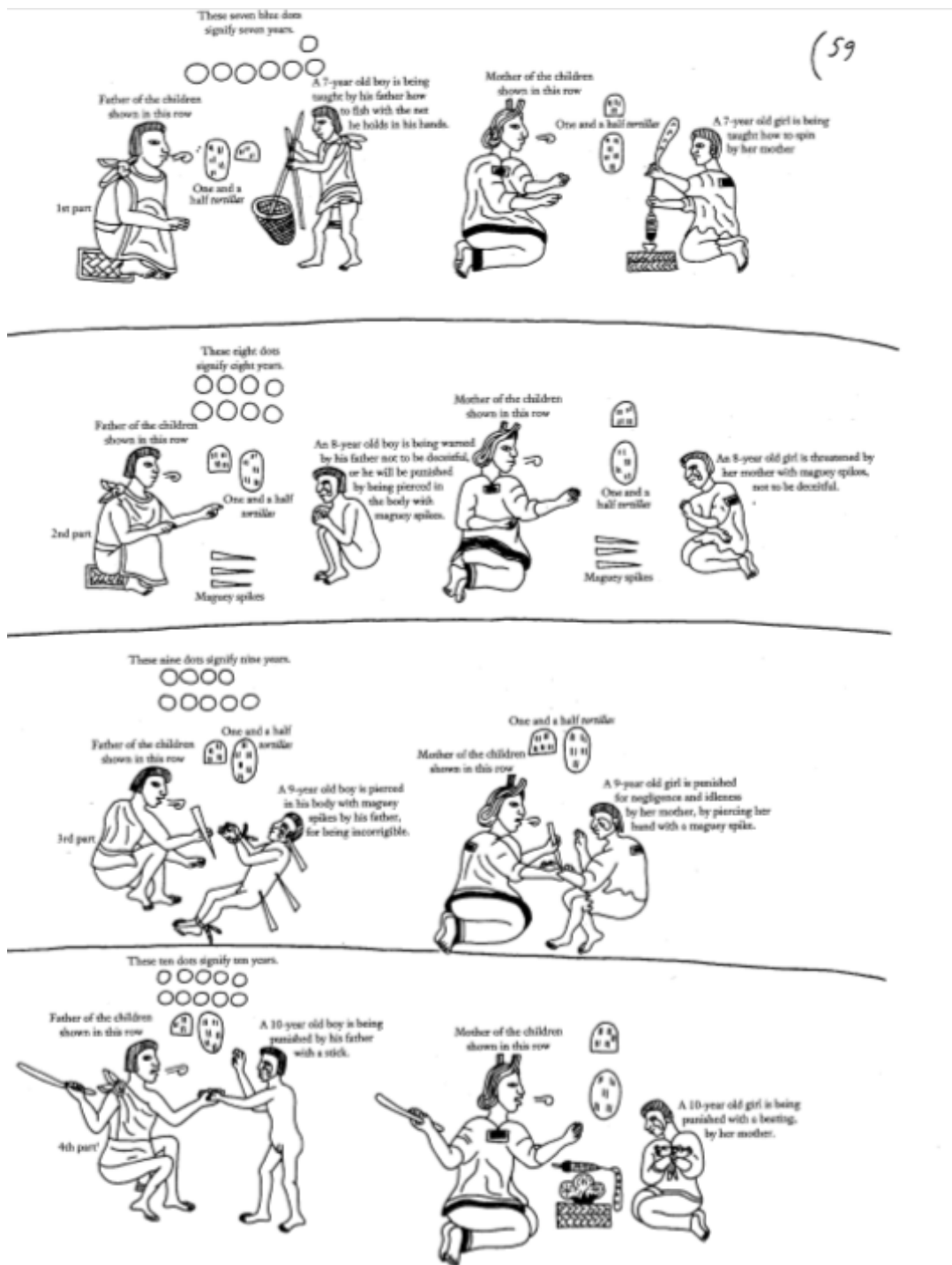


Figure 41: Early childhood and parental responsibility
Codex Mendoza, fol, 59r.

We should not underestimate these rituals in the process of bringing Mexica children and parents to accept their fate. In this respect, the participation of spectators at the rituals was essential. As we saw in household arrangements, the rituals were performed in the patio in domestic spaces which were occupied not only by a nuclear family. This means we cannot speak of the Mexica home as being strictly a 'private' space; firm boundaries between public and private do not apply in this context. While the sources imply that the birth ceremony was for the initiation of the baby, in reality, the dramatic speeches were as much for the benefit of the grandparents and neighbours who huddled into the patio at dawn of the chosen day. The midwife, *tonalpouhqui* and parents would have had something of an audience at this crucial moment: 'all the kin folk, the old men, the old women, the illustrious were assembled' before the midwife washed the baby and gave it a name.⁶⁶⁴ In front of these important, influential ancestors, the midwife formally dedicated the baby to a deity, telling it to 'now arrive with thy mother, Chalchiuhtli icue'.⁶⁶⁵ Also in this exhortation to the female water deity, the midwife emphasised the physical and psychological separation of the newly delivered mother with her baby. The woman does not own the child; it has been born to serve the deities. The midwife lifts the baby high above her head telling Tonatiuh that 'He is thy possession, thy property; he is dedicated to thee. For this was he created, to provide thee drink, to provide thee food'.⁶⁶⁶ This astonishing exhortation cannot be misconstrued; this baby has been born to die in a sacrificial cult.

Early psychological initiation to the violent norms of their culture may seem a cynical and manipulative move by Nahua priestly or civic leaders. A person would likely have participated in a large number of naming ceremonies throughout their lifetime. Here we

⁶⁶⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 37: 201.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 6: 37: 202. This dedication was particularly ominous as children were usually only sacrificed in rainmaking ceremonies to Chalchiuhtlicue and her consort Tlaloc

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 6: 37: 203.

examine the connection between the human sacrifice and the family rituals. Brumfiel has argued that: 'Household ritual activity and the state's warfare-centered ideology did occasionally intersect' and she cites *veintena* ceremonies Tlacaxipehualiztli and Huey Miccailhuitl as examples of when warrior achievement was recognised in the home.⁶⁶⁷ During Tlacaxipehualiztli, for example, households would invite neighbours for feasting if one of their members had captured an enemy who was sacrificed during that *veintena*. However, to my mind the entanglement of the concerns of the sacrificial cult with birthing domestic ritualism was much subtler and more pervasive. Their highly specialised, gendered content and choreography means that they could not exist independently of the official religious structure. In particular, rituals are integrating, socialising events which promote social integration. It is often repeated that, particularly in traditional societies, public rituals 'become the necessary way for achieving group cohesion'.⁶⁶⁸ Among others, David Kertzer has pointed out, 'it is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become and feel themselves in unison'.⁶⁶⁹ Indeed, I have argued this myself in suggesting that Izcalli was an introductory rite which brought a child into communal ritual participation. However, I must highlight here that rituals also are stylised, performative dramas which can *exclude*. During the birth ceremony, it is the midwife who incanted much of the ritual speech not the parents, who could merely respond. The midwife had full control of the scene, demonstrating to the attending family who was in charge of this baby's life. The midwife's acts and speeches were destined to reinforce the state cult in the minds of the celebrants and spectators.

I am, however, mindful not to imply that the sacrificial cult underpinned, or was even related to, *all* domestic rituals. Clearly everyday acts hold many meanings and have different

⁶⁶⁷ Brumfiel, 'Aztec Hearts and Minds', p. 290.

⁶⁶⁸ Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁶⁹ David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 61-62.

purposes. Dancing, cooking and moulding dough were all important features of commoner ritual participation.⁶⁷⁰ Blowing on corn, for example, animated this grain before it was planted and fortified it for cooking. This type of traditional act was not related to human sacrifice but was used, as we saw, to invest the child's bathing water with life force during the birth scene. However, the birth ceremony brings home the fundamental realities of Mexica life: humble, unselfish service to insatiable, fickle deities. While there were some moments of choice in the birth rituals, the ideal was very clear. The setting of the patio where these rituals were conducted means that these ideals were inescapable.

Naming

Where the birth ceremony was a prescribed ritual directed by an external actor, the naming ceremony was more flexible and open to parental choice. Here, we are afforded a vignette into lived experience and personal decisions which is so often lacking in accounts of Mexica life. In the days after the birth, the parents consulted the *tonalpouhqui* to ascertain which day would be most suitable to welcome their new addition into the family and community. The *tonalpouhqui* was a special class of priest who had been trained in the complex art of reading the day-signs, interpreting fortunes and assessing omens. The sources are a little unclear as to the *tonalpouhqui*'s role and status within the community. While we might be tempted to think of them as an authority, evidence from Sandstrom's 1980s investigations suggests that they are marginal, dangerous figures who were paid for their services but whom people avoided.⁶⁷¹ Whether or not this was the case for pre-Hispanic times, it seems difficult to know. However, it is important to remember that while respected, these figures might have

⁶⁷⁰ Brumfiel, 'Aztec Hearts and Minds', p. 289.

⁶⁷¹ Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, p. 235.

been kept at arms' length because of their arcane power and obscure knowledge. Sahagún believed that most people would have known and understood the 52-year count, but the day-signs remained vague: 'almost all adult Indians knew and were informed about the year, as to both the number and house in which they were. But of the names of the days and weeks, and many other secrets and counts which they possessed, only those masters who worked with them attained knowledge'.⁶⁷² While Sahagún might himself have been perplexed by the day-count, it might not have been the case that all Nahuas did not understand them. After all, most Nahuas were named after the day they were born. However, the association of those days — good, bad, ambivalent — and the deities were shifting, complex and confusing.

The esoteric power of their art is exemplified in their paraphernalia and ritual accoutrements. As we saw in the first chapter, the *tonalpouhqui* brought with him his divinatory almanac, the *tonalamatl*. He cross-checked information within this manuscript to produce a unique, personalised reading for his client. This was not a simple 'handbook' which just anyone could read or understand. Quiñones Keber has strongly emphasised that the individual, performative nature of a personal *tonalamatl* reading:

Unlike modern horoscope books through which a curious reader might browse, the *tonalamatl* was a diviner's, not a client's handbook. It did not contain a list of final prognostications based on a facile, pre-determined formula. Divination was a ritual performance during which a knowledgeable diviner weighed the mantic ingredients painted in the *tonalamatl* in order to arrive at a final outcome. Only the diviner could read the day signs, understand the importance of the various components involved in divinatory calculation, and thus arrive at a prognostication tailored to the needs of the client.⁶⁷³

⁶⁷² *Florentine Codex*, 4: Appendix, 141.

⁶⁷³ Eloise Quiñones Keber, 'Representing the *Veintena* Ceremonies in the *Primeros Memoriales*', in her *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagun* (Boulder, 2002), p. 253.

The wise man was summoned to the house ‘in order that they tell of what sort the day was when the baby was born’.⁶⁷⁴ Such was the complexity of the calendar that parents did not know themselves whether their baby had been born on a good, bad or ambivalent day. The parents needed to know his or her *tonalli* to confirm the naming day. The root of this Nahuatl word was *tona* (‘to be warm, for the sun to shine’)⁶⁷⁵ and essentially related to the birthday.⁶⁷⁶ The person’s day-sign was the foundation of their *tonalli* and it conferred on them certain characteristics, predilections, responsibilities and (mis)fortunes. As a decidedly non-Western concept, it has proved difficult to provide a suitable definition. In its most basic sense, *tonalli* simply refers to the actual day-sign. However, its real influences went much deeper and governed a person’s future. ‘Fate’ or ‘lot’ seem to fall short of capturing the intricate combination of fortune, energy, responsibility and spirit which *tonalli* encapsulated. In her important study of Nahua religion, Molly Bassett has suggested ‘prerogative’ which seems particularly apt at capturing the ways in which people were both in control and susceptible to their *tonalli*.⁶⁷⁷ Essentially, it refers to a person’s predispositions for a certain way of life, which were brought about by the characteristics of the day-sign on which they happened to be born. As we shall see, a poor day-sign could be mitigated with an auspicious bathing-ceremony day. Every person also had their own particular *neixcahuilli*, which Dibble and Anderson translated as ‘exclusive thing’ and ‘exclusive privilege’.⁶⁷⁸ Bassett has taken the concept one step further to denote that which a person contributed to the community: ‘an exclusive thing, occupation, business or pursuit’.⁶⁷⁹ *Tonalli* was crucial in determining a person’s *neixcahuilli*. It was acquired and achieved over time, in conjunction with their personality, attributes and associations. In short, every person was different and their characteristics, their *tonalli* and

⁶⁷⁴ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 36: 197.

⁶⁷⁵ Karttunen, *Analytical Dictionary*, p. 245.

⁶⁷⁶ Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 29; Bassett, *Fate of Earthly Things*, pp. 116-118.

⁶⁷⁷ Bassett, *Fate of Earthly Things*, p. 118.

⁶⁷⁸ *Florentine Codex*, 4: 11: 233.

⁶⁷⁹ Bassett, *Fate of Earthly Things*, p. 121, see also p. 235 n. 158.

neixcahuilli would largely determine their path through life. These concepts are particularly interesting then discussing personal agency and decision-making in ritual. While the Nahuas seem to have been an extremely fatalistic people, they did not sit idle and allow a bad lot to consume them and ruin their lives. Quite the reverse, they actively tried to mitigate misfortune as much as possible through positive decisions and actions. In *nalli* and *neixcahuilli*, then, we see the intersection of fatalism with personal choice. It seems in these concepts that the Nahuas felt themselves capable of overturning a ‘bad lot’ and making the best of it. This says much about how they perceived their position in the universe. It seems that they did not consider themselves in the grip of overwhelmingly negative forces, they knew that their actions might assuage any negative situation. Let us explore these issues further with some concrete examples.

As I laid out in the introduction, the Nahua day-sign calendar operated on a twenty-day ‘month’ where twenty day-signs operated in conjunction with thirteen numbers to create a thirteen-day ‘week’. Days were not just characterised by their name but their number, the order in the sequence, their patron deity and their *trecena*. Even though omens and superstitions surrounding days were ubiquitous in Nahua culture, ordinary people could not be sure what value a day held. The parents needed to know the value of the day so that they could set a date for the crucial bathing ceremony where each child would be named and formally presented with tools for their future profession in front of close family. A child born on a favourable day sign:

He who was then born a nobleman, it was stated, would be a lord, a ruler; he would prosper, he would be rich and wealthy. And if a commoner were then born, he would be a brave warrior — a valiant chief, esteemed, honored and great. He would always eat. And if a woman were then born, she would also prosper and be rich. She would have drink and food available... Successful would be her dealings around the marketplace, in the place of business...⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁸⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 4: 1: 2. Sahagún lists these ‘good days’ as being that ‘week which began with One Crocodile: Two Wind, Three House, Four Lizard, Five Serpent, Six Death, Seven Deer, Eight Rabbit, Nine Water, Ten Dog, Eleven Money, Twelve Grass and Thirteen Reed.

It is often repeated that because the Spanish friars' informants on Nahua life were noble men, the sources principally speak of elite, male experiences. However, it is precisely this type of passage which when we pay close attention, reveals important variation in the expectations of each gender and social class. These types of sources can tell us something about the social differences, even if it was just what was expected of them. From this we can glean that the ideal for a lord was that he should be rich and wealthy, a prosperous ruler. By contrast, a commoner's lowly birth meant that he could never aspire to govern, but he could expect, with hard work, to attain the rank of great warrior. A woman could be successful in the marketplace, another important arena of female power and authority. In this way, we can see variations between men and women: it is never expected that a woman be politically powerful, but she could amass authority by being successful in her trade.⁶⁸¹ Here it is also abundantly clear that a humble birth was no barrier to the glories which could await a successful warrior or the rewards for a shrewd woman.

Codex Mendoza's well-known representation of the naming scene — figure 47 which we saw earlier — shows that naming happened four days after birth. However, the alphabetic sources hint at much more flexibility within this system. The day of naming would be decided principally by the parents in consultation with the *tonalpouhqui* and family members. One of the most interesting aspects is that ordinary men and women did not blindly follow the advice of the mysterious reader of days, no matter how authoritative his interventions, or those of other elders, might have been. There is strong evidence that parents would ultimately decide the day

⁶⁸¹ Female commercial success is not a well-recognised or explored topic. However, Nahua women could be (among other things) professional weavers, crafters, traders and practitioners (as we have seen in this chapter). The tenth book of the *Florentine Codex* ('The People') in particular includes much information on women's professional roles, see especially the illustrations where women are depicted as cacao, cape, tamale and bean sellers, among other things. See also Susan Kellogg, 'The Woman's Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre-Hispanic Period', *Ethnohistory*, 42.4, Women, Power and Resistance in Colonial Mesoamerica (Autumn, 1995), pp. 563-76, esp. pp. 566, 569-71.

to name their child once they had received their reading from the *tonalpouhqui*. For example, a baby born on 1 Cipactli. The day could not be bettered - 'For One Crocodile bore with it all the favourable day signs' — and so the *tonalpouhqui* advised the baby be bathed without delay.⁶⁸² However, 'if it were the wish [of the parents], perchance they passed over the days; perchance they settled upon still another day for him to be bathed'.⁶⁸³ This might have been because One Crocodile was so positive that the naming day did not much matter. Regardless, this insight reveals that it was ultimately the parents' decision, and not that of the trained, knowledgeable reader of days.

All was not lost if a child was born on an unfortunate day; no-one was automatically consigned to a terrible *tonalli*. In an immediate sense, the effects of an ill-fated day could be mitigated by selecting a more propitious bathing day. Or, the *tonalpouhqui* would scrutinise his books even more closely, he 'studied which were those related to it which governed there. If perhaps it was a bad day, perhaps good were its companions who governed there. This improved it'.⁶⁸⁴ For example, a baby unfortunate enough to have been burdened with the evil, 'irremediable' day-sign Six Dog was bathed the following day on Seven Monkey which 'somewhat alleviated' his curse.⁶⁸⁵ In the long term, a person could overcome negative *tonalli* with determination, hard work and good spirit. Sahagún recorded this as the case for a baby born on One Reed. The *tonalpouhqui* recommended that he or she be bathed seven days later. Given the precarious state that a newborn was in before it was named, this left the baby in danger and would, I suspect, not have been undertaken lightly. However, this did not automatically entitle the Reed child to a favourable fate, he or she had also to pull their weight, as did all Nahuas. With the bathing, 'they expected that perchance his fate and deserts might

⁶⁸² *Florentine Codex*, 4: 1: 3.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 6: 36: 198.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 4: 20: 73.

become something — if he lived, were well reared, and played his part well'.⁶⁸⁶ By the same token, being born on a favourable day did not entitle a person to a life of riches and leisure; all Nahuas still had to work hard to earn their place in society. Although the day-sign might have been favourable, it certainly did not guard against an idle nature. In this sense we see that a positive fate needed to be backed up by individual agency and activities. For the Nahuas fatalism was not overwhelmingly or all-conquering. It provided a set of guidelines within which each person understood their position and their responsibilities. Each person remained accountable to their family and neighbourhood for their behaviour. A fortunate start in life had to be backed up with meaningful actions and decisions or the person would not be well-regarded.

The protocol for the naming and bathing of the baby within the home was, therefore, adaptable to parental choice and individual circumstance. While many of the sources suggest four days as the normal interval between birth and naming, this was not necessarily the case. Far from being a rigid system where each baby was bathed exactly at four-days old on the orders of a *calmecac*-trained *tonalpouhqui*, as sources such as the *Codex Mendoza* might show, babies could be formally named on basically any day of their parents' choosing. Even if a baby's birthday was a particularly favourable one such as Ten Jaguar, parents could decide to postpone the naming: 'if they had their own reasons, they might yet pass over it'.⁶⁸⁷ However, it does seem that the parents had been socially conditioned to approve or disapprove of certain days. This is clear in the importance of paying the *tonalpouhqui* for his knowledgeable advice. The parents did not know already about the qualities of the day-signs, they paid someone else to tell them and then decided what was best for their baby themselves. It might have been that parents felt more at liberty to choose the bathing day if their child had been born on a favourable

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 4: 8: 30.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 4: 20: 74.

day-sign such as One Crocodile. If it had been born on a bad day, the parents might have followed the reader's advice much more closely. Kinship and family ties can be detected in naming choice. While it was usual for a baby to receive their birthday's day-bearer as their name (the fortunate child born on One Cipactli being called Cipac), 'Or else, they gave him the name of another one of his grandparents'.⁶⁸⁸ This, by extension, reveals that aspects of domestic ritual were highly adaptable to personal sensitivities. Even more striking is that this information comes from official sources which present what was considered 'usual' enough to tell a Spanish priest some decades after the Conquest. This indicates that it was fairly normal for parents to make their own decisions. Female authority is also abundantly clear in the naming decisions. While in some traditional societies the father chooses a child's name, it is clear that both mother and father had a say in Nahua culture.⁶⁸⁹ Indeed, the illustration of the *tonalpouhqui* consultation [figure 15], which is titled 'the parents consult the soothsayer', actually shows only the mother (identifiable by her stylised hairstyle) holding the baby and talking to the wise man.

I suggest that people might have been prejudiced against a child named with an unfavourable day sign. We know that in the case of a child born on a dog day, 'On this one they loaded and heaped up gossip and bad repute'; such a child 'mistreated, perverted, embroiled, and defamed one; they ignored, confused, confounded disgraced...'.⁶⁹⁰ Richard Alford has pointed to 'labeling effects' which might influence how a child is perceived and

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4: 1: 3.

⁶⁸⁹ For example, a baby born into the Dagomba society of northern Ghana has their name chosen by a 'soothsayer'. Depending on the circumstances, the father might select his own name on their advice. The mother is, apparently, not involved in this decision. See M. E. Kropp Dakubu, 'Personal names of the Dagomba', *Research Review*, New Series, 16.2 (2000), pp. 53-65, esp. p. 56. Elsewhere in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, fathers and grandfathers make this decision. See Susan M. Suzman, 'Names as Pointers: Zulu Personal Naming Practices', *Language in Society*, 23.2 (1994), p. 254.

⁶⁹⁰ *Florentine Codex*, 4: 20: 73.

treated.⁶⁹¹ Among the Ashanti in Ghana, a child receives their day of birth as their name. Kwadwo (Monday) means ‘day of peace’ whereas Kwaku (Wednesday) refers to death. This means that Kwadwo children are peaceful whereas Kwaku boys are considered aggressive. These characteristics, apparently, play out in lived experience. Gustav Jahoda examined court records and found that Kwadwo boys ‘were significantly more likely than all others to have a record of violent offenses’.⁶⁹² Jahoda argued that the Ashanti may have treated these two boys differently, in such a way that they ‘selectively enhance certain traits which otherwise may have remained latent’.⁶⁹³ While this Ashanti example is removed from the Nahuas in time and space, it does serve to underscore the importance of naming in any society. Most importantly in traditional ways of life where the family and community remain particularly important to daily life. It is not a stretch to imagine that a lazy Mexica boy born on Six Dog would be pitied and encouraged in his behaviour, lest he be consigned to a poor lot like his other namesakes.

I do not wish to downplay the control which ‘official’ actors had in these ceremonies. The *tonalpouhqui* and the midwife — chosen by the family — would probably have been seen as authoritative and reliable. Even though we have seen that these officiants could vary in reputation, it is likely that the family took considerable time in selecting them and therefore would have considered them trustworthy. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to determine if there was any variation in the way in which the birthing and naming rituals themselves were actually performed. The *huehuetlahtolli* give the impression of a formulaic, stylised ritual process, where people were all greeted and entreated in the same way which was probably not born out by lived experience. There is, however, some accounting for variation between rich and poor and between the genders. While the timing could vary according to the

⁶⁹¹ Richard D. Alford, *Naming and Identity: A Cross-Cultural Study of Personal Naming Practices* (New Haven, 1987), p. 62.

⁶⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 63. See also Gustav Jahoda, ‘A note on Ashanti names and their relationship to personality’, *British Journal of Psychology*, 45 (1954), pp. 192-195.

⁶⁹³ Jahoda, ‘A note on Ashanti names’, p. 195.

family's wishes, it seems unlikely that they could have altered the ritual's internal dynamics. After all, the reader and the midwife were central actors and there is no robust evidence that the speeches were altered in any way. Moreover, much of the language and choreography of the rituals seems consciously to have reinforced the state's militaristic goals and gendered system in the family's minds.

While I have suggested that people could overrule a *tonalpouhqui*, this does not necessarily mean that they did so gladly or willingly. Social structures mean that people can often make 'choices' which end up conforming to the norm. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' seems especially relevant to this situation. Bourdieu argued that power, as a cultural construction, was continually reinforced by the relationship between structures and agency. In this way, habitus is created by the agency asserted within structural boundaries. Choices and preferences in naming, therefore, may reproduce this structural power unconsciously, 'without any deliberate pursuit of coherence... without any conscious concentration'.⁶⁹⁴ Social structures seem to have been particularly influential in the Nahua world where there were strong penalties for contravention of moral standards or legal codes. While the sources may give us an overly stylised or 'average' picture, it does seem that the Nahuas lived in a world where conformity was desirable. In this way, the parents might have thought that they were choosing their own day-sign while unconsciously complying with social expectations. Or, they might have actively chosen to conform. As Stanley Brandes has argued,

When a person must live out a life within the confines of a traditional village or small town in which personalistic ties predominate, he is acutely sensitive to the opinions of his fellow community members because he knows that it is to them that he must give account and upon them that he must rely...⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. and ed. Richard Nice (London, 1984), p. 170.

⁶⁹⁵ Stanley Brandes, 'The Structural and Demographic Implications of Nicknames in Navanogal, Spain', *American Ethnologist*. 2 (1975), pp. 147-148. See also Richard Barrett, 'Village

James Chetwood has recognised the intersection between individuality and society in personal naming. He argues that ‘names are for individuals. But they are also inextricably linked to the community and society of which an individual is a part. They are a reflection not just of personal taste, but social expectations.’⁶⁹⁶ While technically at liberty to decide their child’s name and naming date, there were certainly external social and cultural pressures to conform. However, what is clear is that parents decided either way and the day of their child’s bathing ritual was not explicitly imposed upon them. The sources are emphatic that there was a range of options available, and there seems to have been no formal, physical or explicit intervention which they were actively compelled to follow.

The midwife and the reader did, however, represent official intervention in the home. If the midwife’s profession was a science, the *tonalpouhqui* practised an art. Midwives could clearly vary by reputation and ability, which is why the mother-to-be’s family selected the woman carefully. Moreover, she was a public figure whose responsibility it was to deliver lengthy speeches at important, stressful moments. In this way it seems that the most sought-after midwives would have been not just highly skilled medical practitioners but also calm, knowledgeable and highly eloquent. Sahagún praised the speech which the midwife spoke to the newly delivered mother as ‘Very beautiful language’.⁶⁹⁷ These two professions — fortune telling and healing — were intertwined and complementary and, to a degree, perhaps even interchangeable.⁶⁹⁸ This was not necessarily a binary distinction of men working as fortune-tellers while women trained in healing were all midwives. Women could be healers and curers

Modernisation and Changing Nicknaming Practices in Northern Spain’, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 34, (1978), pp. 92-108.

⁶⁹⁶ James Chetwood, ‘Tom, Dick and Leofric: The Transformation of English Personal Naming, c.800-c.1300, Ph.D. thesis (University of Sheffield, 2017), p. 237.

⁶⁹⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 33: 179.

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6: 7: 34.

as well.⁶⁹⁹ The *Codex Magliabechiano*, for example, shows two female physicians at work. The bottom half of figure shows a woman casting maize, a divining technique,⁷⁰⁰ to diagnose the man sat in the front of her. The top half of the folio shows a female physician working in the presence of Quetzalcoatl.⁷⁰¹ With their skill in healing and curing, in the minds of the Nahuas, both *tonalpouhqui* and



Figure 42: Codex Magliabechiano, fol. 78r.

midwives were thought of as people ‘who see and understand what others do not’.⁷⁰² To take this a step further, I suggest that their role as holders of esoteric knowledge set diviners and curers apart from everyday folk. Hill Boone writes that ‘They were people who knew more than the ordinary person, who had access to extra knowledge and who even created this knowledge. Using their superior understanding, these individuals mediated between ordinary humans and the supernatural world in matters both small and important’.⁷⁰³ Reader and

⁶⁹⁹ The elite male bias of the early colonial sources has obscured Nahuas women’s skill and value as medical practitioners. However, the Holy Office of the Mexican Inquisition (1571-1700) investigated and prosecuted many women during the colonial period for perceived heresy, often including the use of sexual ‘witchcraft’ and curing activities which seem to be related to indigenous medicine. While, we cannot assume that testimonies collected by the Inquisition preserved pre-colonial practices intact, they do give an interesting insight into traditional methods. See for example: Ruth Behar, ‘Sexual Witchcraft, Colonialism, and Women’s Powers: Views from the Mexican Inquisition’, in Asunción Lavrin (ed.), *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America* (Lincoln, 1989), pp. 178-206; Laura A. Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Durham and London, 2003). For the Guatemalan context, and an insight into Maya women’s skills, see Martha Few, *Women who lead Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala* (Austin, 2008). For a more general account of the Inquisition in New Spain see Patricia Lopes Don, *Bonfires of Culture: Franciscans, Indigenous Leaders, and Inquisition in Early Mexico* (Norman, 2010).

⁷⁰⁰ Alarcón, *Treatise on Heathen Superstitions*, pp. 153-54. Maize divination remains a particularly important part of ritual life among present-day Nahuas.

⁷⁰¹ Durán states that Quetzalcoatl was ‘the advocate for tumors, eye diseases, colds, and coughing’ so it seems the case that these physicians might be diagnosing illnesses related to these complaints. See Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 135.

⁷⁰² Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time*, p. 21.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

midwife were therefore agents of an official religion, intervening and controlling aspects of the domestic sphere. Given that midwifery must certainly be among the most ancient practices in any society, it seems that a Mexica midwife's powers would have certainly pre-dated the Mexica's political hegemony. While it can only ever be speculation due to the lack of sources, it seems that her science would, therefore, have perhaps been adapted in order to meet the expectations of the Mexica hierarchies. For example, it seems unlikely that during their migration southwards, a baby was greeted so intensely with battle cries and warrior paraphernalia. These might well have been later additions to the ritual choreography, once imperial expansion had begun and Mexica men were required to be trained for military duty.

So far, this section has interrogated the intersection between parental agency and social structures and official actors. We have discussed how individuals could work within the confines of state-sponsored ritual drama to alter their own prescribed fates and ensure a prosperous future for their children and communities. This has strengthened the central thesis of my study: that Nahuas did not conform unthinkingly to fixed ritual protocol. Here, I have demonstrated that individual Nahuas could make choices about their domestic ritual: rejecting, for example, the advice or the reader and selecting their own name and/or day which suited them for the naming ceremony in their family's patio. Moreover, they could adapt the internal choreography of the lifecycle rites to suit their own personal circumstance and resources. During the naming ceremony, for example, a child was presented with the tools of their father's profession and the grandeur of the activities were restricted by the family's wealth. In doing so, I have shown here that the lifecycle rituals were not static dramas nor were they (completely) prescribed by the state. However, we must be very careful to not overstate this flexibility. There were clearly parts of the birth and naming rites which, it seems, were *not* adaptable to individual whim. The *huehuetlahtolli* performed by the family and the midwife, learnt by rote, were repetitive and emphatic about the gendered fate of the baby. These speeches were delivered, it

seems, in their entirety at each important moment in life. Every person would have heard them many times in their lifetime. In this way, while some of the features and timing could conform to family wishes, it seems as though a ritual's internal choreography was more resistant. Personal agency and official structures collided dramatically in an infant's early life. While it is tempting to infer that Nahuas were free to make their own decisions during this time, they were certainly restricted, to a certain extent, by the functions and desires of the state and its official actors.

Part II

Variation in Domestic Ritual away from Tenochtitlan

In the second half of this chapter, we will look more closely at how material culture can provide insight into lived experience away from Tenochtitlan, using the traces of human creativity (material culture) ‘to correct the errors and biases of literate observers’.⁷⁰⁴ In this section, we will examine more closely the architectural structures which housed much of the domestic ritual. This will further corroborate my argument that the home was a potent ritual space which affected ceremonial choreography. Moreover, it will permit an analysis of how differences in domestic space could produce differences in ritual. Archaeological evidence will be important in this analysis; objects such as pottery rattles, figurines, spindle whorls and incense burners are all crucial sources in fleshing out the synthesised picture presented in the *huehuetlahtolli* and correcting the early colonial friars’ restricted insight into the domestic sphere. This is not a one-way relationship where archaeology is required to fill in gaps left by writers. Quite the reverse, texts provide crucial context to link specific objects with the attitudes, moments or activities which they discuss.⁷⁰⁵ It is by using these objects, which were designed and used to make noise, be touched or smelled that we come to understand that rituals were communal sensory experiences involving far more than formal exhortations and dialogues (even if there could be some variation in their delivery). Moreover, this combination of evidence demonstrates that we cannot reduce rituals to being about either bloodletting or speeches, allowing us to build a picture of variation and agency with which the Nahuas went about their everyday ritualism. These people did not just recite formal speeches by rote but acted out their desires and fears using musical instruments and figurines. Most importantly, the inventory of objects for each house was fairly restricted, meaning that the same artefacts were

⁷⁰⁴ Brumfiel, ‘Asking about Aztec Gender’, p. 58.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

probably used for different ceremonies. While they were ‘static’ objects, the Nahuas could project onto them the mood required for a specific ritual. For example, at weddings or naming ceremonies musical instruments and incense could be used together to create a festive atmosphere. By contrast, these same objects could be used by the same people for mortuary rituals or during deadly moments of transition such as eclipses.

Homes in Pre-Hispanic central Mexico

As we have seen, the home was an incredibly important locus of ritual activity. A key part of this chapter is to explore variation in domestic ritual, in order to advance the thesis’ key argument: that both public and private rituals could be varied and flexible. I consider the actual physical spaces where rituals took place to be of huge significance to our understandings of their meanings. So, it is important for us to assess the composition of domestic spaces. Homes varied quite considerably in the Basin of Mexico before the Spanish conquest. The metropolis of Mexico City which sprawls over the pre-Hispanic city has precluded much excavation of the underlying settlement; what we know about Tenochtitlan’s dwellings is mined from early colonial wills, testaments and litigation.⁷⁰⁶ From these sources, we can tell that people in Tenochtitlan lived in houses with multiple rooms, typically grouped around a small patio, and constructed with adobe mud or stone bricks with thatched roofs which sat on a wooden frame.⁷⁰⁷ While Edward Calnek rightly points out that the small source-base of colonial litigation regarding houses makes it tricky to draw general conclusions, it seems that houses

⁷⁰⁶ Edward E. Calnek, ‘Conjunto urbano y modelo residencial en Tenochtitlan’, in Woodrow Borah, Edward E. Calnek, Keith A. Davies and Alejandra Moreno Toscano (eds), *Ensayos sobre el desarrollo urbano en México* (Mexico City, 1974), pp. 11-65; Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 166.

⁷⁰⁷ Calnek, ‘Conjunto urbano’, p. 32; Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 166. Smith notes that, while abode bricks were perishable and liable to disintegrate during the rainy season, parts of bricks remained intact which allowed excavators to determine that this material was used in house construction: Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 164.

were usually around 30 to 40 square metres in size.⁷⁰⁸ This means that they were likely to have been significantly larger than the dwellings at Cuauhnahuac which, as we saw in the previous chapter, were around 14 metres squared.⁷⁰⁹ The patio defined Nahua domestic life and was a crucial arena for ritual experiences. Most importantly, it could join together unrelated groups of people within a household structure, complicating our understanding of the home as a strictly private space.

Tenocha methods of construction were similar to the non-elite dwellings of Cuauhnahuac province which were discussed in the previous chapter. Both types of houses were made with adobe mud, stone and wood. However, Tenochtitlan's dwellings were significantly more complex. Even in the squeezed conurbation, the multi-room houses were nearly twice the size of their semi-rural counterparts. Only nobles were allowed houses of more than one level and so most commoner dwellings expanded horizontally, which perhaps explains their more jumbled structure. From Smith's plan we see that the households of Yautepec and Cuexcomate were of only one room of varying size.⁷¹⁰ As we saw in the previous chapter, archaeological evidence has proved that at Cuexcomate 'all of the basic domestic tasks were carried out at each house'.⁷¹¹ This lack of artefact specialisation means that each single-room structure represents a 'household'. Cuexcomate's residents did not live cheek-by-jowl as did their counterparts in the capital. People in Tenochtitlan lived in very close proximity to one another: with its swollen population squeezed around thirteen to fourteen thousand people into each square kilometre.⁷¹² By contrast, only 140 people lived in the same area in Cuexcomate's residents had much more space.⁷¹³ So, it might be that rural people had greater space and

⁷⁰⁸ Calnek, 'Conjunto urbano', p. 30.

⁷⁰⁹ ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', p. 1; Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 62.

⁷¹⁰ See this study's fourth chapter for the discussions regarding household specialisation, pp. 275-77; Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 164.

⁷¹¹ ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', p. 8.

⁷¹² Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 18.

⁷¹³ ATCA, 16-18, 'Introduction', p. 9.

flexibility to conduct their rituals and perhaps they were witnessed by much less people. In Tenochtitlan, space was at a premium and many people would have seen each other's ritual and social activity.

Fertility rituals in the archaeological record

Figurines

Figurines are a vital resource for understanding domestic ritual. Figurines were ubiquitous before the conquest, but they remain very poorly understood, in part due to the lack of precise ethnohistorical evidence with which to corroborate their use. The friars, not understanding them, refer to them vaguely as effigies, idols or images. However, houses and their related artefacts indicate that performative curing rituals took place within the home during pregnancy and childbirth using such things as figurines and the domestic *temazcalli* (sweat bath). Figurines are mentioned fairly sparsely and vaguely in the ethnographic material which reflects their almost exclusive use in the domestic, un-official realms. However, we know that they were important as they are ubiquitous in the artefact catalogue of pre-Hispanic houses in central Mexico;⁷¹⁴ they 'occur in low frequencies at almost every Aztec-period site in the Basin of Mexico'.⁷¹⁵ One of the key problems with studying figurines is that, as portable objects, they are often recovered from middens and not in their original context. Moreover, made from clay, they are brittle and easily broken.⁷¹⁶ At Smith's excavations at houses in the

⁷¹⁴ Mary H. Parsons, 'Aztec Figurines from the Teotihuacan Valley, Mexico' in M. Spence, J. R. Parsons and M. H. Parsons (eds), *Miscellaneous Studies in Mexican Prehistory* (Ann Arbor, 1972), pp. 81-117. Parsons was a pioneer in the study of Aztec-period figurines and her work remains influential. See also, Mary H. Parsons, 'Spindle Whorls from the Teotihuacan Valley, Mexico', in the same volume, pp. 45-80.

⁷¹⁵ Brumfiel, 'Figurines and the Aztec State', p. 146.

⁷¹⁶ Elizabeth M. Brumfiel and Lisa Overholtzer, 'Alien Bodies, Everyday People, and Internal Spaces: Embodiment, Figurines and Social Discourse in Postclassic Mexico', in Christina T. Halperin, Katherine A. Faust, Rhonda Taube and Aurore Giguët (eds), *Mesoamerican Figurines: Small-Scale*

town of Yautepec in Cuauhnahuac province, for example, over 2000 fragments of figurines were excavated.⁷¹⁷ Susan T. Evans' investigations at Cihuatecpan yielded 480 figurine fragments and not one figurine was found intact.⁷¹⁸ There is considerable variation of figurine type.⁷¹⁹ 'Pottery rattles' are hollow figurines filled with ceramic beads which make noise by being jiggled or rattled [see figures 43 and 44]. These were fairly small objects measuring between ten to twenty centimetres tall and fitting comfortably in an adult hand.⁷²⁰ Figurines of all types seem to have been important to all social classes. Smith reports that they were an important part of the domestic inventory in both elite and commoner contexts in the three levels of settlement he investigated: in the *altepetl* Yautepec, the town Cuexcomate and the village Capilco.⁷²¹



Figure 43: A cross-section of a rattle figurine
Overholtzer, 'Pottery rattle', p. 70.

Indexes of Large Scale Phenomena (Gainesville, 2009), pp. 297-326; Jan Olson, 'A Socioeconomic Interpretation of Figurine Assemblages from Late Postclassic Mexico' in Nancy Gonlin and Jon C. Lohse (eds), *Commoner Ritual and Ideology in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Boulder, 2007), pp. 251-79.

⁷¹⁷ Michael E. Smith, 'Aztec-Style Figurines from Yautepec, Morelos', *Mexicon*, 27.2/3 (2005), pp. 45-55.

⁷¹⁸ Evans, *Excavations at Cihuatecpan*, p. 44.

⁷¹⁹ Figurine have been organised into different typologies by various scholars; I follow here Flora Kaplan's influential typology: Flora Kaplan, 'The Post-Classic Figurines of Central Mexico', *Occasional Papers*, Vol. 11, Institute for Mesoamerican Studies (Albany, 2006). Type 2 are puppet-like with moveable joints and Type 3 figurines are flat, almost two-dimensional.

⁷²⁰ Overholtzer, 'Pottery Rattle', p. 70.

⁷²¹ Smith, 'Aztec-Style Ceramic Figurines', p. 53.



Figure 44: A pottery rattle held in a hand
Overholzer, 'Pottery rattle', p. 78.

Figurines provide a rare way to assess the main actors and purposes of domestic ritual. Their form and representations indicate that these rituals were not for omnipotent, male deities or state-sponsored patrons. Crucially, figurines are predominantly anthropomorphic or zoomorphic. These were not supernatural images but representatives of ordinary people and sometimes animals. When they are anthropomorphic, they represent female characters. More specifically, pottery rattles overwhelmingly depict young women in clay as pregnant women and mothers. They sometimes hold one or, more rarely two, children [see figure 45].⁷²² The link with reproduction is clear and unambiguous. Very rarely are recognisable Mesoamerican deities depicted as a figurine. Where they do represent supernatural beings, these tend to be agricultural or 'nature' deities such as Tlaloc or Chalchiutlicue.⁷²³ They seldom represent 'man-made' culture heroes such as Huitzilopochtli or Quetzalcoatl. Brumfiel explored figurines from the Basin of Mexico demonstrating that figurines depicting females became

⁷²² Overholzer, 'Pottery rattle', p. 74.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70; Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 420, n. 1.

more frequent following the period of imperial subordination: ‘they outnumber male figurines by a ratio of three to one’.⁷²⁴ This increase suggests a heightened interest in the importance of human fertility and reproduction after the settlement was conquered by the Mexica. In short, the inhabitants required more children to be born. This might be related to increased tribute demands, which could place pressure on women as they were the producers of textiles and food. It is clear that away from Tenochtitlan people were not venerating these cultural heroes for successful reproduction. Instead, they were supplicating natural forces for these purposes, indicating that these figurines did not form part of the official state cult promulgated by elite priests with the *veintena* festivals.



Figure 45: A rattle figurine of a woman holding two smaller figures
Overholtzer, ‘Pottery rattle’, p. 75.
Drawing by Juan Joel Viveros Sánchez

⁷²⁴ Brumfiel, ‘Huitzilopochtli’s Conquest’, p. 7.

From what we can tell, figurines were typically used as talismans for fertility and good health. Almost every house had figurines of some description. Sahagún seems to refer to them in his account of the eve of Xiuhmolpilli ‘statues, hewn in either wood or stone, kept in each man’s home and regarded as gods, were all cast in the water’.⁷²⁵ As small objects they could be carried around easily and might have played a part in many different domestic and public rituals. For example, during the third *veintena*, Tozoztontli, after pre-pubescent children had committed autosacrifice and ‘had accomplished what was required of them’, they were rewarded by the *tonalpouhqui* with different coloured threads with small figurines hanging from them.⁷²⁶ These charms were supposed to protect the children and the grateful parents rewarded the *tonalpouhqui*. It seems as though their influence was not necessarily restricted to people, but they could promote good harvests too. Durán, for example, wrote that figurines were strung up over fields to protect crops from disease.⁷²⁷ The lack of ethnohistorical information regarding figurines has precluded any integration of these objects into an understanding of reproductive rituals beyond the fact that ‘they were likely used in household activities’.⁷²⁸ Scholars, particularly archaeologists who usually wary of drawing firm conclusions relating to ritual, are content to observe that these were objects used in domestic ritual for curing and reproduction without placing them in historical context.⁷²⁹

The lack of evidence regarding figurines within the ethnohistories speaks volumes about their unofficial, private uses and meanings. If the elite indigenous men who collaborated with Sahagún and Durán did not mention these figurines, might this mean that these objects,

⁷²⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 9: 25.

⁷²⁶ Durán, *Book of the Gods*, p. 420.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 419-20.

⁷²⁸ Overholtzer, ‘Pottery Rattle’, p. 70; Brumfiel, ‘Figurines and the Aztec State’, p. 146.

⁷²⁹ For example, Michael E. Smith, ‘Aztec-Style Figurines from Yautepec, Morelos’, *Mexicon*, 27.2/3 (2005), pp. 45-55.

and what they represented, were not necessarily an elite male concern? Or perhaps the friars did not think to ask about them, given their lack of knowledge about domestic spaces, and the informants kept quiet about the specifics of their domestic ritual in the hopes of continuing it in the face of colonial hostility. Thus, the fact that they represented ordinary people and were excavated exclusively from commoner dwellings indicates very strongly that these figurines did not form part of the state-level ritual paraphernalia. The rituals of the home were, therefore, different in their paraphernalia to those conducted in temples by official celebrants.

Rattle figurines represent crucial sources for understanding reproductive rituals away from the state-sponsored cult of the imperial core. While other scholars have tended to focus on texts, oral sources such as the *huehuetlahtolli* or the *Codex Mendoza*'s important pictorial representations of the lifecycle, I argue that the ritual objects should be integrated into analyses. Failing to consider the importance of figurines and other paraphernalia ignores how people really went about their daily lives. Moreover, just because the figurines were not mentioned much by early colonial friars does not mean that we should ignore them in our analyses of rites. I argue that it is precisely the disparity between the attention paid to them in the colonial sources and their clear importance within the home which makes their study so revealing. As we know, ordinary Nahuas might have been reluctant to have shared intimate details of their family ceremonial with friars who came to convert them. Artefacts such as figurines can tell us much about what types of rituals took place in the home.

Archaeologist Lisa Overholtzer's detailed work on pottery rattles uses emerging theories of embodiment and materiality analysis to argue convincingly that hollow rattle figurines were used in ritual activities to create a multi-sensory experience concerned with healthy reproduction and, thereby, with the birth of a child.⁷³⁰ She analyses a collection of 116

⁷³⁰ Overholtzer, 'Pottery Rattle', pp. 69-83.

clay rattle figurines excavated from Xaltocan, a Basin of Mexico settlement occupied during the time of Mexica dominance. One of the most important aspects of her research is the emphasis on extending the duration of ‘reproduction’. In modern Western society, we understand successful reproduction as the birth of a child. This is perhaps because we are confident that once a baby is born the likelihood is that they will live to have their own children. Traditional societies did not necessarily have this certainty and their understanding of successful ‘reproduction’ therefore could extend until the child itself reached reproductive age.⁷³¹ Ginsburg and Rapp argued that reproduction cannot be dissociated from ‘social reproduction... the work, activities, relationships, and attitudes relate to the continuation of current and future generations of human life’.⁷³² This unbreakable connection with work and productivity is hugely relevant to the Nahua experience. For peoples like the Nahuas, even ordinary daily life was extremely precarious. Any moment of uncertainty or change was greatly feared and pregnancy, childbirth and infancy were extremely difficult times. There was a real and present fear that the baby, the mother or both might not survive the ordeal. Anxiety that the baby might not be born or would die soon after childbirth is a prevalent theme in the *Florentine Codex* accounts of pregnancy and birth.

What can these figurines tell us about the experiences of a pregnant mother, her newborn, extended family and attendants? Their mere existence supports the notion that formal speeches did not constitute the entirety of reproduction ritual. Evidence of noise-making figurines and incense-burning *copal* inside the homes means that domestic rituals were also full-on sensory experiences. They were not quiet, discreet activities which followed a set

⁷³¹ Infant and child mortality rates are difficult to ascertain for pre-Hispanic central Mexico. However, the tradition of burying unweaned infants under the hearth means that there is some archaeological evidence relating to death in very early life. A small example from the village of Capilco where, from the four houses completely excavated, three had infant burials containing six individual burials: ATCA, 16-18, ‘Non-Architectural Features’, pp. 14, 18.

⁷³² Overholtzer, ‘Pottery Rattle’, p. 74. See also Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995).

pattern. We have already seen that the *huehuetlahtolli* formed an important part of domestic rites. In this section, I highlighted that the ritual paraphernalia of the domestic sphere also contributed to this experience. As I explored in the second chapter, synaesthesia — the union of the senses — was an important way in which spectators were motivated to understand and participate in rituals. Of course, we know that from the *Florentine Codex* birth accounts that the words spoken at ritual moments were important. But they did not form the entirety of the ritual choreography. The pottery rattles were designed to be held and, as their name suggested, jangled in order to produce a noise. These figurines show us that the domestic sphere was not a cosy space which was quietly exempt from the ritual dynamism which, as I have demonstrated, characterised public ritual. Instead, rites of the home were a moment when seeing, touching, smelling and hearing the ritual experience was key to participation. More specifically, hearing speeches, smelling incense, seeing ritual bloodshed and hearing ritual music and awakened all participants and observers to the ritual's central message. They ensured that all people — young, old, deaf, blind — were included. Domestic ritual was not merely an optical 'display', it was a surrounding experience.

Pottery rattles are small, portable objects which could have been comfortably held in the palm of the hand. As easily transportable objects, their context of discovery is hugely significant. Their placement in exclusively domestic contexts suggests that, aside from these dialogues, performative activities took place within the home, in order to ensure a successful pregnancy and delivery, which did not take place at temples or public ceremonial locations. Disappointingly, the majority of figurines are not found in a primary context. That is, they have been recovered from surface collections or from middens or refuse deposits. This suggests that many might have been forcibly discarded, or hidden, during the colonial years when pre-Hispanic practices endured the threat of extirpation. This lack of secure provenance makes it very difficult to draw firm conclusions about their use in domestic ritual. The rattles which

Overholtzer studies from Xaltocan were predominantly recovered near or around the house, sometimes in middens. Susan T. Evans' household excavations at Cihuatecpan provide crucial, and rare, evidence regarding the context of figurines as many were found in a primary context.⁷³³ Importantly, this site lay in the Teotihuacan Valley which was not part of the Mexica domain. The people of Cihuatecpan were instead in the service of the Mexica's Triple Alliance partners, the Acolhua of Tetzaco. However, the figurines are similar to those excavated from Cuauhnahuac and Xaltocan, meaning that these reproductive rituals formed part of a set of practices which sat outside any state or centralised cult. Their similarity also seems to indicate that domestic rites — and associated paraphernalia — were practices which transcended fixed locations. This suggests that rural and local peoples travelled — perhaps because of markets and trading — and were influenced by practices in other localities. Moreover, it might suggest that domestic rituals of fertility and reproduction were ancient, widespread practices which pre-existed the formation and domination of the Mexica state. Human reproduction is the enduring concern of any society. It seems sensible, therefore, that these rattles, speeches and ritual objects were so widespread and similar as they were not principally connected to a state-sponsored, political cult.

The temazcalli

As we have been exploring, the home and community were important ritual spaces. A key arena for ritual activity within these spaces was the *temazcalli*. In this section, I will explore how the composition of these space contributed to ritual experience. Let us first explore what this building was. The *temazcalli* was a hemispherical mud and stone building which was a type of sauna or steam room used for physical, spiritual and medicinal purification and healing.

⁷³³ Evans, *Excavations at Cihuatecpan*.

The most famous representation of a *temazcalli* is found in the colonial pictorial *Codex Magliabechiano*.



Figure 46: The *temazcalli*
Codex Magliabechiano, fol. 156.

It is unclear whether every house had a *temazcalli*, but it seems as if they were an important architectural feature of village life. Evans wrote that, in Cihuatecpan, the *temazcalli* had been ‘a regular fixture of Aztec period life, a necessity for health and well-being. Every village had at least one, and in fact the usual pattern was probably for many houses within the village to have attached *temascales* [sic]’.⁷³⁴ In his account of daily life, Soustelle mentions that ‘the greater part of the houses had them close by’.⁷³⁵ This steam room worked by placing a fire near one of its outside walls. To conserve the heat and steam, the *temazcalli* had a little door through which a person clambered. Water was then splashed against the heated wall to create the steam. In a society obsessed with cleanliness and order, bathing served not merely a hygiene function but also had ceremonial purposes. The *temazcalli* seems to have been bound up with the *tlazolli* complex. As Pete Sigal comments, ‘The *temazcal* serves as a curing ground,

⁷³⁴ Evans, ‘Excavations at Cihuatecpan’, p. 34.

⁷³⁵ Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (Stanford, 1970), p. 129.

a place in which one can remove filth from the body'.⁷³⁶ I will demonstrate in the following analysis that the steam bath was not just for cleanliness, but that the types of artefacts uncovered show that it served a ritual function during pregnancy and childbirth. This will demonstrate that there were different domestic spaces for ritual activity. Not all the rites of the home were communal or collective, some could be intensely private. In turn, this will show that ritual activity could be altered by its arena or space.

The *temazcalli* is unambiguously associated with reproduction throughout the *Florentine Codex*. The physical link between this structure and figurines depicting women of childbearing age, often holding children themselves, strongly suggests that this was site of female reproductive curing. Moreover, this was — at least during the childbirth rites — a space where female authority, knowledge and experience were powerfully deployed. The parents' anxieties can tell us much about the extraordinary power which the *temazcalli* was thought to wield. While it played a crucial, curative role in the many stages of pregnancy, mis- or over-use was clearly undesirable and dangerous. The parents questioned the midwife about whether their daughter should enter the *temazcalli*. They worried that while it might be necessary it could make their daughter unwell if it was not yet the right time.⁷³⁷ When it was time for her to visit the *temazcalli*, restraint was key. Her parents-in-law advised her, 'do not give thyself excessively to the sweat bath. Do not kill it; do not overdo the heat'.⁷³⁸ This shows that the sweatbath could be a dangerous space. While it might help the pregnant woman, it could also threaten her health. Here we see the Nahuas' enduring respect for moderation and the fear in which they lived their daily lives. Even something that could cure them, also had the power to make them sick if it was not duly respected.

⁷³⁶ Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, p. 19.

⁷³⁷ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 27: 152.

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6: 25: 142.

The temazcalli and pottery figurines were linked. At Cihuateopan, ‘the largest set of material evidence for Nahuatl [sic] culture ideological practices is found in the large number of figurines which were collected’.⁷³⁹ An important part of Evans’ figurine inventory involved women of reproductive age, discernable by the two-pronged hairstyle. Her excavations revealed that, in Cihuateopan at least, figurines were not placed sporadically or randomly around the home. Here almost all of the 480 figurine fragments were uncovered from living spaces or from a courtyard with a *temazcalli*.⁷⁴⁰ This suggests that at Cihuateopan the sweat bath was an extremely important locus of reproductive fertility rituals. Very rarely were they recovered from burials or as offerings. At the time the site was abandoned in around 1600,⁷⁴¹ it seems as though figurines will still in use. This means that some decades into the colonial period, rituals associated with fertility continued to be performed in the home, suggesting that the domestic reproduction cult was enormously resistant to colonial missionary pressure, partly perhaps because it was taking place away from the friars’ gaze. However, it seems that pottery rattles were, at the very least, overwhelmingly associated with the home and with the household. An important part of the domestic inventory of possessions, they were emphatically out of the control of public temples, elite priests and the state-sponsored cult. Brumfiel has compared ‘unofficial’ domestic figurines with depictions of women in state-sponsored architecture. She found that in the latter, ‘women are posed in a controlled kneeling position, perhaps in reference to their role as producers of cloth and food. In contrast, female figurines more often stand than kneel, and they frequently hold one or two children... this suggests that commoners were not preoccupied with the state’s definition of social roles and status’.⁷⁴² Clearly, we cannot argue that homes were totally divorced from the central human sacrificial cult. It is clear that concerns

⁷³⁹ Evans, ‘Excavations at Cihuateopan’, p. 19

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44; Overholtzer, ‘Pottery rattle’, p. 74. Ninety percent of the fragments were recovered from domestic spaces, or from a courtyard with a sweat bath.

⁷⁴¹ Evans, ‘Excavations at Cihuateopan’, p. 8.

⁷⁴² Brumfiel, ‘Huitzilopochtli’s Conquest’, p. 7.

of ritual bloodshed permeated the domestic sphere during the birth and naming ceremonies. Physically, this meant the intervention of the *tonalpouhqui* into the domestic space. Imaginatively speaking, the incantations of the midwife to the glories of ritual killing and sacrifice linked the home to the central cult. However, domestic figurines tell us that people also had other concerns and priorities. The entirety of their religious experiences were not human sacrificial or in service to Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl or Tezcatlipoca. Rather, little to no evidence of these political deities exist at all in homes or other local-level spaces. While their iconography is crucially important to public ritual spaces, the home reflected other religious concerns. Through an assessment of figurines and household composition, we see that ordinary people thought much more about the health and wellbeing of their children, other family and their crops.

Public and private ritual spaces

My findings that ritual varied markedly in purpose and subject between the public and private arenas leads us on to discuss the differences between these spaces in the pre-Hispanic Nahua world. Nowadays, with the rise of the nuclear family as the basic unit of social organisation, homes are usually considered private spaces inhabited only by combinations of individuals, a couple or a family within a fixed, physical perimeter. This space is considered exclusive to the people who occupy it. In this way, our understanding of ‘domestic’ would largely tend to equal ‘private’.⁷⁴³ However, evidence from Tenochtitlan, Xaltocan, Cuexcomate and Capilco would suggest that this was not the case in pre-Hispanic central

⁷⁴³ For critiques of binary distinctions between public and private in the classic Maya world, see: Takeshi Inomata, Daniela Triadan, Erick Ponciano, Estela Pinto, Richard E. Terry and Markus Eberl, ‘Domestic and Political Lives of Classic Maya elites: The Excavation of Rapidly Abandoned Structures at Aguateca, Guatemala’, *Latin American Antiquity*, 13 (2002), pp. 305-50; Cynthia Robin, ‘New Directions in Classic Maya Household Archaeology’, *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 11 (2003), pp. 307-56.

Mexico. Nuclear families did not live in neatly separated, enclosed houses but different generations of extended, patrilocal kin lived communally around a shared patio. As we have seen earlier, the most common household set up was a group of three or four buildings clustered together around an open patio. Sometimes these structures could be of a single room only, as at Cuexcomate or Capilco in Cuauhnahuac province. The archaeological evidence demonstrated that, at these provincial locations, a full range of domestic tasks was undertaken in just one space. Closer to the imperial core, individual houses could be larger and more complex, comprising several rooms, such as at Cihuatecpan or inside Tenochtitlan itself. However, the patio was a universal fixture of household organisation and it seems to have been within and around this open space that people went about their daily business, conducted rituals and celebrated together. Taking population estimates for Cuexcomate as our guide, it seems as though that as many as 20 people might have lived around a patio in local communities and possibly even more in Tenochtitlan, given that space was at a premium in this crowded island city.⁷⁴⁴

The patio

The patio complicates the boundary between public and private spheres.⁷⁴⁵ This means that any ritual activity which took place there was not wholly private *or* public. A walled compound with a single gateway to the outside, it enclosed those who lived within it and bound them together. The internal space was not strictly private, and residents seem to have considered themselves a social group of some kind. Early colonial censuses provided the

⁷⁴⁴ This is assuming that around five people lived to a house with a patio being surrounded by four houses. See ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', p. 43.

⁷⁴⁵ Kellogg, 'The Social Organization of Households Among the Tenochca Mexica Before and After Conquest', pp. 207-24.

collective Nahuatl name for those living around one patio as *it hualli* ('people of a yard').⁷⁴⁶ Or the residents have also been referred to as *cemihualtin* ('those people of one patio').⁷⁴⁷ However, an intriguing aspect of these organisations is that the *cemihualtin* were not necessarily related. This was, therefore, a significant settlement level with some kind of collective identity at a level between individual households and the *calpulli*. And one, I argue, which transforms our understanding of the boundaries between public and private in the Nahua world. Those inside the patio bore witness to the ritual experiences which went on inside its walls. Its closed nature meant that any ceremonies taking place would have been unavoidable experiences.

Molotla, a settlement in Cuauhnahuac province near Yautepec (see map), provides some intriguing evidence about a *cemihualtin*'s internal relations. While we might assume that small groups of people living in such close proximity were sets of nuclear or extended family, this does not seem to have been the case. Molotla shows that a *cemihualtin* was certainly not always composed of blood relations. At this settlement, 42 of the 128 houses were arranged in 16 patio groups of between two and four houses each.⁷⁴⁸ Most intriguingly, each patio had a 'head' house which was clearly superior to the others in terms of status and wealth. Moreover, 'Only about half of the dependent families in Molotla compounds were related to the head by kinship bonds, and those kin ties that did exist often were not close'.⁷⁴⁹ Pedro Carrasco concludes that this was at least in part an economic relationship.⁷⁵⁰ In this system, the head householder divided up their land between the dependent families for cultivation and in return

⁷⁴⁶ Smith, *Aztec City-States*, pp. 165-66;

⁷⁴⁷ Michael E. Smith, 'Houses and Settlement Hierarchy in Late Postclassic Morelos: A Comparison of Archaeology and Ethnohistory', in Robert S. Santley and Kenneth G. Hirth (eds), *Prehispanic Domestic Units in Western Mesoamerica: Studies of the Household, Compound, and Residence* (Boca Raton, 1993), p. 198.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁰ Pedro Carrasco, 'The Joint Family in Ancient Mexico: The Case of Molotla', in N. Hutini, P. Carrasco and J. M. Taggart (eds), *Essays on Mexican Kinship* (Pittsburgh, 1976), pp. 45-64.

these neighbours paid them tribute.⁷⁵¹ This evidence from Molotla, in Cuauhnahuac province, does not necessarily mean that Tenochtitlan had exactly the same settlement patterns. As I have previously discussed, the almost total lack of household archaeological investigations underneath present-day Mexico City has meant that we have very little material evidence for the domestic context in Tenochtitlan beyond the alphabetic chronicles and early colonial testaments. However the pattern of mixing nobles and commoners within a single patio grouping is repeated at other sites in Cuauhnahuac⁷⁵² and I would venture to suggest that it is likely that the patio groups of Tenochtitlan might follow this pattern. At the very least, Tenochtitlan's domestic compounds were large enough to accommodate people who, even if they knew each other well, could not *all* have been related by blood. This is crucial evidence that the patio was not a 'private' space. Instead this was a communal, open-air area which was shared by 20 or so people who were not necessarily even related.⁷⁵³

The nature of the patio as a bridge between public and private spaces has important implications for our understanding of the ritual which took place within, and directly outside, Nahua homes. Moreover, and much more specifically for our context, it means that domestic ritual cannot be reduced to merely being understood as 'private' activities. What took place inside the home and patio were, in essential, semi-public acts which were witnessed by many unrelated people. Although this community was fairly restricted in number, the audience could be diverse. We might assess that domestic ritual, therefore, played a much more important role in the spectrum of ritual activity than being only private or family rites.

⁷⁵¹ Smith, 'Houses and Settlement Hierarchy', p. 198. Carrasco, 'The Joint Family in Ancient Mexico', pp. 45-64.

⁷⁵² At Cuexcomate, there are a number of patio groups had a 'head' house: Smith, 'Houses and Settlement Hierarchy', p. 203.

⁷⁵³ Smith, 'Houses and Settlement Hierarchy', p. 203.

Also this fresh understanding of the patio recasts some of the ritual actors. For example, the midwife becomes a much more ‘public’ figure than she might previously have been credited. While, by virtue of her speeches and activities, the midwife certainly ‘straddled the male and female spheres’.⁷⁵⁴ I would go further in suggesting that she might have been viewed as a liminal figure in many ways. She connected public and private, male and female, divine and mortal. Her role as a ritual officiant has often been downplayed or ignored by scholars. I argue that, in fact, the midwife was an intermediary between ordinary people and their deities. Her knowledge, skill and experience made her ‘the artisan of our lord... empowered by him’.⁷⁵⁵ She must have been seen not only as an authoritative figure by virtue of her speech but also a physically impressive person who, due to her female power, could withstand the throes of the Earth Mother’s power and calmly emerge victorious. Another revealing insight is when the pregnant woman’s mother and female elders entrusted her to the midwife’s care, they addressed her as ‘precious person, godly mother [*teunantli*]’.⁷⁵⁶ Here she was referred to as almost divine herself.

The nature of public and private, therefore, was blurred and indistinct in Nahua life. The patio was the space which most directly obfuscates this clear boundary. Its existence as space which conjoined unrelated people inside a domestic arena means that any activity which took place inside its boundaries was a semi-public act. Birth and naming were, therefore, not ‘private’ or ‘family’ moments but a time when a child was starkly presented with the norms and expectations of their culture in full view of their community. This network served to reinforce the binary, gendered distinctions and responsibilities of the Nahua way of life.

⁷⁵⁴ Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, p. 42.

⁷⁵⁵ *Florentine Codex*, 6: 27: 152.

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6: 27: 155.

Conclusions

This section has demonstrated that domestic ritual activity was not restricted to the family or private spheres as these spaces did not exist in the way we understand them. This chapter makes an important contribution to our understanding of religious behaviour in pre-Hispanic central Mexico by demonstrating that the domestic arena was crucial to acculturating Nahuas to the fatalism, social norms and ultimate submission to supernatural forces which characterised their way of life. Most importantly, these principles were those which underpinned cult of human sacrifice. It was in the domestic space that ordinary people were brought to understand these ideologies.

Returning to the early colonial alphabetic and pictorial sources, this close analysis has demonstrated that powerful, constructed rituals took place in the home and patio in front of family, kin and neighbours which swiftly plunged a baby into their customs and were sustained across local communities. A key aspect was the ritual separation of the baby from its mother and the child's formal dedication instead to another female figure: Chalchiuhtlicue, a female deity associated with agricultural fecundity. With this act, it was undeniable to mother, family and congregation that this child did not belong to them exclusively. The baby would live here on the terrestrial plane only temporarily, as indeed they all would, to serve the wider purpose of a sacrificial cult. The ubiquity of institutionalised ritual violence meant that a person had to be acculturated early — and repetitively — in their life. It would not have been possible for a young person to have been brought up in a comfortable, sheltered environment only to be exposed to ritual bloodshed at an age when these acts would have been incomprehensible. While this analysis could emphasise the Nahuas' lack of compassion, by contrast, it seems to reinforce their humanity. These were not inherently bloodthirsty killing machines but real people who had to be brought to consent to their fate and their place in this wider system.

The family did not act alone in during the precious moments and two professional celebrants have been crucial to this chapter. The midwife had an extremely important role in these activities. She singlehandedly (if the mother was a commoner) delivered the newborn while also advising the young woman and her family during her pregnancy and labour. She was greatly respected for her profession and her role is particularly important as it is one of only a few instances in which a woman led a ceremony and spoke publicly. While practical skill was crucial, she also had to be eloquent and articulate. The reader of days was a different type of ritual participant. While the midwife had to be hands-on, the *tonalpouhqui*'s knowledge was esoteric and his role was purely advisory, although clearly authoritative. In Nahua culture, time was organised into a cyclical calendar with multiple interlocking, mutually influencing cycles which were patently unknowable to the ordinary person. Just as priests had to advise the *tlahtoani* that the time for Xiuhmolpilli had come, a reader had to interpret these multivalent categories for the parents.

An important feature of these domestic ritual experiences which allows us some window into lived experiences is choice. While both the reader and the midwife were the holders of knowledge, the sources make very clear that the baby's parents and their wider family were at liberty to select or reject many of their recommendations. Moreover, these advisers were not foisted upon any given family but had been clearly carefully selected by them based on their reputation, experience and, presumably, their disposition. In this way, we cannot say that these 'official' men and women unwelcomingly intervened in the domestic sphere to impose state-sponsored customs. Quite the opposite, the choreography and content of the pregnancy, birth and naming rites make it very clear that people were allowed some agency in their decisions and organisation.

Overall, this reinforces one of main hypotheses of my research: that rituals were not unthinkingly performed but were flexible by virtue of being adaptable to different

conditions.⁷⁵⁷ At the state or public level, these conditions might have been political, such as the death of a *tlahtoani*, ecological such as a drought or, as I demonstrate in this section, personal circumstance or household resources. As I have made clear, it is not possible to trace any one single, ‘ordinary’ person’s way through life. However, demonstrating that individual Mexica could have made judgements is crucial in removing them from the ‘ethnographic present’ which much scholarship has cast them. While it is difficult to access their lived reality, these people had their own priorities, emotions and circumstances and took decisions based on those factors. Moreover, in determining potential differences in lived experience, I further undermine the notion that the religion directed by the elites of Tenochtitlan was perpetuated and accepted uncritically by all of their subjects.

Most distinctively, domestic practices illuminate the experiences of women and children who are so often left out of analyses of Nahuatl ritualism in favour of a focus on warfare and sacrifice. By contrast, these people take centre stage in my analysis of birth. This is not to say that the domestic cult was entirely divorced from the public, official spectacles. While there were clearly some unique aspects to private ritual, these lifecycle markers are characterised by an accommodation of the blood debt. Each *huehuetlahtolli* makes it very clear that the audience were aware of the difficulty and precariousness of their existence.

Precariousness was also an important leitmotif in the *huehuetlahtolli* delivered at childbirth. The Nahuas did not shy away from the difficult realities of their lives but acknowledged directly that they understood themselves to be living in the grip of capricious deities who required constant appeasement and attention. Similarly, a pregnant woman was

⁷⁵⁷ Ethnographers working today in Nahuatl communities have confirmed that practitioners use their own esoteric skill to direct rituals as they see fit. Alan Sandstrom describes the three rituals associated with corn’s lifecycle for the Nahuas of a community in the eastern state of Veracruz. He explains that: ‘There is no rigid form for these rituals, and each shaman varies them according to his or her own judgment. They do share certain components, however’. See Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, p. 293. While we should be wary of using present-day ritual experiences in analyses of historical activities and conditions, this ethnographic evidence of ritual flexibility seems important to consider.

careful with her behaviour so that the baby did not perish, so priests diligently performed their religious duties as everyone played their part in this wheel of life. Childbirth and infancy remain precarious, dangerous moments filled with uncertainty in Western culture. For the Nahuas, these were necessarily difficult moments which prepared them for a life of hardship, grief and pain.

VI

CASE STUDY 4: A ‘STATE’ VERSUS ‘LOCAL’ RELIGION? RITUAL IN THE PROVINCES

This final chapter plunges us into the provinces with an assessment of the relationship between and among ‘peripheral’ communities and, in turn, any central cult. The economic and political interactions between Tenochtitlan and its provinces have been well-drawn.⁷⁵⁸ By contrast, far less is known about cultural and religious connections across regional boundaries. Where these issues have been considered, scholars have assumed that the Mexica’s laissez-faire governing approach extended to a lack of control over local religions.⁷⁵⁹ Or, at the other extreme, the Mexica enforced a state cult where their own deity Huitzilopochtli enjoyed widespread worship throughout the Empire with his Templo Mayor as the archetypal ritual stage.⁷⁶⁰

This chapter will interrogate these blunt conclusions by examining the temples and dwellings of two provincial settlements. Later in the chapter, we will interrogate intra-provincial religious connection by returning to our major ritual case study Xiuhmolpilli, the ‘binding of years’ ceremony. The chronicler-friars’ informants indicated that this ceremony was a widespread ritual celebrated throughout the land. However, the regional perspective on

⁷⁵⁸ Conrad and Demarest, *Religion and Empire*; Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*; Mary G. Hodge and Michael E. Smith (eds), *Economies and Politics in the Aztec Realm* (Albany and Austin, 1994); Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*; Michael E. Smith, ‘Social Complexity in the Aztec Countryside’, in Glenn M. Schwartz and Steven E. Falconer (eds), *Archaeological Views from the Countryside: Village Communities in Early Complex Societies* (Washington, D.C., 1994), pp. 143-59.

⁷⁵⁹ Brumfiel, ‘Aztec Hearts and Minds’; Brumfiel, ‘Figurines and the Aztec State’; Brumfiel, ‘Huitzilopochtli’s Conquest’.

⁷⁶⁰ Nicholson, ‘Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico’, p. 409; Broda, ‘Templo Mayor as Ritual Space’, pp. 61-123; Carrasco, ‘Introduction’, to Broda, Carrasco and Matos Moctezuma (eds), *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan*, pp. 1-14; Carrasco, ‘Myth, Cosmic Terror, and the Templo Mayor’, *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan*, pp. 124-62; Matos Moctezuma, *Life and Death in the Templo Mayor*.

this ceremony remains poorly understood and this ritual provides an excellent case study by which to assess the relationship between the Mexica's official religion and local practices. However, given the alphabetic sources' Mexica-centrism, we must employ new strategies to examine this dynamic. As we have seen, the field of archaeology has largely remained focused on Tenochtitlan and its ceremonial centre, with little attention paid to less politically significant cities and towns in the provinces. However, in recent years archaeologists have turned the focus towards ordinary lives with excavations of small towns and their dwellings.⁷⁶¹ In this section, then, I use many of their unpublished, underexplored archaeological reports of provincial settlements.⁷⁶² Using excavated material culture, in conjunction with textual evidence, this section will provide more nuanced conclusions to the following questions: Did the Mexica have any interest in controlling or adapting 'local' ritual behaviour or customs? How did local peoples respond to any orders regarding their rituals? Could they express any choices about

⁷⁶¹ Some works which have shifted focus away from the Mexico City-Tenochtitlan have been: Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, 'Consumption and Politics at Aztec Huexotla', *American Anthropologist*, 89 (1987), pp. 676-86; Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, 'Specialization, Market Exchange, and the Aztec State: A View from Huexotla', *Current Anthropology*, 21 (1980), pp. 459-79; Cynthia O. Charlton, Thomas H. Charlton and Deborah L. Nichols, 'Aztec Household-Based Craft Production: Archaeological Evidence from the City-State of Otumba, Mexico', in Robert S. Santley and Kenneth G. Hirth (eds), *Prehispanic Domestic Units in Western Mesoamerica: Studies of the Household, Compound, and Residence* (Boca Raton, 1991); William T. Sanders, Jeffrey R. Parsons and Robert S. Santley, *The Basin of Mexico: Ecological Processes in the Evolution of a Civilization* (New York, 1979). For a survey of archaeological fieldwork within the Mexica state, see Nichols, 'Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State', esp. pp. 267-71.

⁷⁶² In this chapter I am using unpublished archaeological reports which I gathered from the Archivo Técnico de Coordinación Arqueológica in Mexico. The most important are: Michael E. Smith, 'Informe archaeological research at Aztec period rural sites in Morelos, Mex. Vol. 1: Excavations and Architecture. Octubre 1990', Estado de Morelos, ATCA, 16-18; Michael E. Smith, 'Artefactos domésticos de casas posclásicas en Cuexcomate y Capilco, Morelos, Mayo 15 2006', Estados de Morelos, ATCA 16 — 146; Michael E. Smith, 'Informe final Abril 2006 de las Excavaciones de casas Posclásicas en Yautepec, Morelos', Estado de Morelos, ATCA 16-142; Michael E. Smith, 'Informe. Proyecto: excavaciones de Casas posclásicas del Centro Urbano de Yautepec, Mor. Informe técnico parcial 1994, trabajo de campo entre febrero y agosto de 1993. marzo 1994', Estado de Morelos, ACTA 16-37. Some findings have subsequently been published, for example: Michael E. Smith, Cynthia Heath-Smith and Lisa Montiel, 'Excavations of Aztec Urban Houses at Yautepec, Mexico', *Latin American Antiquity*, 10.2 (1999), pp. 133-50; Michael E. Smith, 'Houses and the Settlement Hierarchy in Late Postclassic Morelos: A Comparison of Archaeology and Ethnohistory, in Kenneth Hirth and Robert Santley (eds), *Prehispanic Domestic Units in Western Mesamerica* (Boca Raton, 1993), pp. 191-206.

their religious customs? In the case of Xiuhmolpilli specifically, other historical analyses of this ceremony focus entirely on the documentary record, with resulting interpretations based on the colonial agenda of friars and indigenous elites.⁷⁶³ My interdisciplinary methodology will provide fresh insights, filling a substantial historiographical gap which has left both ordinary and provincial peoples out of the history of Nahua ritual.

Let me first explain how cultural and religious interactions between Tenochtitlan and its empire have hitherto been understood. Such an explanation will allow us better to understand the nature of the problem and position my own analysis within the current debates. The concept of ‘great and little traditions’ has been influential in the field for interrogating the relationship between urban people and their rural ‘peasant’ counterparts.⁷⁶⁴ Anthropologists such as Robert Redfield understood a ‘little tradition’ of the local community to be a simple version of a ‘great tradition’ which exists in a watered-down, simplistic way, among peasants. He wrote that:

In civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many. The great tradition is cultivated in schools or temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities.⁷⁶⁵

While Redfield’s paradigm has been critiqued,⁷⁶⁶ it has clearly influenced understandings of Late Postclassic central Mexican societies and led to phenomena such as social hierarchy and

⁷⁶³ Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, pp. 96-103; Carrasco, ‘Star Gatherers and Wobbling Suns’; Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, pp. 41-44, 236-39; Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, p. 16; Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, pp. 293-94; Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion*, pp. 143-47.

⁷⁶⁴ Esther Pasztory, *Aztec Art* (New York, 1983), 289-91, quoted in Brumfiel, ‘Huitzilopochtli’s Conquest’, p. 8. See also: Brumfiel, ‘Figurines and the Aztec State’, *passim*; Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood*, pp. 31-34.

⁷⁶⁵ Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture*, p. 70.

⁷⁶⁶ McAnany, ‘Rethinking the Great and Little Tradition Paradigm’; Sandstrom, *Corn in Our Blood*, pp. 31-34; Smith, ‘Domestic Ritual at Aztec Provincial Sites in Morelos’, *esp.* pp. 93-94.

political institutions being considered the preserve of the urban centres.⁷⁶⁷ As such, I must discuss this idea here before my analysis. In a Redfieldian understanding of variations of Nahuatl rituals, Nicholson explained religion in the Triple Alliance Empire thus: 'In versions of it from smaller or more peripherally located communities the rituals tend to be less complex and less concerned with specific deities per se, consisting largely of more generalized ceremonies involved with agricultural fertility promotion, honoring the dead, the lords...'⁷⁶⁸ Elsewhere, archaeologist Flora Kaplan speculated that 'Aztec-period' figurines of replica temples found in outlying city-states 'may have integrated peasant ritual with the cults of the urban elite'.⁷⁶⁹ In this way, it has been understood that Tenochtitlan's 'great' human sacrifice tradition trickled down into the provinces, unopposed and uninterrogated, until it reached its lowest point. Brumfiel, for one, ventured that: 'Human sacrifice and the glorification of warriors were more muted in hinterland towns than in the Aztec capital'.⁷⁷⁰ My analysis will show that, away from formal temples and organised ceremonies, ordinary people took control of their own rituals. While the Mexica elite had political considerations, local peoples' livelihoods depended much more precariously on successful crops and healthy children. This meant that, rather than sacrifice, they relied much more on domestic rituals related to human and agricultural fertility. However, this was not necessarily some parochial 'little' version of an urbane, 'great' culture. As such, I will demonstrate in the next two chapters that these more personal concerns motivated and directed local people's 'private' rituals. The dynamics between central and local were not that which Redfield and others have described. There was not some 'high' culture of Tenochtitlan which trickled down to local provinces and out into the countryside. Farmers and

⁷⁶⁷ See, for example, William T. Sanders and Robert S. Santley, 'A Tale of Three Cities: Energetics and Urbanization in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico', in Evon Z. Vogt and Richard Leventhal (eds), *Prehistoric Settlement Patterns: Essays in Honor of Gordon R. Willey* (Albuquerque, 1983), pp. 243-91.

⁷⁶⁸ Nicholson, 'Religion in pre-Hispanic Central Mexico', p. 434.

⁷⁶⁹ Pasztory, *Aztec Art*, pp. 289-91, quoted in Brumfiel, 'Huitzilopochtli's Conquest', p. 8. See also Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, 'Figurines and the Aztec State', pp. 143-66.

⁷⁷⁰ Brumfiel, 'Aztec Hearts and Minds', p. 307.

their families had their own priorities, concerns and traditions which directed their rituals. That is not to say that human sacrifice was unimportant to Nahua worldview. The repayment of the blood debt by means of ritual bloodshed was clearly an extremely significant part of their religious expression. However, my research will demonstrate that these practices did not hold equal significance for all people throughout the empire.

Archaeological evidence, strengths and limitations

Archaeological evidence from a series of local settlements is crucial to my original analysis of provincial ritual practice. As the alphabetic sources are heavily skewed in favour of the elite Mexica religion, material culture is particularly important as it allows for a more rounded perspective. This section will draw heavily on unpublished archaeological reports from settlements in the imperial province of Cuauhnahuac. They comprise the *altepetl* Cuexcomate and the village of Capilco. Where relevant, I integrate evidence from other imperial provinces to try to build a more nuanced picture of local practices across the Triple Alliance empire. For example, I make use of Elson's published work at Chiconautla when drawing pan-regional comparisons.⁷⁷¹

My sample of Cuauhnahuac settlements is located within about 40 kilometres of each other. This proximity has advantages and disadvantages for my study. On the one hand, it strengthens my analysis I can build a comprehensive picture of local practices in a well-defined area of the empire. The paucity of domestic, non-elite and local excavations means that using

⁷⁷¹ Elson, 'An Aztec Palace at Chiconautla', *passim*. I have also consulted Brumfiel's surface investigations at Huexotla, Xaltocan and Xico and Evans' work at Cihuatecpan. Elizabeth M. Brumfiel and Claudia Espejel Carbajal, 'Informe final: Estrategias de las unidades domésticas en Xaltocan posclásico, México 15 de Abril de 2007', Estado de México, ATCA 14-579; Susan T. Evans, 'Proyecto excavaciones en Cihuatecpan, Edo. de México 1988', Estado de México, 14-29; Brumfiel, 'Consumption and Politics at Aztec Huexotla', pp. 676-86; Evans, *Excavations at Cihuatecpan*.

archaeological evidence can run the risk of making haphazard conclusions which can only relate to individual settlements. By contrast, my set of neighbouring case studies means that I can securely draw conclusions which relate to a discrete area of the empire. This does, however, limit my findings to the particular perspective of settlements which lay fairly close to Tenochtitlan. Clearly, a rounded analysis might have compared settlements at different points of the empire. However, simply put, there has not been enough systematic fieldwork in other areas to bear such an analysis. More household-level excavations in communities across the Empire are clearly sorely needed. Thus, my sample of case studies has been constrained by the paucity of excavations which has taken place outside of Tenochtitlan/Mexico City.

Despite their limitations, case studies from excavated households in the important can province of Cuauhnahuac provide a crucial, if rare counterweight to the field's overwhelmingly blinkered focus on the high-level monumental architecture of the imperial core and its associated elite population. My use of these reports to assess religious practices is a novel approach. Hitherto, material culture has mostly been used by scholars such as Deborah Nichols, Susan Evans and Michael E. Smith to evaluate the impact of Tenochtitlan's structures on production and networks of exchange, the 'political economy'.⁷⁷² These approaches have added to our understanding of Aztec urbanism and socioeconomics.⁷⁷³ However, ritual remains

⁷⁷² Nichols, 'Rethinking Huitzilopochtli's Conquest', p. 155. For some examples of the above-cited archaeologists' contributions see, among others: Evans, *Excavations at Cihuatepan*; Deborah L. Nichols, 'The Organization of Provincial Craft Production and the Aztec City-State of Otumba', in Mary G. Hodge and Michael E. Smith (eds), *Economies and Politics in the Aztec Realm* (Albany and Austin, 1994), pp. 175-93; Nichols, 'The Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State', pp. 265-95, esp. 274-8; Deborah L. Nichols and Susan T. Evans, 'Aztec Studies', *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 20 (2009), pp. 265-70; Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*; M. E. Smith, 'The Aztec Marketing System and Settlement Pattern in the Valley of Mexico: A Central Place Analysis', *American Antiquity*, 44.1 (1979), pp.110-25.

⁷⁷³ Frances Berdan and Michael E. Smith, 'Archaeology and the Aztec Empire', *World Archaeology*, 'Archaeology of Empires', 23.3 (1992), p. 353. Some examples of archaeological fieldwork from outside the Basin of Mexico: Elson, 'An Aztec Palace at Chiconautla', pp. 151-67; Evans, *Excavations at Cihuatepan*; Edward B. Sissons, *First Annual Report of the Coxcatlan Project* (Andover, 1973); Michael E. Smith, *Archaeological Research at Aztec-Period Rural Sites in Morelos, Mexico* (Pittsburgh, 1992); Smith, 'Excavations of Aztec Urban Houses at Yautepec, Morelos'.

unexplored. With regard to my case studies in Cuauhnahuac, Smith gathered information on domestic architecture, wealth indicators and community organization.⁷⁷⁴ He uncovered ritual remains and ceremonial architecture but did not interpret these findings in any sustained way.⁷⁷⁵ For instance, Smith admits that at the *altepetl* Cuexcomate: ‘Our understanding of the temple platform... is quite limited given the lack of extensive excavation’.⁷⁷⁶ In these statements it is clear the extent to which, and the reason why, provincial religions remain poorly understood. Even the handful of archaeologists who have excavated at provincial sites have little interest in investigating temples or domestic ritual paraphernalia. With some exceptions, archaeologists are notoriously reluctant to engage in sustained or clear analysis of ritual remains: ‘focusing instead on the ways that the experience of ritual and ritual symbolism promotes social orders and dominant ideologies’.⁷⁷⁷ Nahua religion and ritualism at imperial sites, therefore, remain neglected topics. Here, I redress this imbalance by integrating underappreciated material culture with the documentary record in my consideration of provincial ceremonies. These findings will contribute significantly to the central tenets of my thesis: that ceremonial practice varied across the Triple Alliance Empire. Moreover, I will prove that, despite the challenges of the historical and archaeological records, we can detect individual and community decisions in ritual practices.

Postclassic urbanism in central Mexico

To assess relationships between provinces and settlements, we must first establish the lie of the land of Postclassic central Mexico. As we know, the Mexica ruled a vast hegemonic

⁷⁷⁴ Smith, ‘Social Complexity in the Aztec Countryside’, p. 146.

⁷⁷⁵ Smith, *At Home with the Aztecs*, p. 50.

⁷⁷⁶ ATCA, 16-18, ‘Conclusions’, p. 21.

⁷⁷⁷ Fogelin, ‘The Archaeology of Religious Ritual’, p. 55

empire based on tribute and reciprocity. At its height, 125,000 square miles of central Mesoamerica their sway. This huge territory was eventually organised into 38 administrative provinces.⁷⁷⁸ Beyond this, the *altepetl* was the basic unit of territorial organisation within this exploitative economic network controlled from Tenochtitlan.⁷⁷⁹ The general model of territorial organisation was one where large *altepetl* capitals dominated hinterlands composed of towns and smaller villages, which in turn paid them tribute which the larger capital passed up the chain to the province's capital.

A Nahuatl difrasismo *in atl, in tepetl* ('the water, the mountain'), the term *altepetl* refers to a contained territory divided into parts called *calpolli*. The *altepetl* was the seat of an ethnic group with a dynastic *tlahtoani* and a titular deity.⁷⁸⁰ It was a religious and economic entity, exemplified by the fact that its architectural landscape would comprise at least a temple for worship and a marketplace for trading. Drawing tribute from surrounding places, an *altepetl* formed 'a single trading system focused on the town market, which in turn was one link in chain of urban markets that made Central Mexico a symbiotic region'.⁷⁸¹ Sanders showed that *altepetl* populations tended to be around 3,000 to 6,000 but some had populations of over 10,000.⁷⁸² Towns and villages seem not to have had their layout prescribed. This differs significantly from Tenochtitlan which was a highly ordered city. Nichols argues that there was significant heterogeneity in spatial organization: 'Beyond a nucleated core of public buildings

⁷⁷⁸ For context, the Triple Alliance Empire covered a land mass which is slightly smaller than present-day New Zealand.

⁷⁷⁹ See this study's introductory section for comment about the nature and scale of the Triple Alliance empire.

⁷⁸⁰ It seems as though there were around 50 *tlahtoqueh* in the Basin of Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest: Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A history of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810* (Stanford, 1964), p. 34; Gillespie, 'The Aztec Triple Alliance', p. 235.

⁷⁸¹ William T. Sanders, *Cultural Ecology of the Teotihuacan Valley* (Pennsylvania, 1965), p. 67.

⁷⁸² William T. Sanders, 'Ecological Adaptation in the Basin of Mexico: 23,000 B.C. to the Present', in Jeremy A. Sabloff and Patricia A. Andrews, *Handbook of the Middle American Indians*, supplement 1: *Archaeology* (Austin, 1981), p. 189, quoted in Nichols, 'Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State', p. 272.

— rulers' palace, *calmecac* (school), marketplace, and ceremonial enclosure with the major temple and shrines — Aztec cities in the basin do not seem to follow a single canon in their layout. Nor did Aztec imperial rulers impose a standardized layout'.⁷⁸³

As we have seen, an *altepetl*'s physical territory was divided into sections called *calpolli*, which we might translate as 'neighbourhoods'.⁷⁸⁴ As much of this section focuses on ritual in towns and villages away from the imperial core, it is crucial to understand the way in which territory was divided so that we know how people lived together. A *calpolli* had a leader, referred to as the *teuctlahtoani* ('noble-speaker'),⁷⁸⁵ and often an associated deity. While an *altepetl* had relatively straightforward defining characteristics, primarily in relation to its *tlahtoani*,⁷⁸⁶ what constituted a *calpolli* seems to be harder to pin down. Essentially, it was an area of the *altepetl* whose inhabitants were somehow bound together by collective identity: 'ethnic pride so characteristic of the *altepetl* is seen at the *calpolli* level'.⁷⁸⁷ However, *calpolli* residents were not merely a nuclear or even extended family. These were exogamous communities with people marrying both inside and outside of their *calpolli*. In general terms, a *calpolli* was a household grouping who served the same lord and probably had ethnic, genealogical or historical associations. It has been suggested that *calpolli* members might have

⁷⁸³ Nichols, 'Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State', p. 277.

⁷⁸⁴ Other possible translations for *calpolli* might be 'district' or 'ward' but these seem purely administrative and do not recognise the familial, kinship and genealogical ties which bound these communities. As with *altepetl*, I use the Nahuatl term in the absence of any suitable alternative which captures the full nuance of the original.

⁷⁸⁵ Lockhart, *Nahuas after the Conquest*, p. 16.

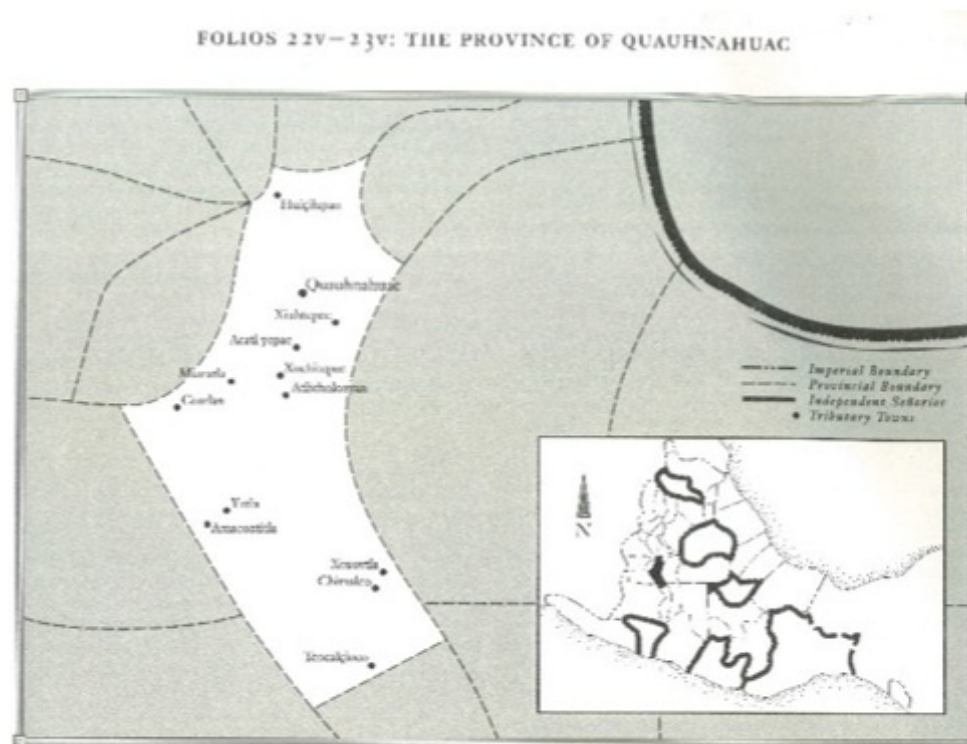
⁷⁸⁶ Scholars have, however, disagreed about the defining characteristic of an *altepetl*. Lockhart's influential definition focuses on the *altepetl*'s physical space. By contrast, Smith emphasises the role of the *tlahtoani*'s persona in the organization of the *altepetl* and points to the importance of communal bonds which transcended fixed territorial boundaries. Lockhart also emphasises the ruler's authority, stating that 'an *altepetl* existed where and only where there was a *tlahtoani*'. See: Michael E. Smith, 'Aztec Urbanism: Cities and Towns', in Deborah L. Nichols and Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs* (Oxford, 2016), p. 211. See also Brian M. Tomaszewski and Michael E. Smith, 'Politics, Territory, and Historical Change in Postclassic Matlatzinco (Toluca Valley, central Mexico)', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 37 (2011), pp. 22-39; Lockhart, *Nahuas after the Conquest*, p. 18. For Smith's critique of Lockhart's view that the Nahuas did not have cities see Smith, 'Aztec Urbanism', pp. 205-6.

⁷⁸⁷ Lockhart, *Nahuas after the Conquest*, p. 17.

been from the same profession or trade.⁷⁸⁸ While each *calpolli* were largely considered ‘equal’, in reality an *altepetl* would have a principal *calpolli*. This temple of the *calpolli*’s god would serve as the *altepetl*’s titular deity and it would usually contain the marketplace and elite residence.⁷⁸⁹

Case studies

Cuauhnahuac province



Map 8: Cuauhnahuac
Codex Mendoza, p. 14.

⁷⁸⁸ Nichols, ‘The Organization of Provincial Craft Production’, quoted in Nichols, ‘Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State’, p. 272. This has, however, not been convincingly proven. For example, Brumfiel found no evidence of craft-specialist *calpolli* at Huexotla, Xico or Xaltocan: Nichols, ‘Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State’, pp. 275-76. This might have been because tribute burden encouraged local populations to focus on subsistence farming instead of textiles or other craft goods. Hassig suggests that full-time artisans resided only in the imperial cities: Ross Hassig, *Trade, Tribute, and Transportation: the Sixteenth-Century Political Economy of the Valley of Mexico* (Norman, 1985).

⁷⁸⁹ Elson, ‘An Aztec Palace at Chiconautla’, p. 153.

Given the fact that my case studies are located in Cuauhnahuac, I must devote some time to explaining how this province sat within the Triple Alliance Empire. The nature of its economic and political relationship with Tenochtitlan is important when considering cultural and religious ties. Cuauhnahuac covers the western part of the present-day Mexican federal state of Morelos and is a region which featured prominently in Durán's *History of the Indies of New Spain*.⁷⁹⁰ This area has received comparatively greater attention from archaeologists than most regions and therefore represents fertile ground for the exploration of local and non-elite perspectives and practices. That the material evidence can be complemented by solid alphabetic evidence is also extremely helpful.

Cuauhnahuac ('Beside the Trees') was a large and fertile province of over a thousand square miles with an eponymous *altepetl* capital.⁷⁹¹ It was conquered in 1438, relatively early in the Mexica's imperial project, during the latter stages of the reign of fourth Mexica *tlahtoani*, Itzcoatl (r. 1427-1440).⁷⁹² With a climate favourable to cotton production and horticulture, it was important for commerce and trade in the area. Durán lived in a Dominican monastery at Huaxtepec, Cuauhnahuac's provincial neighbour, and wrote that:

This is certainly one of the most beautiful and pleasant lands in the world... There are delightful springs, abundant rivers full of fish, the freshest of woods, and orchards of many kinds of fruit. [It] is full of a thousand different fragrant flowers and is very rich in cotton. The commerce in this product is carried on here by people from all over the country.⁷⁹³

⁷⁹⁰ Durán, *History*, p. 15, n. 6. Horcasitas and Heyden, 'Fray Diego Durán: His Life and Works', p. 31.

⁷⁹¹ Peter Gerhard, *A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain* (New York, 1972), p. 94, quoted in *The Essential Codex Mendoza*, p. 42. We do not possess reliable climate statistics for the pre-Hispanic period but a glance at present-day statistics can help to establish the difference in climate between these two regions. This extremely fertile region has a warmer and wetter climate than Mexico City; Morelos is consistently a few degrees warmer and receives almost twice as much rainfall as the centre. This territory's climate is classified as a tropical savannah, rather than Tenochtitlan/Mexico City's subtropical highland terrain.

⁷⁹² *Codex Mendoza*, fol. 6r; Smith, 'The Role of Social Stratification', p. 79. Chimalpahin stated that Cuauhnahuac was incorporated later, in the year 12 Tecpatl, 1452: Chimalpahin, p. 99.

⁷⁹³ Durán, *History*, p. 14.

Perhaps due to the important trading links, Cuauhnahuac was densely populated and influential in the region. It had several urban centres with populations larger than many contemporaneous European cities. For instance, the main urban centre — also called Cuauhnahuac — had nearly 70,000 inhabitants; five other towns in the region had populations which ranged between 10,000 and 35,000 residents.⁷⁹⁴ Cuauhnahuac had been a significant city before the rise of Mexica; it was subject to Azcapotzalco during its own imperial expansion.⁷⁹⁵ Cuauhnahuac people were the Nahuatl-speaking Tlahuica, who originated, as had the Mexica, from the mythical seven-lobed cave Chicomoztoc. While they had ancient ties with each other, the Mexica clearly considered the Tlahuica to be a subordinate ethnic group. Similar to their denigration of the Otomí (‘untrained, stupid’),⁷⁹⁶ the Tlahuica were recorded in the *Florentine Codex* as ‘untrained’ and ‘cowardly’.⁷⁹⁷ Perhaps envious of Cuauhnahuac’s fertile lands and favourable climate, Sahagún’s Mexica informants mocked the Tlahuica, who were ‘pompous as they tied on capes, as they went carrying flowers’.⁷⁹⁸ This gentle criticism also indicates that the Mexica considered the Tlahuica to be a different group with different social customs.

Cuauhnahuac had been expanding and gaining political power in the years before its conquest.⁷⁹⁹ Its rulers and nobles were well-integrated into the regional elite culture and it

⁷⁹⁴ ATCA, 16-18, Introduction, p. 9. This is far beyond Sanders’ estimates referenced earlier, that an *altepetl* would have between 3,000 and 6,000 inhabitants. Sanders, ‘Ecological Adaptation in the Basin of Mexico’, p. 189, quoted in Nichols, ‘Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State’, p. 272. While demonstrating the scale of Cuauhnahuac urbanism, these figures also serve to underscore the exceptional nature of Tenochtitlan’s estimated population of c.250, 000. For more on Tenochtitlan as an exceptional urban centre see Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, pp. 3, 22, 123, 189.

⁷⁹⁵ Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, pp. 33-4.

⁷⁹⁶ *Florentine Codex*, 10: 29: 178.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10: 29: 186.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibid.* Interestingly, the *Codex Mendoza* does not mention flowers in the tribute list for this province during the reign of Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina, where warrior array and accoutrements feature heavily: *Codex Mendoza*, fols 22v-23v.

⁷⁹⁹ Based on the documentary record, Gibson deduced that there were nine politically dominant ethnic groups in the Valley of Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest. The most important were the Triple Alliance partners of Mexica (Tenochtitlan), Acolhua (Tetzoco). After this were, in descending order of important, and the Tepanecs (Tlacopan) were the ever-recalcitrant Chalca, Xochimilca, Mixquica, Cuitlahuaca, Colhuaqueh and the Otomí.

enjoyed political, social and economic links with the imperial core and other provinces. Cuauhnahuac's strategy of making exogamic marriages with their regional counterparts highlights their political integration.⁸⁰⁰ However, it clearly remained subordinate,⁸⁰¹ a position which is made clear in Durán's memorable account of the 1487 Templo Mayor dedication ceremony.⁸⁰² After the Templo Mayor's extension was completed in year 8 Acatl (1487), the eighth *tlahtoani* Ahuitzotl (r. 1486-1502) invited the rulers and nobles of his tributaries to a lavish ceremony lasting four days.⁸⁰³ During this showcase of Mexica power, vassals and allies were 'invited' to Tenochtitlan and were asked to present the *huey tlahtoani* Ahuitzotl with 'cloth and everything necessary that had been stored in the different subject cities and provinces as royal tribute'.⁸⁰⁴ It is interesting to note that Cuauhnahuac had a lesser tribute burden than

⁸⁰⁰ ATCA, 16-18, 'Introduction', p. 9; Smith, 'The Role of Social Stratification', pp. 76-82. In 1395, Tlahuica noblewoman Miahuaxihuitl married the Mexica *tlahtoani* Huitzilihuitl (r. 1391-1417). Strategic alliances endured after Cuauhnahuac's subjugation to the Triple Alliance. Miahuaxihuitl's niece Chichimecacihuatl married her cousin, the infamous Mexica *tlahtoani* Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina. Exogamic partnerships tended to solidify acknowledged political hierarchies, often by unifying a *tlahtoani*'s daughter with a more junior ruler. The suggestion, then, in the marriage of Cuauhnahuac noble Miahuaxihuitl to Mexica *tlahtoani* Huitzilihuitl is that, in 1395, the Mexica were junior to the Tlahuica.

⁸⁰¹ While June Nash, Ross Hassig and others have cited warfare and intimidation as the principal Mexica imperial strategies hierarchical marriage partnerships were a crucially important socially integration factor, ensuring loyalty and the regular tribute which was the empire's *raison d'être*. Pedro Carrasco, 'Social Organization of Ancient Mexico', in Gordon F. Elkholtz and Ignacio Bernal (eds), *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, Handbook of Middle American Indians, vol. 10, pt. 1 (Austin, 1971), pp. 349-75; Pedro Carrasco, 'Los linajes nobles del México antiguo', in Pedro Carrasco and Johanna Broda (eds), *Estratificación social en la Mesoamérica prehispánica* (Mexico City, 1976), pp. 19-36; Boornazian Diel, 'Till Death Do Us Part', p. 269; Susan Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings*, pp. 130-31.

⁸⁰² Durán, *History*, pp. 337-43.

⁸⁰³ Durán quotes a figure of 80,400 victims for the Templo Mayor rededication ceremonies in 1487 (Durán, *History*, p. 339). This is a much-cited, shocking estimate which scholars have contested, not least due to the chronicler-friars' tendency to exaggerate figures relating to human sacrificial activity to legitimize their civilizing mission and, for the Nahuas, to hark back to previous glories. Scholars have also pointed to the implausibility of sacrificing so many people in this amount of time and the impracticality of disposing of so many corpses as evidence of exaggeration: R. C. Padden, *The Hummingbird and the Hawk: Conquest and Sovereignty in the Valley of Mexico, 1503-1541* (New York, 1967), p. 284, n. 12. Heyden suggests 20,000 as a more realistic figure but this can only ever be an estimate: Durán, *History*, p. 339, n. 2. However, it seems safe to deduce that the rededication events of 1487 involved mass human sacrifice. For a recent evaluation of the available evidence regarding human-sacrifice statistics, see Dodds Pennock, 'Mass Murder or Religious Homicide?', pp. 276-302.

⁸⁰⁴ Durán, *History*, p. 328.

other city-states. Cuauhnahuac rulers were only required to bring tribute in the form of jewels and feathers and were exempt from human sacrificial victims. By contrast, rulers and nobles from rival provinces and cities such as Chalco, Colhuacan and Malinalco, with whom the Mexica had historically much more antagonistic, challenging relationships, ‘were asked to bring slaves for sacrifice, as tribute, which was obligatory on these occasions’.⁸⁰⁵ This shows that Cuauhnahuac experienced a less threatening, less competitive relationship with the Mexica than did the rulers of Chalco or Malinalco.

After 1428, then, Cuauhnahuac’s ritual participation and strategic marriages demonstrate that they enjoyed a close, if subordinate, relationship with the Mexica and its association continued after its incorporation as a tributary province under Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina. Thus, Cuauhnahuac’s nobles were well-integrated into the wider regional elite culture. Moreover, the region was an important economic and trading centre, with large and influential urban centres and a climate which favoured textile production. But the religious activities of this province remain sorely underexplored.

This section will explore how two of Cuauhnahuac province’s settlements, the *altepetl* Cuexcomate and the village Capilco, interacted with each other in terms of religious expression. Our ritual case study, Xiuhmolpilli, will provide a case study for these discussions. Finally, I will propose a new model for religious interactions which moves beyond the binary distinctions of ‘centre’ versus ‘periphery’ or ‘local’. Given that we will be discussing Cuexcomate and Capilco’s dwellings and institutions with a view to examining their religious expression, it is

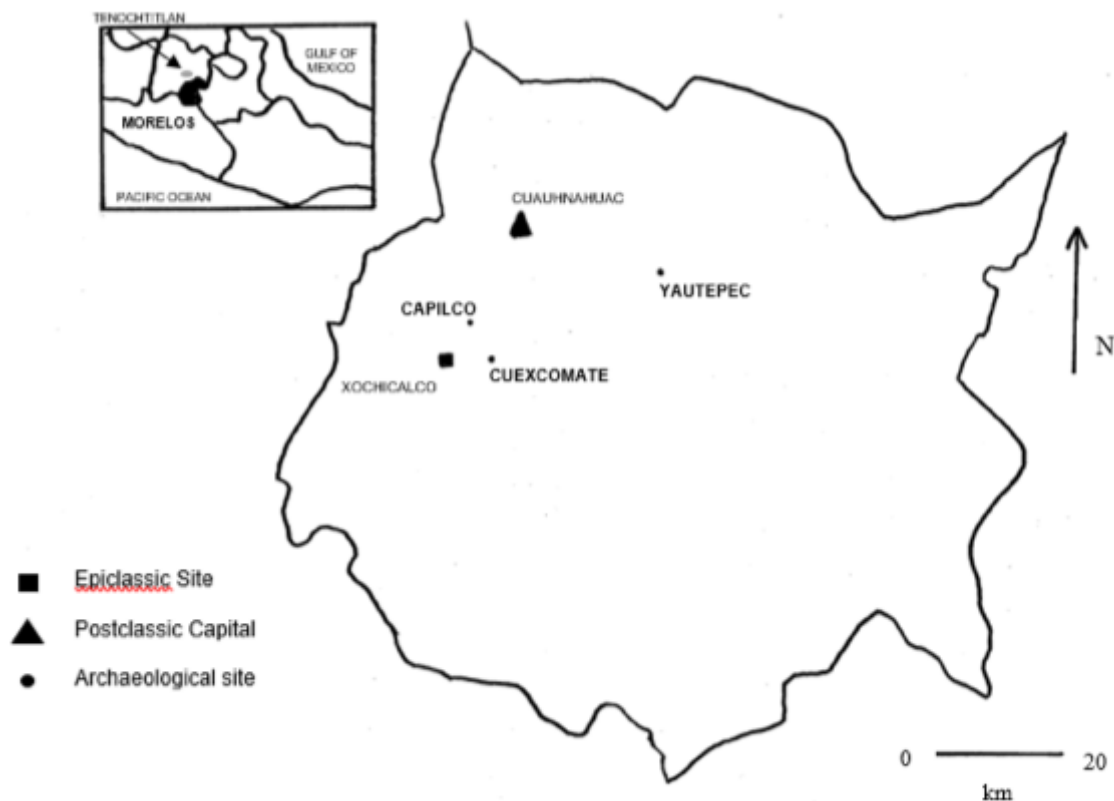
⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 329. Tenochtitlan’s relationship with Chalco is clear in the lyrics of the infamous ‘Chalcan’s Woman’s Song’ which was performed in front of Ahuitzotl in 1479. The Chalcans complain about their status and demand more privileges by means of sexualized metaphors. See: Camilla Townsend, “‘What in the World have you done to me, My Lover?’ Sex, Servitude, and Politics among the Pre-Conquest Nahuas as Seen in the *Cantares Mexicanos*”, *The Americas*, 62.3 (2006), pp. 349-89; or, for a different view which emphasises politics and warfare over sexual content, Kay A. Read and Jane Rosenthal, ‘The Chalcan Woman’s Song: Sex as a Political Metaphor in Fifteenth-Century Mexico’, *The Americas*, 62.3 (2006), pp. 313-348.

paramount that I give context to their situation, key architectural features and composition, before we can analyse the religious life to which it played host.

Introducing *Cuexcomate*, a small *altepetl*

Cuexcomate, a small *altepetl*, forms an essential case study for my analysis as it is one of only a handful of provincial settlements where both public and domestic architecture has been excavated.⁸⁰⁶ We therefore have rare access to ordinary people's houses and associated domestic paraphernalia. In this way, we have evidence to compare and examine ceremonies in public and private contexts. As we know, Xiuhmolpilli is one of the few Nahuatl rituals which is detectable archaeologically, by virtue of the smashing of pots inside houses. The presence, or absence, of Xiuhmolpilli offerings in Cuexcomate's houses will therefore be revealing as to this town's relationship with Mexica central priestly authority.

⁸⁰⁶ The name given to this town derives from the Nahuatl *cuexcomatl* meaning 'granary' or 'corn crib' (essentially, a maize storage structure). *Online Nahuatl Dictionary* <http://whp.uoregon.edu/dictionaries/nahuatl/> [accessed 4 November 2016] searched for 'cuexcomate'. See also: *com(a)-tl* in Karttunen, p. 71 and *cuezcomatl* in Molina, fol. 26v. Michael E. Smith claims that *cuexcomatl* refers specifically to a circular granary, see ATCA, 16-18, 'Introduction', p. 20. Cuexcomate was first reported archaeologically, along with Capilco, in 1978 by Kenneth Hirth. Michael E. Smith and Cynthia Heath-Smith conducted investigations from 1986. Kenneth G. Hirth, *Archaeological Research at Xochicalco*, 2 vols (Salt Lake City, 2000); Smith, 'Los hogares de Morelos', p. 2; Smith, 'Archaeological Patterns at Three Aztec-Period Sites', p. 186; Michael E. Smith and Cynthia Heath-Smith, 'Rural Economy in Late Postclassic Morelos: An Archaeological Study', in Mary G. Hodge and Michael E. Smith (eds), *Economies and Politics in the Aztec Realm* (Albany, 1994), pp. 349-76.



Map 9: Cuexcomate and Capilco, Cuauhnahuac
 Drawn by Harriet Smart

People settled at Cuexcomate sometime between 1300-1430 CE, during which time it was home to around 200 people across nearly ten hectares of land.⁸⁰⁷ Cuexcomate lay around 65 miles south of Tenochtitlan in Cuauhnahuac province [see map 9]. A couple of miles north of Cuexcomate lay the smaller village of Capilco. Both sites were a few miles from the important Epiclassic site of Xochicalco. Cuauhnahuac was incorporated into the Triple Alliance Empire early in the Mexica's state-building enterprise. Imperial domination began a new phase in the town's history, during which time Cuexcomate's population increased four-fold to reach 800 inhabitants and the size of the town expanded cover 15 hectares.⁸⁰⁸ It did,

⁸⁰⁷ ATCA, 16-18, 'Conclusions', p. 3.

⁸⁰⁸ ATCA, 16-18, 'Population, Social Organization and Religion', p. 43.

however, lead to a depreciation in quality of life. The town's elites seem to have had to move from their *tecpan* (palace) to a less elaborate nearby structure. Although there is lamentably sparse evidence to tell us how Cuexcomate's people filled their days, most men were probably farmers growing the three staple crops: maize, beans and squash. Cuexcomate was nestled in a fertile region where, as Sahagún recorded: 'Cotton, chili [sic], maize, grow well'.⁸⁰⁹ Maize, chia and amaranth figure prominently in the tribute demands of Cuauhnahuac province and so it seems Cuexcomate's farmers may have also cultivated these products.⁸¹⁰ Given Cuauhnahuac was famed for its cotton, it is highly likely that women spun and wove this material in order to meet the Mexica' tribute demands [see figure 47].

Cuexcomate paid tribute to another *altepetl* in the province, where it was delivered to the province's capital, the eponymous Cuauhnahuac *altepetl*. Cuexcomate serves to emphasise the importance of integrating archaeological evidence with the documentary record. As it was not a tributary capital, this town does not feature in the *Codex Mendoza*. Moreover, it does not appear in the friars' writings of ritual. However, with its fairly large population and complex structures, Cuexcomate was certainly a significant settlement where both public and private ritual activity took place. If we were reliant entirely on the historical record, we would have completely missed Cuexcomate and not considered the experiences of these people.

⁸⁰⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 10: 29: 186.

⁸¹⁰ Nichols, 'Rural and Urban Landscapes of the Aztec State', p. 273.



Figure 47: Cuauhnahuac province tribute demands
Codex Mendoza, fol. 22

Even though Cuexcomate's population was significantly smaller than the average *altepetl* in the region (as per Sanders' estimates),⁸¹¹ it had specialised public architecture such as a large plaza and a compound which was likely a priests' residence, in addition to the requisite temple.⁸¹² Most importantly, the temple had a double-staircase, which was the region's dominant style and form. It was clearly constructed before Cuexcomate, and Cuauhnahuac province, was conquered by the Mexica. This shows that the temple was not imposed on the people of Cuexcomate, even though it conformed to the Mexica's preferences.⁸¹³ This is an important point of the town's architecture and will be discussed in greater detail later, when we assess their religious customs.

Cuexcomate's elite lived in the largest compound which lay in the centre of the sprawling settlement.⁸¹⁴ The *tecpan* was a completely enclosed compound comprising a series of connected platform houses which surrounded a central patio area.⁸¹⁵ The *tecpan* was built with sophisticated methods and materials; the floors were lime plaster rather than the *tepetate* sediment or cobbles used for the commoner dwellings.⁸¹⁶ Figure 40 shows clearly that the *tecpan* opened eastwards, facing towards the public temple which itself faced back west onto

⁸¹¹ Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, pp. 57, 60-62.

⁸¹² ATCA, 16-18, 'Introduction', p. 2.

⁸¹³ ATCA, 16-18, 'Circular Structures and Temples', p. 9.

⁸¹⁴ The *tecpan*'s total surface area was very large at 536.8 square metres; based on its size, the archaeologists estimated that 11 people would have lived in this residence. While the archaeological reports refer to this compound as Patio Group 6, I will refer to it here for reasons of style as the *tecpan* ('palace'). My study aims to explore the cultural history of religious behaviour in the imperial provinces. In this way I choose — where appropriate — to eschew the overly technical language employed by some archaeologists in their reports. In turning instead to Nahuatl terminology, I hope to conjure a picture of provincial life as the inhabitants might have perceived it. *Tecpan* is translated as 'palace' and can refer to the household organisation of the compound, as well as the physical structure: Karttunen, p. 217. Other studies use *tecpan* and 'palace' interchangeably in their analyses of elite structures: see Elson, 'An Aztec Palace at Chiconautla'.

⁸¹⁵ ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', p. 13-15.

⁸¹⁶ ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', p. 2; Smith, 'A life in the provinces', p. 95. Note that some floors at the Templo Mayor were also constructed with lime plaster: L. A. Barba, A. Ortiz, K. F. Link, L. López Luján and L. Lazos, 'Chemical Analysis of Residues in Floors and the Reconstruction of Ritual Activities at the Templo Mayor, Mexico', in Mary Orna (ed.), *Archaeological Chemistry: Organic, Inorganic, and Biochemical Analysis*, ACS Symposium Series (Washington, D.C., 1996), pp. 139-56.

a public plaza. In effect, these buildings mirrored each other to create a central district which projected a strong impression of unification between the temple and noble household. This central cluster of civic-ceremonial architecture was completed by the priestly residence which sat adjacent to the temple. This arrangement mirrors the architecture of Tenochtitlan which, as we saw earlier, had an enclosed religious compound where temples were clustered closely together.

As I have explained, drawing comparisons between Cuexcomate and other communities which fell under Mexica sway will allow for a more nuanced analysis than simply drawing comparisons between Tenochtitlan and its subjugated towns. In this way, we might look at other *altepemeh*'s elite residences to see how Cuexcomate fits with the regional trends. Cuexcomate's *tecpan* was similar to elite residences in Chiconautla, an *altepetl* which lay north of Tenochtitlan at eastern shore of Lake Tetzaco. Lying over a hundred kilometres to the north, this settlement was also subject to a different overlord. Chiconautla fell under the sway of the Mexica's imperial partner, the Acolhua of Tetzaco and lay from their overlords.⁸¹⁷ Chiconautla's *tecpan* demonstrates that Cuexcomate had similar hierarchical structures to counterparts in other provinces.⁸¹⁸ However, the Chiconautla's political and religious architecture indicate that both were integrated into a wider, long-distance shared cultural system which transcended political divisions and natural boundaries. As Smith writes, 'The resemblance of the temple platform to other Late Postclassic temples (although not the twin

⁸¹⁷ Elson and Smith, 'Archaeological Deposits of the Aztec New Fire Ceremony', p. 161; Deborah L. Nichols, Christina Elson, Leslie G. Cecil, Nina Neivens de Estrada, Michael D. Glascock and Paula Mikkelsen, 'Chiconautla, Mexico: A Crossroads of Aztec Trade and Politics', *Latin American Antiquity*, 20.3 (2009), p. 443. Interestingly, the type of artefacts found in Cuexcomate *tecpan* were not particularly different to commoner possessions. This demonstrates that, although they had more imported and decorated objects, Cuexcomate's nobles did not necessarily have exclusive use of any artefact: Smith, 'A Life in the Provinces', p. 95.

⁸¹⁸ Elson, 'An Aztec Palace at Chiconautla'.

stairway variety) may provide another example of elite interaction given the close association between the palace and the temple'.⁸¹⁹

⁸¹⁹ ATCA, 16-18, 'Conclusions', p. 9.

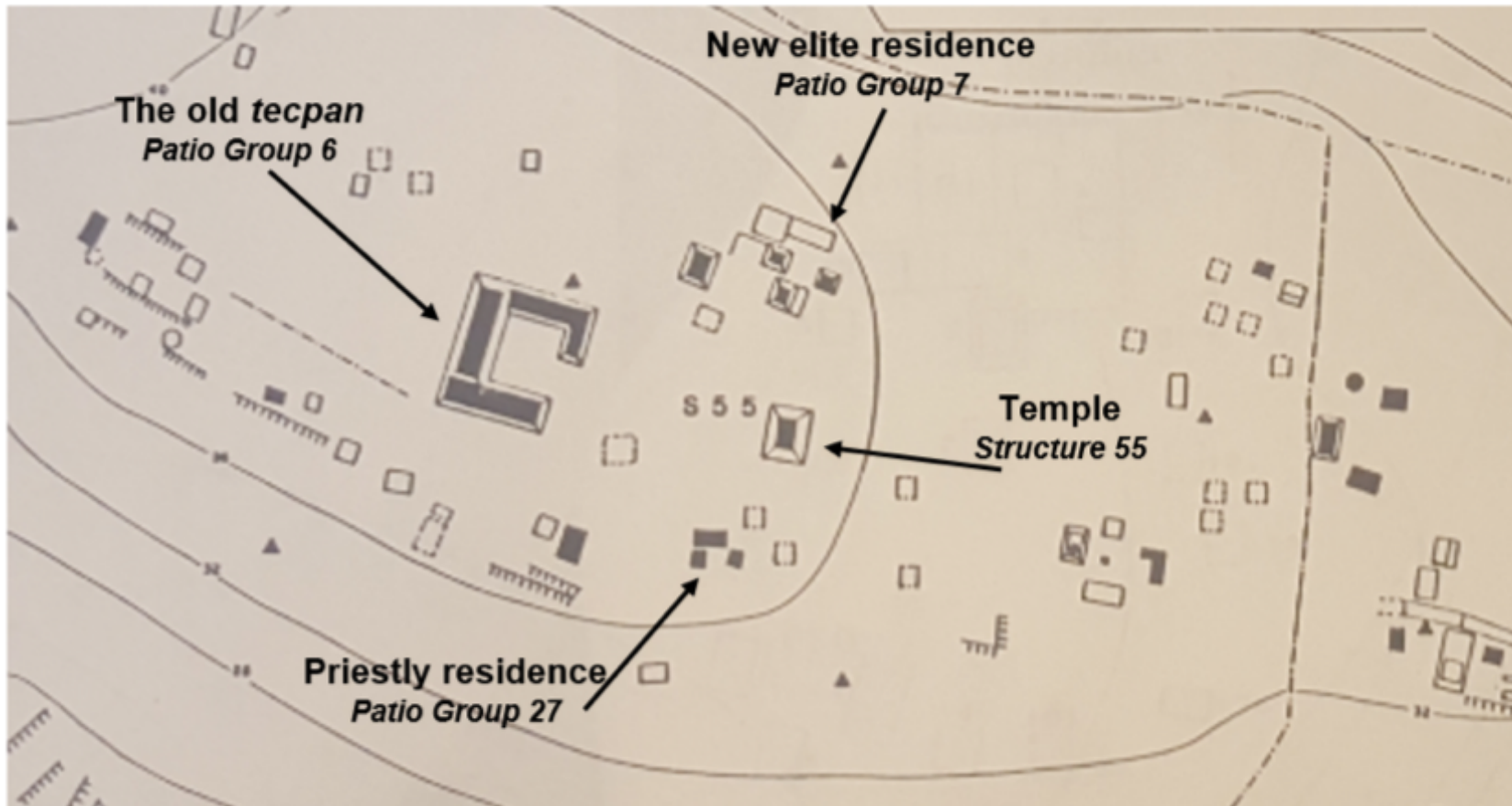


Figure 48: Cuexcomate's civic-ceremonial cluster
ATCA 16-18 (annotated by Harriet Smart)



Figure 49: A 1980s Nahua house in Amatlán, Veracruz
Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, p. 229.
Photograph: Alan Sandstrom

Cuexcomate's 800-strong population lived in family groups of five or six in rectangular mud mortar structures of only one room which were only about 14 metres squared.⁸²⁰ Probably because the roofs were perishable, there is no archaeological evidence of how these dwellings were protected from the elements. While it can only ever be speculation, Smith points to ethnographic comparisons with present-day Morelos traditional houses with thatched roofs resting on a wooden frame.⁸²¹ Figure 50 depicts a present-day Nahua house which gives some impression of how Cuauhnahuac's houses might have looked.

⁸²⁰ ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', pp. 1-2; ATCA, 16-146, 'Introducción', p. 2; Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, pp. 61- 62.

⁸²¹ ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', p. 4.

The spatial organisation of Cuexcomate's houses has implications for rituals in the town. Cuexcomate's houses were smaller than the average Basin of Mexico commoner house. The general regional trend was that houses had a few, separated rooms.⁸²² A significant majority of Cuexcomate's houses, 93 of the 150, were grouped around a patio: a space defined as 'an arrangement of two or more structures arranged around a formal rectangular plaza'.⁸²³ Importantly, a mixture of domestic implements and paraphernalia was found in each dwelling. This indicates that each small dwelling was a single household where all the daily activities of cooking, weaving, working and sleeping took place. This is crucial for our understanding of Cuexcomate people's ritual lives as their houses' small size suggests that a great deal of these domestic activities would have been undertaken outside the four walls of the house. This has implications for rituals. It seems unlikely that many ceremonies, except for micro-ceremonies (acts such as blowing on maize for animacy) would have taken place inside. Rituals involving several participants would surely have taken place outside of the home, in either full view of neighbours or within the confines of the patio. I speculate that many rituals would therefore, not have been strictly 'private' and would have involved neighbours in their activities and choreography.

We might turn to some present-day examples for reference. While, of course, we cannot use current anthropological evidence to corroborate our findings, they can provide us with some perspective on the issues. Alan Sandstrom's fieldwork in the Huasteca in Veracruz is helpful for understanding community organisation. In the 1980s, Sandstrom found that Huastecan families lived in a single room where 'the family prepares and consumes food, stores equipment and produce from the fields, makes ritual offerings, socializes children, sleeps, and

⁸²² Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 164.

⁸²³ ATCA, 16-18, 'Population, Social Organization and Religion', p. 11. At Cuexcomate, 62% of the dwellings were grouped around a plaza forming these so-called patio groups. This leaves a sizeable minority of houses of 57 houses which were single-room structures without patio affiliation.

carries out the many daily activities of village life'.⁸²⁴ Sandstrom also comments that people spend little time indoors and most leisure and work is spent outside of the home.⁸²⁵ It seems likely that many of their pre-Hispanic counterparts' activities would have similarly taken place outside the four walls of the home. For instance, Jacques Soustelle recalled how a fireplace was often built outside, in order to heat the porous wall of the *temascal*.⁸²⁶

Just because Cuexcomate's people were farmers and weavers does not necessarily mean that they had simple tastes. In fact, all of the houses contained rare, imported goods such as ceramics, salt containers and, sometimes, copper.⁸²⁷ The presence of obsidian at Cuexcomate is particularly telling because another cutting tool, chert, was available locally.⁸²⁸ The excavations transformed even the archaeologists' preconceptions: they found at Cuexcomate 'a level of social complexity that was unexpected for a rural setting', which will be explored further in the subsequent chapter.⁸²⁹ Similarly to Cuauhnahuac province's nobles, then, local people at Cuexcomate were well-integrated into the economy of the area. This section will interrogate what interactions, if any, there were in ritual practices in the area.

⁸²⁴ ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', pp. 1, 8; Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, p. 107.

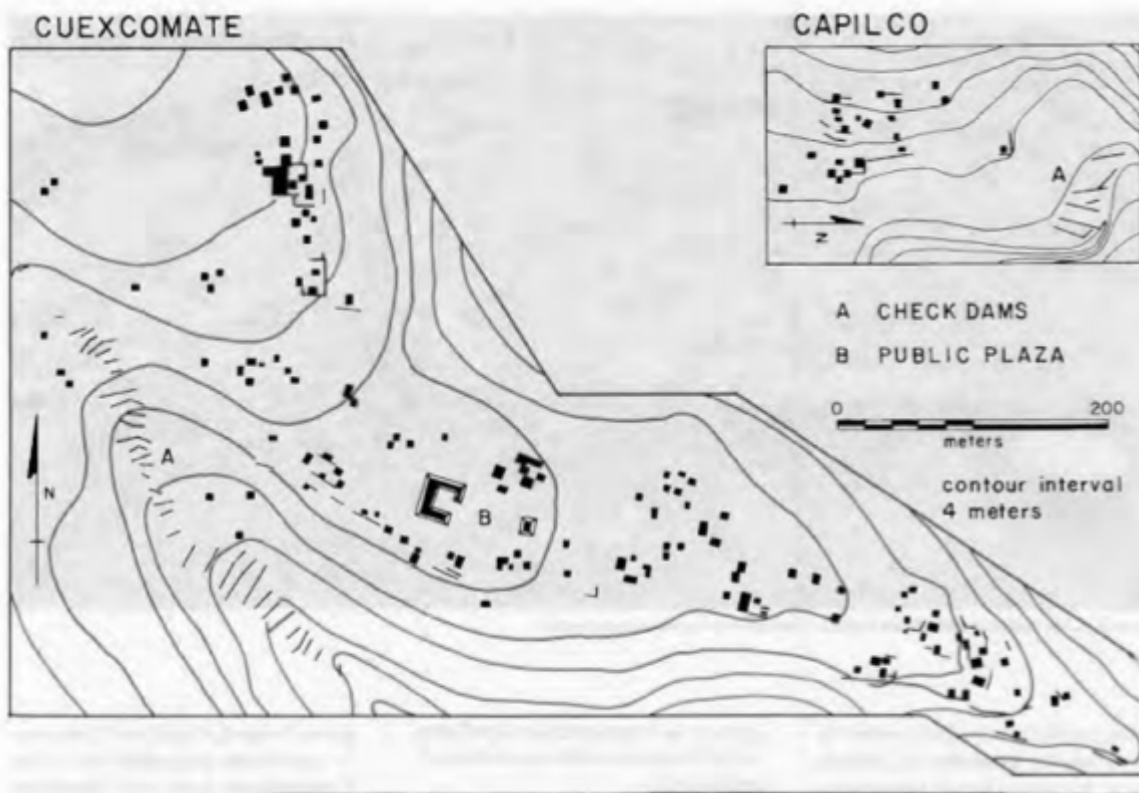
⁸²⁵ Sandstrom, *Corn is our Blood*, p. 113.

⁸²⁶ Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (Stanford, 1970), p. 129. While interesting simply as a rare attempt to reconstruct lived experiences, Soustelle should read with caution. This work's dated nature is apparent in some of the references to indigenous peoples' supposed 'natural' predilection for alcohol and gambling which is clearly influenced by racist stereotypes.

⁸²⁷ ATCA, 16-18, 'Introduction', p. 3; ATCA, 16-18, 'Conclusions' pp. 6, 11-12.

⁸²⁸ Smith, *At Home with the Aztecs*, p. 24.

⁸²⁹ ATCA, 16-18, 'Introduction', p. 2; Smith, 'A Life in the Provinces'.



Map 10: Cuexcomate and Capilco
 Smith, 'Arquitectura y sociedad en sitios rurales postclásicos', p. 41.

Introducing *Capilco*, a hamlet

I will now briefly introduce Capilco before moving on to a discussion of religious experiences and interactions in these settlements. Three kilometres west of Cuexcomate, at the foot of a hill called Cerro Coatzin, lay Capilco. Capilco was less than a tenth of the size of Cuexcomate; this settlement covered just over one hectare compared to its larger neighbour's 14.2 hectares.⁸³⁰ Capilco was essentially a hamlet. On the eve of the Spanish conquest around 120 people lived here in 20 houses, meaning that about six people were living in a single house

⁸³⁰ Michael E. Smith, 'Arquitectura y sociedad en sitios rurales postclásicos en el oeste de Morelos. El Proyecto Morelos Postclásico', *Cuadernos de arquitectura mesoamericana*, 24 (1993), p. 51.

in a similar fashion to Cuexcomate.⁸³¹ Capilco was first occupied approximately 100 years earlier than Cuexcomate, the time of sharpest population rise in Cuauhnahuac province.⁸³²

Capilco had no temple, elite residence or priestly quarters. Its differing social organisation and architecture — while lying in close proximity to Cuexcomate — make it a particularly interesting case study. We might think that the lack of civic-ceremonial architecture meant that there was no ritual activity in the village. Quite the opposite: possessions and utensils uncovered from the dwellings reveal that the people of Capilco conducted rituals at the level of their households and patios, and were potentially connected to the religious activity of the region via Cuexcomate's temple. The most significant ritual feature at Capilco was the large number of child burials: six were uncovered, compared to the three found at Cuexcomate. Figurines were an extremely important component of the artefact inventory of both Cuexcomate and Capilco houses. This indicates that rituals likely took place relating to human fertility and reproduction.⁸³³ The importance of domestic ritual in this provincial setting will be discussed in greater depth in the subsequent chapter.

Religious autonomy in the provinces

Now that I have provided some general context to Cuexcomate and Capilco, and their position within Cuauhnahuac province, we can examine their religious practices more specifically. This will allow for comparisons with how these people interacted between

⁸³¹ Capilco's population of grew modestly from approximately 70 to 120 from Early (1300-1430) to Late (1430-1521) Cuauhnahuac phases: ATCA, 16-18, 'Conclusions', p. 3.

⁸³² ATCA, 16-18, 'Introduction', p.23; ATCA, 16-18, 'Conclusions', p. 4. Smith speculates that its founders might have arrived in the Valley from small settlements west of Xochicalco: Michael E. Smith, 'Los hogares de Morelos en el sistema mundial mesoamericano postclásico', *Relaciones*, 25 (2004), p. 84.

⁸³³ Lisa Overholtzer, 'So that the Baby not be Formed like a Pottery Rattle: Aztec Rattle Figurines and Household Social Reproductive Practices', *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 23.1 (2012), pp. 69-83.

themselves and with the institutions of the capital, Tenochtitlan. I will begin this discussion with ceremonial architecture in Cuexcomate specifically to scrutinise the ways in which this settlement fitted with the dominant regional trends. I will then use Xiuhmolpilli to assess whether Cuexcomate and Capilco's people made decisions about their public, or community, rituals. Moreover, Xiuhmolpilli will allow us to examine whether all people participated in a widespread ritual in a similar fashion. This in turn will strengthen the overall arguments of this study, that Nahua and Tlahuica people were, to a greater extent, able to make choices about their ritual involvement.

We have already seen that Cuexcomate's nobles were well-integrated into the wider regional elite culture. But what about the religious activities of this town? Might the temple provide any clues to religious autonomy? Architectural and material culture evidence strongly indicates that Cuexcomate shared religious and cultural systems and activities with its neighbours before their incorporation into the empire. The tallest building in Cuexcomate, the temple stood at 1.8 metres,⁸³⁴ significantly taller than the surrounding houses, whose walls stood at less half this height.⁸³⁵ Michael E. Smith's investigations demonstrated that Cuexcomate's temple conformed to the region's dominant style and form.⁸³⁶ Excavators determined that it was constructed in two stages between 1300 and 1430. This is hugely significant as it demonstrates that the temple was constructed before the town's incorporation into the empire, which as we know, was from 1440 onwards.⁸³⁷ The temple bore striking

⁸³⁴ ATCA, 16-18, 'Circular Structures and Temples', p. 1; ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', p. 28.

⁸³⁵ Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 164. Cuexcomate's architectural landscape finds an interesting parallel in Tenochtitlan's cityscape, where the Templo Mayor soared above the dwellings as only nobles were allowed houses of more than one storey.

⁸³⁶ ATCA, 'Architecture', p. 29. As with the *tecpán*, the quality of the construction materials indicate that this was a special structure: notably, the outer stones of the platform walls were carefully trimmed and the platform's plaster floor was superior to those of the commoner houses. We do not have texts or other historical documents to corroborate findings that the so-called *tecpán* or temple were these special structures. Such functions are inferred based on their refined architecture and position within the settlement.

⁸³⁷ ATCA, 16-18, 'Circular Structures and Temples', p. 9.

similarity to other temple structures in Postclassic central Mexico which were usually built on top of stepped pyramids that faced west onto a public plaza.⁸³⁸ However, Cuexcomate's temple is architecturally significant due to its double staircase. Only five known temples in the region had this staircase formation: the most recognisable are Tenochtitlan's famous Templo Mayor and its counterpart in Tlatelolco.⁸³⁹ Figure 42 depicts the reconstructed double-staircase temple at Santa Cecilia Acatitlan which gives an impression of how Cuexcomate's might have looked. The dating of Cuexcomate's temple before Mexica conquest proves that Cuexcomate's religious architecture was, therefore, not imposed on them by their imperial overlords. The Mexica did not instruct them to build this temple. Smith rightly observes that 'The archaeological data from Capilco and Cuexcomate are quite ambivalent about the existence, let alone the impact, of the Aztec empire'.⁸⁴⁰ This is hugely important for our understanding of the people of Cuexcomate, and their level of autonomy from Tenochtitlan and the Triple Alliance with regards to their religious affairs. Although their level of political autonomy is hard to determine (after all, evidence suggests that their *tlahtoani* abandoned — voluntarily or otherwise — his residence in 1440), it is clear that the people of Cuexcomate were not dictated to, in terms of public religion, by their imperial overlords.

⁸³⁸ ATCA, 16-18, 'Population, Social Organization and Religion', p. 37.

⁸³⁹ A double staircase was built during the Late Postclassic period at Santa Cecilia. During the Middle Postclassic, such temples had also been built at Tenayuca and Teopanzolco. ATCA, 16-18, 'Architecture', p. 29.

⁸⁴⁰ ATCA, 16-18, 'Conclusions', pp. 15-16.



Figure 50: Twin-temple pyramid at Santa Cecilia Acatitlan
Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 60.
Photograph: Michael E. Smith

Rather than being imposed by the Mexica, Cuexcomate's ceremonies were likely directed by the priests resident at an open cluster of three structures a few metres to the south of the temple.⁸⁴¹ The colonial *Relaciones geográficas*, colonial census-style documents, claimed that in Morelos a couple of priests lived in the town and worked in the local temple

⁸⁴¹ See Smith, *Aztec City-State Capitals*, p. 186 for the urban functions of Cuexcomate. While there is no documentary record with which to corroborate the hypothesis that Patio Group 24 was a priestly lodging, its location adjacent to the temple strongly supports this hypothesis. Aside from its central location, its refined construction and specialised artefacts such as jade beads suggest that it was a significant structure. These types of artefacts were not found in commoner settings which strongly indicates that this was the residence of a priestly class: ATCA, 16-18, 'Population, Social Organization and Religion', p. 38.

and served the local population.⁸⁴² Cuexcomate's priests, therefore, do not seem to have been unusual in the regional culture. Most intriguing is that these religious authorities lived directly among the commoners of the town. While Tenochtitlan's priests lived and worked inside a walled ceremonial compound with strict rules for access, no such segregated, exclusive precinct existed at Cuexcomate.⁸⁴³ The lack of such a complex meant that the town's priests, or at least their residence, were not physically separated from ordinary people. The priests' house sat along with the other important civic and religious buildings, nestled among the houses in the middle of sprawling Cuexcomate. I venture to suggest that at this smaller settlement, the priests might have had greater contact with the people of the town than Tenochtitlan's elite priests had with their commoner counterparts. While Tenochtitlan's priests formed an authoritative, privileged class which operated within their own sphere of influence, it seems that priests in a smaller town would have had closer dealings with the people they served. Whether it be to oversee an auspicious naming day for a newborn, or assessing a couple's suitability for marriage, Cuexcomate's priests might have moved more freely throughout the town's neighbourhoods. While being mindful not to stretch the evidence, it might have been that these priests, as a consequence of their unenclosed living space, enjoyed closer, more personal relationships with ordinary people. Given their reduced numbers, we might also speculate that priests had less specialised tasks. While in Tenochtitlan priests had their own tasks, there might have been a blurring of roles between sacrificial practitioners and the 'readers of days'.

Here, we have seen that there were different levels of religious expression at Cuexcomate. Most importantly for our purposes, this town had a temple which was constructed before Mexica conquest. We have established, then, that Cuexcomate's religious monuments

⁸⁴² René Acuña (ed.), *Relaciones geográficas, 1579-1580*, vols 6-8; ATCA, 16-18, 'Population, Social Organization and Religion', p. 38.

⁸⁴³ ATCA, 16-18, 'Population, Social Organization and Religion', p. 38.

cannot have been imposed on them by any economic or political overlord. While Mexica conquest seems to have led to a depreciation in standards of living for both elites and commoners in Cuexcomate, it did not lead to any major innovations in religious architecture. No special temples to Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica's special patron, were built. The pre-existing temple remained in place and in use. Cuexcomate's central plaza was constructed long before imperial conquest and remained largely intact. In this respect, therefore, it seems as though the Mexica did not meddle in Cuexcomate's religious affairs.

But what about participation in a centralised, official ritual? Did Cuexcomate and Capilco play any part in the mass participation of Xiuhmolpilli which was strongly indicated by the textual sources? In this section we will use the archaeological record to examine further Motolinía's fervent claim that: 'In the provinces distant from Mexico they performed the same ceremony and it was done everywhere with much feasting'.⁸⁴⁴ When assessing if provincial people practised Xiuhmolpilli, we run into the same problems as when we try to investigate local ritual in general: the almost total lack of documents and the reliance on archaeological material. Smith's research in Cuauhnahuac province is crucial in understanding provincial ritual in relation to state-sponsored activities of the centre.

Variations in Xiuhmolpilli practice in Cuauhnahuac province

So far, we have been discussing Xiuhmolpilli within the context of a state ceremony which simultaneously celebrated the death of a calendar cycle and brought on a new phase of time. We have discussed that it was a perilous moment for rulers, elites and commoners alike due to the anxiety over whether the sun would rise. As you will remember, an integral part of the ceremony was commoners' destruction of household items who, on the understanding that

⁸⁴⁴ Motolinía, *History*, p. 113.

the world might end and they would have no use for them, ‘broke all the jars and jugs which had been used and the tortilla griddles which they had, they broke them all’.⁸⁴⁵ The smashing of pots makes the earlier phases of Xiuhmolpilli detectable archaeologically. These material remains make Xiuhmolpilli a particularly useful ceremony for tracing levels of adherence to state ritual across time and place.

Let me begin this section of the analysis by clarifying how we might detect these Xiuhmolpilli offerings. Given that they usually comprise broken household utensils, how can we distinguish them from mundane rubbish and household waste? In his unpublished report of the excavations, Smith explained that broken pots are diagnosed as Xiuhmolpilli offerings ‘based primarily on the stratigraphy and artifactual content of the rock piles, supplemented by comparative data from Aztec ethnohistory’.⁸⁴⁶ In other words, one would expect a Xiuhmolpilli offering to be composed of a high density of *different* artefacts which were deposited at the *same* moment. This ‘moment’ is detectable by carbon dating and also the reconstruction of multiple shards into single, complete objects.⁸⁴⁷

Broken pottery, figurines and household utensils matching these diagnostic traits were found in the province of Cuauhnahuac. Smith and his team uncovered what he described as ‘amorphous piles of rocks’ at the town of Cuexcomate and Site 3, the small hamlet of two dwellings during his excavations in the 1980s. Smith interpreted these piles, with the help of some colonial descriptions of the festival, as Xiuhmolpilli deposits which he terms ‘ritual dumps’.⁸⁴⁸ Given the reasonable consensus on their purpose, I prefer to call these deposits

⁸⁴⁵ *Códice Tudela*, fol. 83 v. This is my translation. The original Spanish is: ‘y quebravan todas las ollas y cantaros q[ue] avian servido y los comals y basijas q[ue] tenían, todo lo quebravan’.

⁸⁴⁶ ATCA, 16-18, ‘Non-architectural features’, p. 9.

⁸⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6. George Vaillant, excavating in the 1930s at Chiconautla found a similar ritual dump at the *tecpan*. Vaillant — the first archaeologist to suggest that certain artefact remains were part of Xiuhmolpilli ceremonial — termed them ‘cyclical dumps’: George C. Vaillant, ‘History and Stratigraphy in the Valley of Mexico’, *Scientific Monthly*, 44 (1937), pp. 307-24; George C. Vaillant, ‘A Correlation of Archaeological and Historical Sequences in the Valley of Mexico’, *American*

‘Xiuhmolpilli offerings’. Crucially, offerings which are likely to relate to this ceremony were uncovered at Cuexcomate, but not at Capilco. It is not clear, however, whether some offerings might remain undetected.

The Cuexcomate and Site 3 offerings are the best available evidence for Xiuhmolpilli in the provinces; their context provides very strong support for the hypothesis that this ancient, dramatic festival was practised away from Tenochtitlan. Although the documentary sources specify that household goods were cast into the water during Xiuhmolpilli, Cuexcomate and Site 3 offerings were found underground, covered over with piles of rocks beside a patio. This is an excellent example of regional variation in the practical details of this ritual. As the documentary sources which describe this festival were written from the perspective of Tenochtitlan, it seems that the Mexica might have thrown their possessions away into nearby Lake Tetzoco. Cuauhnahuac did not have similar large watercourses and so it seems likely these people discarded their items around their houses and patios. It is clear that the general principles of the festival were subject to change, either for reasons of practicality or individual preference.

Let us explore further the nature of the Xiuhmolpilli offerings in Cuexcomate in the Cuauhnahuac region, in order to make clear how we can be sure that these are indeed from Xiuhmolpilli ceremonies. At Cuexcomate, piles were found at only five of the 25 patio groups which were excavated from the random sample; however, not every patio area was completely cleared by the archaeologists, and so I suggest it is entirely possible that there are more Xiuhmolpilli offerings at Cuexcomate.⁸⁴⁹ All of the Xiuhmolpilli offerings were associated with the patio.

Anthropologist, 40 (1938), pp. 535-73; Elson and Smith, ‘Archaeological Deposits of the Aztec New Fire Ceremony’, p. 159.

⁸⁴⁹ ATCA, 16-18, ‘Non-architectural features’, p. 9.

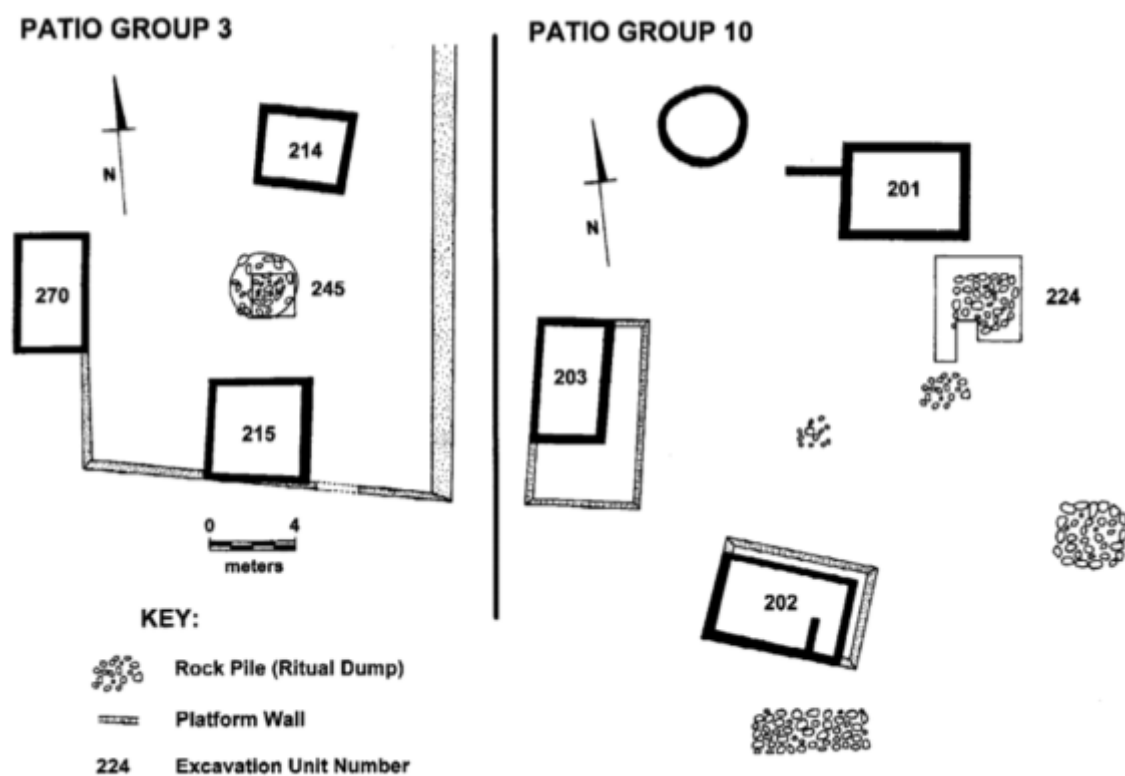


Figure 51: Location of Xiuhmolpilli offerings at Cuexcomate
 Elson and Smith, 'The Aztec New Fire Ceremony, p. 166.

While most were found in the centre of the patio (which is why they were initially interpreted as collapsed altars)⁸⁵⁰ there was some flexibility about where these Xiuhmolpilli deposits were positioned: one was found to the side of a patio and one deposit was located behind a detached house. Crucially, the artefacts which comprised the deposits — broken cooking vessels, household shrines and griddles — were found to date from the same archaeological phase as the houses near which they were positioned.⁸⁵¹ These caches are distinctive because of the high density and their lack of stratification, meaning that they are the

⁸⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

result of ‘a single depositional event’.⁸⁵² Carbon dating has provided a calibrated date of 1433 for a wooden tool found in one of the offerings,⁸⁵³ which strongly indicates that this might relate to the ceremony of 1455. Earlier I explained that Xiuhmolpilli offerings, as prescribed by Smith, should be composed of many different artefacts, deposited at the same time, which can be reconstructed into single, replete objects.⁸⁵⁴ Interpreted within these diagnostic characteristics, these offerings can certainly be aligned with a Xiuhmolpilli celebration.

Most significantly, Xiuhmolpilli deposits were found at both commoner and elites’ residence at Cuexcomate. Five patio groups had Xiuhmolpilli deposits; four were commoner compounds and the fifth was found in the middle of the *tecpan* patio.⁸⁵⁵ Figure 43 shows very clearly the position of this offering (‘*ofrenda*’) inside the abandoned elite residence. Given that, as we have discussed, the archaeological evidence suggests the *tecpan* was abandoned around 1440, it is interesting to discover an apparent Xiuhmolpilli offering here. Rather than the date of 1455 suggested by Smith, could these offerings have been deposited at the previous Xiuhmolpilli of 1403? Or did Cuexcomate celebrate this festival of calendrical renewal at an entirely different time? It could be that commoners deposited their offerings inside the abandoned *tecpan*. However, the discarded possessions in the *tecpan* offering were not necessarily of any higher quality than those found in Cuexcomate’s ordinary houses. Without textual evidence, it is extremely difficult to corroborate, or verify any of these suggestions without further archaeological fieldwork. What the *tecpan* Xiuhmolpilli offering *does* tell us, however, is that participation in this rite was likely to have been important across social groups. This is particularly crucial evidence as the documentary record is vague regarding where the

⁸⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸⁵⁵ In the archaeological reports, these units are: patio group 3 (unit 224), patio group 6, patio group 9 (unit 222), patio group 10 had a total of five ‘ritual dumps’ (units 224, 202-167, 240-103) and patio group 17 (unit 223). See ATCA, 16-18, ‘Non-architectural features’, pp. 6-12.

domestic participation took place. While the *Florentine Codex*, our key textual source for this ceremony, suggests that it took place ‘in each man’s home’,⁸⁵⁶ it has not been clear to scholars whether this was strictly a commoner festival or one that transcended social boundaries.

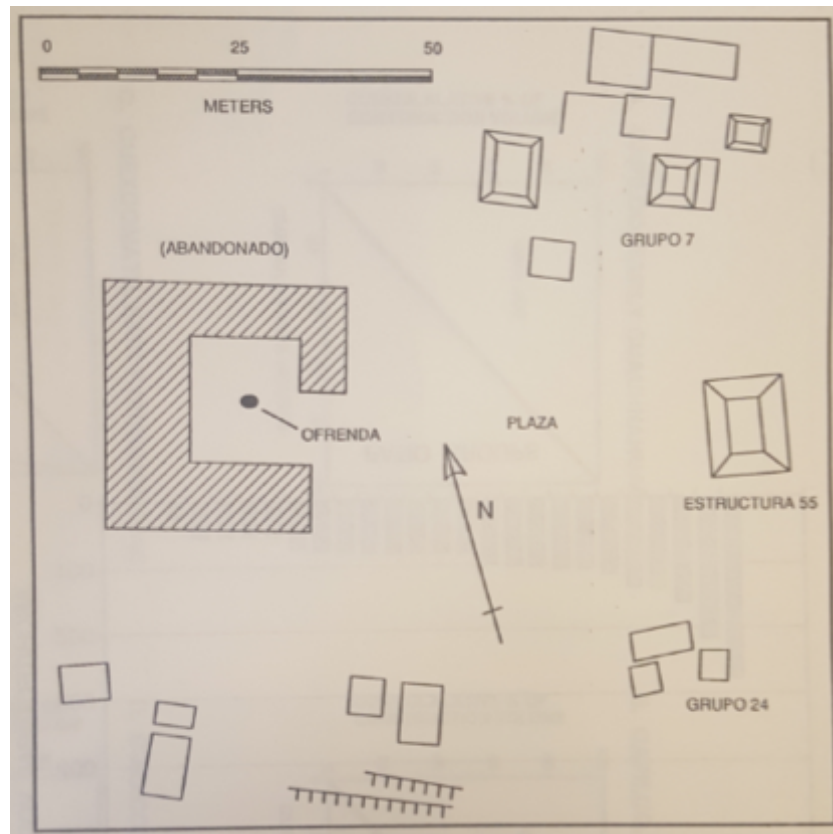


Figure 52: The Xiuhmolpilli offering inside Cuexcomate's civic-ceremonial cluster ATCA 16-18

These archaeological findings illuminate significantly our understanding of Xiuhmolpilli and its regional practice. Given that it has not been possible to excavate any commoner dwellings in Tenochtitlan, the Cuexcomate offerings are some of the only material evidence we have for the domestic phases of Xiuhmolpilli ritual happening *at all*. The most interesting aspect of the ritual is that at Cuexcomate these deposits were predominantly found

⁸⁵⁶ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 9: 25.

in association with a patio group and not located beside individual households. However, this was not exclusively the case. There were two cases where the objects were found in different contexts: one to the side of the patio and another behind a house. This variation in how people discarded their items suggests that individual commoners could exercise a degree of agency in where they tossed out their belongings. The suggestion is, therefore, that these provincial commoners were dynamic and engaged actors who made decisions about their ritual practice. Even if this activity was decreed, or imposed, people responded in different ways. As I mentioned earlier, the textual descriptions suggest that they were cast into water. The Mexica-centric nature of the *Florentine Codex* suggests that this water refers to Lake Tetzaco, on which Tenochtitlan was constructed. In other places, perhaps discarding belongings into water was not practical or desirable. Cuexcomate's people who, as Smith indicated, might have settled the town from the Epiclassic urban centre Xochicalco, might have had their own traditions which were passed down to them. Whatever the reason, at Cuexcomate they threw their belongings into small pits and not into water, as their counterparts did at Tenochtitlan.

Discarding household possessions seems to have been a social, communal enterprise. Figure 44 shows that, in these groups at least, at Xiuhmolpilli people were discarding their possessions together, and placing them right in the centre of their shared space. This suggests that the ritual was a communal activity in which family groups and neighbours participated together within their semi-public patio.⁸⁵⁷ As we know, an individual house was occupied by a family, usually (but not always) centred around a patio. The houses were particularly small and there would not have been much room inside to conduct elaborate, or even fairly simple, rituals if there were several celebrants. The patio, therefore, played host to many rituals. This was a walled compound with a single entrance; it enclosed those who lived inside its boundaries.

⁸⁵⁷ The ritual significance of the patio as a stage for ceremonial practice is discussed in the next chapter.

Early colonial censuses provided the collective Nahuatl name for those living around one patio as *it hualli* ('people of a yard').⁸⁵⁸ The residents have also been referred to as *cemihualtin* ('those people of one patio').⁸⁵⁹ It is crucial to note that not everyone living around one patio was related by kin or blood. The internal space was communal and by no means a private family space. The patio was an important settlement level with some kind of collective identity, at a level between individual households and the *calpulli*. That those people taking part in Xiuhmolpilli within a single patio were not necessarily blood relatives transforms our understanding of the domestic phase of this important ceremony. While the documentary evidence relates specifically to the 'household', archaeological evidence allows us to ascertain that it was the patio that was the site of Xiuhmolpilli activity. If we accept that it was the patio, and not the individual household, which played host to this phase of the ceremony, then we see that people are likely to have participated in Xiuhmolpilli across the divide of the nuclear family. This was then certainly a domestic ceremony but, crucially, was not fixed within an individual dwelling. Here we see that material culture permits us to access rituals beyond those which were described in colonial records. My integrated methodology allows us to conclude here that, during Xiuhmolpilli unrelated people gathered together in semi-private spaces to partake in the activity. Xiuhmolpilli, therefore, was not a moment for individual decision-making. Rather than being the strictly family activities which we might expect when taking the colonial ritual descriptions, the location where the sherds were deposited was likely the result of communal discussions and actions.

We have seen in this section that both elites and ordinary people at Cuexcomate deliberately discarded their possessions in what we assume to have been a Xiuhmolpilli ritual

⁸⁵⁸ Smith, *Aztec City-States*, pp. 165-66.

⁸⁵⁹ Michael E. Smith, 'Houses and Settlement Hierarchy in Late Postclassic Morelos: A Comparison of Archaeology and Ethnohistory', in Robert S. Santley and Kenneth G. Hirth (eds), *Prehispanic Domestic Units in Western Mesoamerica: Studies of the Household, Compound, and Residence* (Boca Raton, 1993), p. 198.

of around 1455. This is very striking in a rural context. If the Mexica people considered themselves to be living a metaphorically precarious life centred on the wax and wane of the sun and moon, Cuexcomate people certainly had a much more difficult time. The fact that these people would go so far as to wilfully destroy what possessions they did own, supposedly to motivate the continuation of the universe, is extremely revealing. While I am disinclined to paint a picture of unhappy, faceless peasants toiling the land, it certainly must have been the case that Cuexcomate's townsfolk had much less access to goods and services than their counterparts in Tenochtitlan.⁸⁶⁰ Although Tenochtitlan was dependent on tribute and imports from the provinces, it was not dependent on the climate or prosperity of any one region. Mexica commoners would also have been poor but the enormous market at Tlatelolco was relatively easily accessible. By contrast, Cuexcomate must have had a much more basic market and, without Tenochtitlan's tribute structure, presumably had to work harder to acquire necessary items. If they were willing to destroy these precious belongings, it seems as though they were clearly fully committed to this ritual.

The date of the Xiuhmolpilli offerings is extremely important in this respect. If we accept Smith's suggestion that this was the 1455 Xiuhmolpilli, then Cuexcomate had only been under the Mexica's political hegemony for less than twenty years by this point. Would this be enough time for the Mexica to enforce and engender such a strong commitment to the cosmic purpose of rituals? I suggest not. Indeed, beyond the priests' command to destroy possessions and start the ceremony, there seems to have been little effort given to explaining Xiuhmolpilli's purposes to ordinary people, or to inciting them to participate. I suggest, therefore, that Cuexcomate's people were already well aware of the purposes of this ritual. This evidence points to the fact that ceremonies of renewal and fire pre-existed the rise of the Mexica to

⁸⁶⁰ Brumfiel, 'Aztec Hearts and Minds', p. 301.

imperial power. They did not need it to be enforced by any far-flung, unknown ruler, those people who smashed their belongings in Cuexcomate were fully participant in this ceremony.

It is true though that not everyone participated in Xiuhmolpilli in the same way. While some might have been committed to the ceremony, others seem to have been nonchalant. In this respect, it is also important to discuss where Xiuhmolpilli deposits were *not* found. Only 25 of the patios were excavated by the archaeologists so we cannot know the exact spread of the offerings. But we do know that Xiuhmolpilli offerings were found at only five of the 25 patios excavated. This could mean that adherence to the ritual was by no means widespread throughout the town. Alternatively, perhaps people moved around the town and conducted the ritual in shared spaces, such as the patio of their extended family. Moreover, no Xiuhmolpilli offerings were found at the priestly residence or at the town's new *tecpan*, where elite residences seem to have moved after Mexica conquest. The lack of a Xiuhmolpilli deposit at the second *tecpan* can be accounted for by the fact that this residence might have been built after the Xiuhmolpilli of 1455.

Xiuhmolpilli offerings were not discovered at Capilco, Cuexcomate's neighbouring village. It seems as though the residents of Capilco did not participate in the Xiuhmolpilli rites. At least, archaeologists did not detect any evidence of Capilco's commoners discarding their belongings in the same way as at Cuexcomate. There are several possible explanations or reasons for the lack of Xiuhmolpilli offerings at this small village. They might have cast them away in a nearby river. Or perhaps they travelled to either Cuexcomate or Site 3 to dispose of their possessions in their neighbours' patios? It seems likely that Cuexcomate, a fairly large town, would have drawn in participants and spectators from surrounding villages at important moments in the ritual calendar. However, it seems implausible that people at Capilco would have transported broken pots to another village in order to discard them. It is possible that Capilco offerings were not uncovered because they were too small and were therefore less

detectable. Perhaps, also there were offerings at households which were not in the excavated sample.⁸⁶¹

How can we account for the possible differences between Cuexcomate and Capilco in their celebration of Xiuhmolpilli? One of the most important variances between these two settlements was that Cuexcomate had a resident priestly class who likely directed public ceremony. As we saw in the earlier chapters regarding elite control over this exceptional ceremony, it was authoritative priests, according to the *Florentine Codex* at least, who instructed the rulers and commoners about the impending date and enforced the putting out of the otherwise ever-burning hearths. Capilco had no local religious or administrative authorities, at least no superior dwelling has been detected there. The obvious reason would be that the lack of religious authorities meant that Capilco did not know, or wish, to discard their objects. While this is a tempting answer, the presence of Xiuhmolpilli offerings at Site 3 (a tiny hamlet), precludes such a conclusion. Moreover, Cuexcomate's priests resided barely three kilometres away and, with its fairly well-developed religious architecture, one imagines that they could, if they had wished, travelled to this village to instruct people (especially as such an important festival as the one marking the calendar transition). Maybe the farmers and weavers of Capilco, without an administrative or religious class, just did not think Xiuhmolpilli was that important. Cuexcomate's priests might have focused their attention more directly on their own town. Maybe they did not consider Capilco's cluster of houses, as it was hamlet, to have been significant enough for their attentions. Perhaps the priests did travel to Capilco, but their instructions were met with indifference.

⁸⁶¹ At Capilco, random sampling was used to identify eight houses of 21 for excavation. Of this number, one dwelling was selected for total excavation and surface collections were taken from a further four: ATCA, 16-18, 'Field Methods', p. 4.

A possible answer to this puzzling question takes into account the different levels of education between provincial peasants and the commoners of Tenochtitlan. Xiuhmolpilli was a ‘man-made’ ritual which did not fit easily into the agricultural ritual cycle which pleaded for rain and celebrated the harvest. While it was an ancient festival which pre-dated the rise of the Mexica, it was not an inherent part of the circle of seasons. It was an erstwhile invention, an idiosyncratic feature of their complex calendar cycle. It held enormous significance for those who had the relevant education and cultural capital to understand its role in the march of time. Those living in Tenochtitlan, for example, would have the appropriate knowledge to understand the complexity of the intermeshing cyclical counts and the legend of the five suns which foretold destruction at the end of a calendar cycle. However, for the uninitiated, the end of a 52-year cycle would have passed by unknowingly. Perhaps Capilco did not celebrate the *nemontemi* and therefore were not aware that a perilous phase was drawing near. These people were farmers whose main concern was the weather, the growth of their crops and the safety of their families. But our evidence has shown that most Nahuatl commoners were very well-connected to larger social and trading networks and relations. Would the people of Capilco really have gone about their daily lives, going to the market and working the fields, without knowing Xiuhmolpilli — a one-in-a-lifetime-ceremony — was about to happen? With the current evidence, it is extremely difficult to draw firm conclusions about Capilco’s lack of Xiuhmolpilli offerings. I would conjecture that perhaps Capilco were informed by some lofty, unknown priest that Xiuhmolpilli was about to happen, but were unconcerned. Whatever the reasons, the archaeological evidence makes it plausible to suggest that Capilco commoners did not practice the smashing of pots which characterised the early phases of Xiuhmolpilli. Capilco did not celebrate Xiuhmolpilli like their neighbour Cuexcomate.

‘State’ religion versus ‘local’ practices?

How can we make sense of such conclusions and relate them to the broader trends of centralised and regional ritual practices? Elson and Smith have analysed the documentary and archaeological evidence relating to provincial Xiuhmolpilli offerings within a binary model which compares ‘state’ and ‘local’ practices. In their understanding, the ‘state level’ comprised those public activities such as the human sacrifice at the top of Huixachtecatl while the ‘local level’ activities included those undertaken by commoners: discarding pots, autosacrifice and relighting fires.⁸⁶² They conclude that ‘The forms of Aztec ritual were worked out through a dialectic between traditional local and household practices, on one hand, and innovative imperial policies, on the other’.⁸⁶³ However, I have demonstrated that such arbitrary separation is not applicable to this ceremony (or, perhaps, any others). I suggest that analysing these relationships within this binary model is perhaps as unhelpful to our understandings of Nahua religion in different places as the ‘great versus little tradition’ concept. Framing our discussion within monolithic, oppositional entities ignores the experiences of commoners who live within the supposed ‘state’ of Tenochtitlan. Moreover, it skips over the nuanced differences which clearly existed between these different settlements. For example, Cuexcomate and Capilco, lying close within three kilometres of each other in the province of Cuauhnahuac, were both what we might class as ‘local’ settlements. However, there were differences *between* them in their participation in Xiuhmolpilli. Some people at Cuexcomate clearly discarded their pots; there is no evidence of such activities at Capilco. Moreover, people *within* Cuexcomate seem to have celebrated it differently from each other. The key difference is that some seem to have either travelled to a different patio to discard their objects and/or some people might have stayed in their homes with their possessions intact. Most importantly, ritual participation clearly varied

⁸⁶² Elson and Smith, ‘Archaeological Deposits of the Aztec New Fire Ceremony’, pp. 158-59.

⁸⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

across communities, families and even patios. There were, therefore, important ‘intra-local’ differences in ritual participation. There was not one single, homogenous way in which provincial people celebrated the domestic phases of Xiuhmolpilli. Lumping together Cuexcomate and Capilco into the monolithic category of ‘local’, with the unifying principle being that they are far from the large metropolitan centre of Tenochtitlan, glosses over the clear differences in ritual architecture and practices which we know from the archaeological evidence existed between them.

I wonder whether the ritual activities of ‘ordinary’ people in cities and towns — regardless of location — might have constituted more of a set of shared religious principles than the commoners had with the residential elites. Elson and Smith rely chiefly on the *Florentine Codex* for their interpretations of ‘observances in local communities throughout the empire’.⁸⁶⁴ This source was, as we know, created in conjunction with the elite elders of New Spain in the metropolitan centre of colonial Mexico City some years after conquest. While we might wish to infer examples from these sources for how people might have behaved in their provinces, it is not sufficiently clear that the domestic activity they describe in relation to Xiuhmolpilli can be applied directly to local communities. It seems much more likely that Sahagún’s informants were describing what they knew to have happened within the elite houses of Tenochtitlan which, due to the lack of domestic archaeology beneath Mexico City, we cannot corroborate with the current evidence. As I have indicated, more local-level, domestic archaeological is desperately needed for us to understand these questions with proper clarity. Elson and Smith concluded that ‘the New Fire Ceremony was an ancient and widespread ritual in Postclassic central Mexico that was appropriated by the Aztec empire as part of its program of ideological legitimization and control’.⁸⁶⁵ While I concur that the Mexica were trying to

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-59.

⁸⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

adapt a pre-existing ceremony, there are more complex dynamics at play relating to distinctions between public and private activity than can be reduced to a simple, binary distinction between ‘state’ and ‘local’ or ‘centre versus periphery’. To my mind, Elson and Smith’s conclusions appear to rehash Redfield’s great versus little traditions model without sensitivity to the nuances of ritual participation.

How can we account for the ‘relationship’ between the public, state-sanctioned activities of the imperial core and the Xiuhmolpilli deposits found in domestic contexts in the provinces? Was there even a formal ‘relationship’ at all? What evidence is there that the commoners at Cuexcomate were being directed by anyone from Tenochtitlan? We turn instead to the ‘dominant ideology thesis’ to explain the interactions between state activities, their ideology and domestic ritual in the Aztec empire.⁸⁶⁶ I agree with Smith in his conclusions that, in adapting Xiuhmolpilli, ‘the Mexica kings of Tenochtitlan appropriated an ancient and widespread ritual, gave it imperial trappings and symbolism, and then turned around and tried to impose the imperial version of the ceremony on their subjects’.⁸⁶⁷ Nevertheless, I suggest that the Mexica’s actual attempt to impose was, in reality, fairly weak. There is very little, if any, evidence that the Mexica actually attempted to enforce any activities.

As I argued earlier, the domestic activities of Xiuhmolpilli were not a mere precursor to the main event of human sacrifice but a key component of the ritual choreography which set the imbalance in favour of the apocalypse. However, the mountain-top phase at Huixachtecatl was certainly the most dramatic moment of the entire festival. So, for the Mexica elite it was likely to have been the moment that mattered the most to them. Of course, it can only be speculation, but perhaps to them, discarding household items was not particularly important. It

⁸⁶⁶ Smith, ‘Domestic Ritual at Aztec Provincial Sites’, p. 94; Brumfiel, ‘Figurines and the Aztec state’, pp. 143-66.

⁸⁶⁷ Smith, ‘Domestic Ritual at Aztec Provincial Sites in Morelos’, p. 95; Elson and Smith, ‘Archaeological Deposits of the Aztec New Fire Ceremony’, *passim*.

might have been something which ordinary people held on to in their historical traditions but maybe nobles were not involved in this practice in their own homes. There is, at least, no documentary evidence that elites discarded their positions. What interest, then, would the Mexica elites have had in forcing provincial peoples to discard their items?⁸⁶⁸ The most detailed source for Xiuhmolpilli, the seventh book of the *Florentine Codex* gives very little mention of actual enforcement of the ritual: Sahagún's informants recorded that 'they put out fires everywhere in the country round'.⁸⁶⁹ The strongest language used to explain how the priests made the demands comes from his Franciscan counterpart Motolinía who wrote that 'by command of the ministers of the temples the Indians extinguished all of their fires with water, both the fires in the temples... and those in private houses'.⁸⁷⁰ However, there is scant textual evidence that it was a concern of the priests to make sure that fires were extinguished far from Tenochtitlan. Or, perhaps, the chroniclers' elite colonial informants did not wish to make it clear that they went to great lengths for provincial peoples to comply. Perhaps they wished their imperial domination to appear more effortless and pre-ordained. There was clearly a difference in the level of adherence to Xiuhmolpilli in Cuauhnahuac: Cuexcomate, with their resident priestly elite, displays evidence of deposits, whereas Capilco, with no such priests, does not. While we cannot know precisely the reason for the differences, the fact that there *was* a difference is clear. Not all provincial peoples performed Xiuhmolpilli in the same way, if at all.

The dominant model for understanding Nahua ritual within an imperial context has been to assess differences through a binary framework which sets up 'state' and 'local' activities. This chapter has demonstrated that a model where 'Tenochtitlan' equals the state

⁸⁶⁸ In fact, merchants presumably had an important stake in this ritual, given that they would provide and trade the new pots and other crockery which commoners would require on the first day of the new year.

⁸⁶⁹ *Florentine Codex*, 7: 9: 25.

⁸⁷⁰ Motolinía, *History*, p. 112.

and everything else is deemed ‘local’ or ‘provincial’ is not inapplicable to Nahua religious behaviour. For that matter, the separation of ‘state’ and ‘domestic’/ ‘public’ versus ‘domestic’ is equally unhelpful. There are far more interesting, mutually influencing dynamics at play here than are implied by these binaries. In her work considering ritual and food, Morán has claimed that: ‘State rituals often mirror those that were practiced on a domestic level’.⁸⁷¹ In the official spaces of the grand temple, the deities needed to be sustained via traditional methods of cooking and sweeping. Female priests, for instance, spun and wove cloth and prepared the food for the deities.⁸⁷² As Burkhart shows that ‘Much Mexica temple ritual functioned as a kind of cosmic housekeeping’.⁸⁷³ This shows that there was a close association between domestic ritual and the rituals propagated by the state. Brumfiel has shown that, in Tenochtitlan, ‘household ritual activity followed an annual round that paralleled state rituals without actually being a part of them’.⁸⁷⁴

While I am extremely sceptical of ideas which cast any Nahua as an unthinking actor in a pre-determined ritual drama, there is something to be said for a ‘mirroring’ of ritual processes between public and private rituals. After all, state-level practices were not conjured from thin air. They were not an entirely separate, discrete set of practices with no relationship to everyday spirituality. Rather, it is clear that the ceremonies, at least the *veintenas*, were based on the agricultural cycle. This cycle of rain and sunshine, planting and harvest began with ordinary farmers observing their fields and tracking the changing seasons to ensure good harvests. While the state might have adapted and aggrandised certain parts of it to suit its own ideological purposes, the central tenets of the central Mexican religion were fertility, productivity and order. Brumfiel has pointed out that, paradoxically, the seasons might have

⁸⁷¹ Morán, *Sacred Consumption*, p. 31.

⁸⁷² Burkhart, ‘Mexica Women on the Home Front’, p. 32. Most interestingly, male priests adopted some traditionally female roles, such as tending the fire.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷⁴ Morán, *Sacred Consumption*, p. 31.

been less important to metropolitan Nahuas. She argues that they were ‘insulated from rural concerns with rain, fertility, and harvests’.⁸⁷⁵ However, Tenochtitlan drew in much of its subsistence from tribute and it was, therefore, indirectly dependent upon these fickle concerns. If their tributaries had a poor harvest, the Mexica would suffer in their urban capital. The seasons were, therefore, a universal occupation.

Conclusions

This section has explored ritual behaviour in one of the closest provinces to the imperial core: Cuauhnahuac. An important province to the regional economy, it was one of the first regions to be incorporated into the Triple Alliance empire and enjoyed strong kinship ties with the imperial capital by means of strategic marriages. Diverging from the scholarship which has explored the political economy, I have explored ceremonial architecture and ritual behaviour in two different settings away from the imperial capital at Tenochtitlan. Crucially, Cuexcomate and Capilco differed in nature and demonstrate variations in religious architecture, social hierarchy and ritual behaviour both from each other and the capital Tenochtitlan. This has demonstrated that not everyone in the Triple Alliance empire performed ceremonies in the same way. Cuexcomate, a large *altepetl* of eight hundred residents with a *tlahtoani*, priests, a temple and a palace, possessed Xiuhmolpilli offerings in both elite and commoner settings. However, these offerings did not appear at every patio. Meanwhile, its neighbour Capilco, a small hamlet without apparent social hierarchy, public religious or administrative architecture or resident religious authorities, exhibited no Xiuhmolpilli offerings whatsoever in the sample. These examples demonstrate that the binary distinctions between an imagined state and diverse local communities are inappropriate. Moreover, there are clear similarities between the

⁸⁷⁵ Brumfiel, ‘Aztec Hearts and Minds’, p. 301.

commoner activities of Tenochtitlan and Cuexcomate demonstrating the ritual behaviour might have had more to do with class and social status than geographical location.

This section has demonstrated that the out-dated, but influential, model for relationships between ritual in traditional societies — the ‘great versus little’ traditions — is unsuitable for the Nahua context. Moreover, we cannot speak of a religion which differs between its ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, nor is a ‘state’ versus ‘local’ a helpful paradigm of investigation. As I have examined, these theories and models cast the Nahuas as a mass of homogeneous peasants who are incapable of independent reasoning, who accepted a religion which was created within elite institutions. Nahua religion was, by contrast, not ‘thought up’ in Tenochtitlan’s schools or temples but had important, historical associations and foundations in the natural world. Rather than being fabricated in a central place, Nahua religious practices had ancient associations based on the observation of the seasons for successful harvests. With their celebration of Xiuhmolpilli, Mexica urban elites were adapting a pre-existing ceremony for their own ends. It was an ancient and widespread festival symbolising renewal and regeneration which was linked to astronomy and the priesthood. While they might not have enforced all the phases of the ritual throughout their entire empire, the central human sacrifice was clearly a crucial moment for Mexica power, rulership, ideology and the state.

I have argued here that the relationship between the imperial core and the provinces was far more complex than one that can be reduced to ‘state’ versus ‘local’ actors and systems. Using Xiuhmolpilli as our case study, we have seen that there is clear adherence to the ritual in the Cuauhnahuac province. However, the activity was by no means uniform, monolithic or even that widespread. So, if the Mexica were trying to enforce their new imperial ritual on subject city-states, it seems that they were not that successful. It is more likely that similarities arose from the fact that renewal ceremonies of fire and broken pots pre-existed the rise of the Mexica. I have shown with my comparisons of Tenochtitlan and Cuexcomate that these

similarities were related to social status and people's proximity to authoritative priests. In the next section of this study, I apply a more critical, fluid framework of 'public versus private' to study of Nahua ritual, with particular focus on the domestic ceremonies of the lifecycle.

CONCLUSION

The Mexica's magnificent, now ruined, Templo Mayor stands as one of the most famous, perhaps infamous, religious monuments in the world. At the height of its use as a sacrificial stage, its glorious steps epitomised the union of sacred violence with political power. Its impressive façades and confronting sculptures echo an imposing, dominating and all-conquering religion. It is not in dispute that the Mexica constructed their magnificent Templo Mayor as an *axis mundi*. With its dual-temple structure and multi-layered surfaces, this was certainly the monumental, physical expression of their cosmological world and mythical history. Its steps were soaked with the blood of countless victims in displays of violence which defy even the strongest adjectives or descriptions. These spectacles were surely more terrifying than we can imagine.

But my research has shown that the intricate meanings of this glorious structure did not necessarily 'trickle down' automatically to local practices. Miles away from the imperial centre, farmers and weavers would surely have remained unaware of its existence. I have dislodged the notion that such people would have understood this temple's complex meaning. I have shown that the Templo Mayor — and the rituals which it hosted — cannot have represented a unified state cult which stretched throughout Mexica territory. While foreign rulers were invited to these public ceremonies, provincial commoners were unlikely to have witnessed them or seen the Templo Mayor in all its glory. The Tlahuica people, for example, going about their lives in Cuauhnahuac, would not have appreciated the Templo Mayor as a cosmological centre of the world; this temple was not their principal religious focus. Instead, they focused on their crops, the weather, the health of their family and communities, and how they were going to meet their local overlords' material demands. In short, they had their own concerns

which played out in their houses, fields and communities. We see this in their ritual objects. They had many figurines in their houses, almost all them models of young women, babies or fertility gods. These people were not supplicating Huitzilopochtli for successful harvests or healthy babies. There is little to no material evidence of political deities such as Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl or Tezcatlipoca being important to domestic ritual within or beyond the capital.

We have tested the notion of a centralised cult by investigating how people participated in one particular state ritual: Xiuhmolpilli. I asked the question: was there variation across social class or location? The alphabetic colonial writings, collected in conjunction with noble indigenous men, claim that all central Mexican people followed the orders of Tenochtitlan's elite priests in extinguishing their fires and discarding their possessions. My integrated textual and archaeological methodology has demonstrated that, in fact, there was not uniform or universal adherence to these demands. Most importantly, differences in participation were not, as some scholars have argued, solely between city and province; there were important *intra*-local variations. While people in Cuexcomate, with their resident priests and public temple, seem to have discarded their worldly belongings during the ritual, their neighbours at the simple village of Capilco did not. Using this evidence, I have shown that binary distinctions such as Redfield's 'great and little' or Smith's 'state and local' are not adequate models with which to explore Nahua religion or ritual behaviour. There were important differences in public ritual participation which deserve a more nuanced theoretical model than these oppositional, monolithic categories allow. This is an extremely important finding as it demonstrates that there was not a 'central' high tradition versus a single smaller 'local' set of practices but rather religious practices were fluid, changing over time and according the personal circumstances.

This study has also analysed rituals' internal choreography. In so doing, we have detected variation, flexibility and personal decision-making in their practice. Previous scholarship has usually attempted to synthesise divergent accounts and evidence, to reconstruct

an ‘accurate’ version of how these dramas played out. This flawed approach assumes that there was a set ritual protocol by which Nahuas practiced their religion. Such an understanding fails to grasp the true nature and purpose of their activities which, as I have described, were intended to assuage insatiable forces. Manifesting themselves in human, animal and natural form, these deities were unpredictable and, therefore, needed a flexible response. This study has shown that Nahua rituals were not fixed in their internal choreography or external features. Their religion was not an endless, repetitive cycle of individual, separate ceremonies which appeared discrete ceremonies. Rather, all Nahuas — rich and poor — could make some (limited) choices about participation and performance, relative to their social position.

Timing of public ceremonies was an elite concern and chronological adaptability has been one of the most important themes of my study. For example, the calendar festival Xiuhmolpilli, was shifted from 1 Rabbit to 2 Reed years to suit political and ecological factors. This temporal flexibility was not only restricted to public ritual but also extended into the private realm of the home; parents could choose the date of a baby’s naming ceremony in accordance with their own priorities. In these decisions, we have revealed the nature and extent of personal agency within the Nahuas’ official structures.

The location of ceremonies was also, as we have seen, adaptable to prevailing concerns. The springtime *veintena* festival of Huey Tozoztli was usually a domestic ceremony celebrated within Tenochtitlan as farmers and their families took fresh maize to Chicomecoatl’s temple. But, in 1507 this festival was shifted dramatically to Mount Tlaloc and took on more explicit political significance. In a historically difficult year, both enemy and allied rulers ignored their constructed temples and came together on this soaring mountain. Here they venerated the sacred landscape by supplicating Tlaloc — an ancient and widespread deity — for a decent rainy season so that crops would grow and famine be avoided. I examined the alphabetic, pictorial and archaeological evidence that Xiuhmolpilli had been moved, aggrandised and also

shifted on an entire calendar year. This is hugely important as it shows that state-sponsored, set-piece ritual theatre was susceptible to change. Religious practices were, therefore, not set in stone but were products of subtle decision-making based on political considerations and imperatives.

Despite my findings, however, I would not wish to overstate the freedom of ordinary Nahuas to select aspects of ritual participation. While the Mexica *tlahtoani* might have been able to adapt a *veintena* to suit his own situation, a farmer or weaver did not have the same freedom. The (problematic, androcentric) sources tell us that there were extraordinary pressures to conform to the culture's social, gendered norms and expectations, for both nobles and commoners. The *huehuetlahtolli* of birth and naming tell us emphatically that boys were expected to adopt the weighty mantle of a warrior life; an industrious life within the home and marketplace was desirable for women. The ability to conform and excel within certain structures and expectations was, for men at least, publicly rewarded. Failure was equally publicly marked and this meant that the burden to adapt was felt heavily and and so, despite some flexibility in day-to day decision making, individual Mexicas were operating within coercive structures which served to constrain their choices.

In this way, while people might have known that they *could* make some decisions, it does not necessarily follow automatically that they *would* have done so. We see a certain reticence in the naming of a child when parents defer to the *tonalpouhqui*'s esoteric knowledge. In the fiercely competitive and brutal world of pre-Hispanic central Mexico, parents might have followed the *tonalpouhqui*'s divinatory advice fairly closely to ensure the best fate for their child. Rituals which punctuated life reinforced these expectations continually and perennially. While there would, of course, have been changes over time, each and every generation bore witness to the drama of a naming ceremony and been left in no doubt about the life ahead. It is very difficult to tell exactly how much flexibility there was in this system, but it seems highly

likely that both young men and women would have felt compelled to conform to what was expected of them.

As I conclude my study, insecurity stands out as a hallmark of Nahua existence. Occupying a territory with a fickle climate, at the mercy of capricious gods, life for the Nahuas was hugely unpredictable. Their religion was developed to control and appease the natural elements. Attempts to control volatility and mitigate instability lay at the heart of many of their structures and rituals and I suggest that these anxieties formed the bedrock of their religion. Moments of uncertainty — death, solar eclipses, even crossroads — were greatly feared and practical attempts were made to ease any accompanying misfortune.

In a major departure from current scholarly trends on pre-Hispanic central Mexican ritual, I have shown here that the Nahuas did not perform rituals unthinkingly but rather could express choice and personal reasoning; and that although individuals, groups and communities operated within and alongside ‘official’ structures, they also had scope to challenge, change and reject them. My conclusions contribute considerably to removing the Postclassic Nahuas from monolithic understandings of their society as a devoutly violent people in the grip of an ideologically enforced human sacrificial cult. Without downplaying the importance of such bloody acts, my research demonstrates that there was far more to Nahua religious expression, both within the capital and its hinterland, and beyond.

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