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CHAPTER TWO

PILGRIMAGE AND THE TEMPLE OF DEATH IN THE ANCIENT MEXICAN MANUSCRIPTS

ALESSIA FRASSANI

Pilgrimage, the ritual journey to sacred places, is a universal feature of religion found in cultures worldwide. Destination and route are equally important in a performative act that deeply affects both the psyche and social status of the individuals involved. The ancient pictographic manuscripts from central and southern Mexico offer a unique opportunity to study this ritual practice in indigenous Mesoamerica from a variety of perspectives, since pictography was the preferred medium of communication in the Postclassic period (A.D. 900-1521). Despite the rise of hegemonic forces throughout Precolumbian history, Mesoamerica always remained multiethnic and some hundred different indigenous languages are still spoken today. Relying minimally on phonetic components, pictography successfully enabled community and long-distance communication between people of different ethnic background and languages, and continued to be widely employed even after the Spanish Conquest.

Manuscripts were among the many casualties of the Conquest. Of the estimated thousands, only a few pictographic manuscripts dating to the Precolumbian period survived, which makes their stylistic and iconographic coherence all the more remarkable. The most notable aspect of coherence is a system of simplified representations, which favors flat profile depictions, a few basic colors, and a thick black outline. Combining these features with the Mesoamerican solar and ritual calendars, produced many different literary genres, from tribute accounts to genealogical reckoning, from migration stories to ritual divination. These typological differences have to be carefully considered for a proper understanding of pictographic content, as they provide the fundamental contextual background for the information recorded. In this study I analyze sections from different manuscripts, comparing historical-genealogical accounts with mantic and ritual representations. I specifically outline the main compositional and calendrical characteristics of each category, bearing in mind nevertheless that the

secular dichotomy between history and religion, myths and factual reality, is a modern Western construct.

The largest existing corpus of Prehispanic historical manuscripts comes from the Mixteca, in southwestern Mexico, in the modern state of Oaxaca. Painted during the Postclassic period, they recount the long family histories of the Mixtec city-states. Royal families claim legitimacy by connecting to the greatest hero of Mixtec Prehispanic history, Lord 8 Deer “Jaguar Claw, who lived during the 11th century.” His life and deeds are depicted many times as they intersect with local history. Lord 8 Deer. Son of a priest from the town of Tilantongo, he could claim little political power, but thanks to his military success achieved a temporary unification of the numerous Mixtec city-states. The few remaining Prehispanic manuscripts of ritual and religious content matter are known as the Borgia Group, after the technically superior Codex Borgia. The exact origin and date of these documents are unknown, but their stylistic and iconographic similarities to manuscripts such as the Mixtec genealogies reveal a Postclassic Mesoamerican origin. The manuscripts consist of a thematic organization of prescriptions for the correct practice of divination and rituals, with sections organized according to the 260-day ritual calendar.

The focus of this article is upon the so-called Temple of Death, a ceremonial center found in both historical and divinatory manuscripts. By combining the information provided by the two types of sources, I demonstrate that they give a complementary picture of the importance of pilgrimage in Mesoamerica, from the Epiclassic to the Postclassic period (10th to 16th century). Ceremonial activities, depicted in the codices and recognizable by recurrent spatial and temporal patterns, were not only common to the different groups that populated Pre-Columbian Mexico, but were also a means of connecting the wisdom and legacy of the world of the ancestors with the concerns of their modern inheritors.

The Vehe Kihin: History of a Mixtec pilgrimage

The Temple of Death is frequently depicted in the Mixtec manuscripts. Diagnostic features include the walls and roof made of bones and decorated with death-related symbols, bleeding hearts, severed hands, and menacing owls. In the Mixtec manuscripts the entire structure resembles a skeletal head, with the skull’s jaw open wide to serve as an entrance to the temple. The structure is associated with the town of Ñuu Ndeya (Chalcatongo) at the southern corner of the Mixtec world.

¹ The founders of the dynasty of Tilantongo, the most important lineage at the time of the Conquest, were buried in a cave near Ñuu Ndeya, as first chronicled by the friar Francisco de Burgoa in the 17th century.² The temple is presided over by Lady 9 Grass, a very important deity in Postclassic Mesoamerica. She is known in Central Mexico by the Nahuatl name of Cihuacoatl, and can be recognized by her black skirt and *quechquemiltl* (a female garment) decorated with scroll patterns or crossed bones, a protruding skeletal jaw, and claws in place of hands and feet. Claws are an important attribute. They refer to a specific quality of the ancestors as guardians of the places where they reside and should be read with the Mixtec word *ii* (Ñuu Ndeya variant) meaning “touchy,” or else *shraan*, “wild” or “sharp.”³ When approaching these places, one has to move with care, because an extraneous presence might irritate the guardians. If not respected and worshipped properly, ancestors may grab a person with their claws and cause sickness or even death.⁴ I believe this is also the case with the Temple of Death, the cave where the nobles of the Mixtec kingdoms were buried and still serving as revered and powerful ancestors. Lady 9 Grass’ attributes qualify her as an ancestor, once buried in the cave-temple of Ñuu Ndeya and now serving as a guardian of that place.

Recently, Maarten Jansen and Aurora Pérez Jiménez explained the importance of the Temple of Death as a *topos* in Mixtec literature and historiography.⁵ The sacred pantheon of the ancient Ñuu Dzavui (Mixteca) is nowadays related to the concept of the Vehe Kihin, the residing cave of a horrific supernatural being.⁶ Pilgrimage to the site is ultimately a courageous act, for the horrendous creature will exact a price for the desire for fame, glory, and immortality. Tragedy will be cast upon the ambitious visitors.

¹ Codex Vindobonensis, p. 15. For the identification of these places in the Mixteca, see Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen, *Huisi Tacu. Estudio interpretativo de un libro mixteco antiguo: Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1982), 225-227.

² Francisco de Burgoa, *Geográfica Descripción* (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1934), 337-341.

³ G. Aurora Pérez Jiménez and Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen, *Sahin Sàu. Libro para aprender la lengua mixteca* (Leiden: 1999), 59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-57.

⁵ Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen and G. Aurora Pérez Jiménez, *La dinastía de Añute. Historia, literatura e ideología de un reino mixteco* (Leiden: CNWS, 2000), 20-21 and 180-181.

⁶ The term is probably the modern version of what Francisco de Alvarado referred to as *huahi cahi*, “the southern direction,” in his 16th-century dictionary (Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen and G. Aurora Pérez Jiménez, *El Vocabulario del Dzaha Dzavui (Mixteco antiguo) hecho por los padres de la Orden de Predicadores y acabado por Fray Francisco de Alvarado (1593). Edición Analítica* [on-line publication] (Leiden University, 2003); available from <http://www.archeologie.leidenuniv.nl/>

Codex Selden (p. 6-III; fig. 2-1) tells of Lady 6 Monkey's visit to the Vehe Kihin in the year 5 Reed, day 6 Serpent. She reaches the temple by going through an underground passage, shown simply as an L-shaped path and a patch of earth into which she disappears. Her journey is both physical and moral, as this encounter will change the course of her life. Lady 9 Grass arranges for Lady 6 Monkey to marry Lord 11 Wind, through which she is able to secure succession to the throne of Añute. On the way to her wedding, Lady 6 Monkey encounters two men yelling the words *yuchi yuchi* (literally "knife knife"), a Mixtec expression meaning "you will be killed with a knife." Unfortunately, she misunderstands the helpful advice as a danger to herself. She consults again Lady 9 Grass, who confirms her worst fears and instructs her to kill the two men. The tragedy is ironic. She will defeat and sacrifice the men who tried to help her, but she will eventually be assassinated during the conquest of her town.⁷

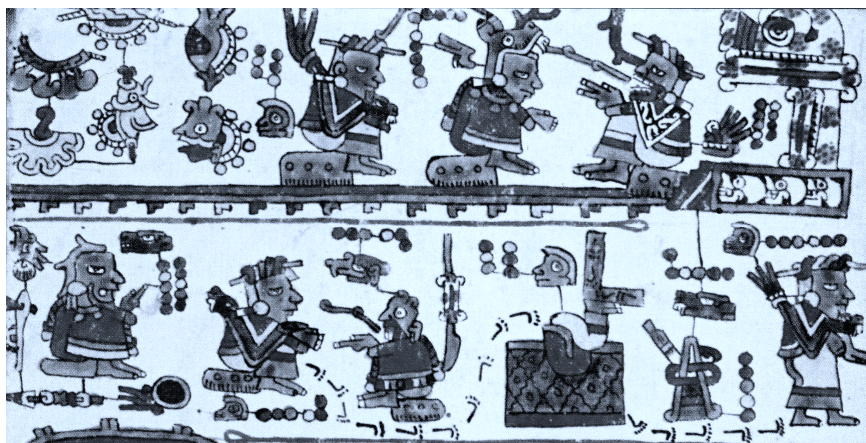


Fig. 2-1 Codex Selden, p. 6 (Photo: Alessia Frassani, courtesy of the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología)

Codex Selden was produced in the town of Añute and is indeed meant to celebrate Lady 6 Monkey, the local ancestor, yet the tragic fate of the heroine's life is only to be found in complementary versions of the story. Codex Colombino (p. IV-1, 2, and 3; fig. 2-2) relates another episode of the powerful encounter with Lady 9 Grass at the Vehe Kihin. It is here, we are told, that on the day Lady 6 Monkey interrogated the sacred oracle she was not alone; Lord 8 Deer was also present. Although their original purpose for visiting Lady 9 Grass was

⁷ Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *La dinastía de Añute. Historia, literatura e ideología de un reino mixteco*, 120-121.

to get married, the mighty goddess decided otherwise.⁸ Lord 8 Deer leaves for the Pacific Coast where he will be crowned ruler of the kingdom of Tututepec and become the one and only sovereign ruler of the Mixteca. However, Lord 8 Deer pays a price for his achievement. He will be responsible for the murder of his long-gone lover Lady 6 Monkey, whom he met many years before at the Vehe Kihin when he took over the kingdom of Añute (Codex Becker I, p. 11).

In every version, it is the petition to the sacred temple of Lady 9 Grass that shifts the narrative tone from epic to tragic and gives to both characters and story a new moral dimension. Pivotal figures help Lady 6 Monkey and Lord 8 Deer in their journey to the Vehe Kihin. In the Codex Selden (p. 6-III; fig. 2-1), Lady 6 Monkey is directed to the cave by an old priest, Lord 10 Lizard, whose numerous titles—Jade Ax, Eagle, Arrow, and Smoking Mirror—testify to his power. Before undertaking her quest underground, Lady 6 Monkey encounters and consults with a small anthropomorphic being. The creature’s big round eyes and visible fangs indicate that we are in the presence of a *ñuhu*, frequently depicted in the Mixtec codices. His name, a combination of “bone,” *yeque* in Mixtec, and *coa* (the stick used to plow the field), *yata* in Mixtec, possibly refers to his ancestral nature and qualifies him as an ancestral bone. As the Vehe Kihin is also a place where the living communicate with the dead, this encounter plays a fundamental role in preparing Lady 6 Monkey for her quest, and *yata yeque* is the primary intercessor figure.



Fig 2-2 Codex Colombino, p. IV (Photo: Alessia Frassani, courtesy of the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología)

Another interceding role is played in the Codex Colombino (p. IV-2, fig. 2-2) by three characters seated with their arms crossed and eyes closed. Two of

⁸ A parallel passage is in the Codex Nuttall, p. 44.

them are wearing an eagle costume, while the middle one bears a turtle carapace on his back. This figure is identified as a *yaha yahui*, a flying wizard, in Alvarado's dictionary. He is a shaman in the throes of his spiritual and physical transformation. He is sometimes associated with lightening and thunder, sudden and violent natural phenomena. *Yaha*, "eagle" in Mixtec, suggests that the other two attendants are also shamans who play a similar role to the *yahui* in the center. Recently, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez interpreted their closed eyes as a sign of an inward spiritual state of trance, whereas they were previously understood the sign of a deadly offering to Lady 9 Grass on the part of the petitioners.⁹

The vision of these shamans and their ability to connect with the ancestral world is critical to the understanding of the Temple of Death in the religious manuscripts. This type of pictography is extremely esoteric, its representation a product of personal experience and years of training. Devoid of any historical grounding, the original location of these manuscripts is not known (except for an important case which is discussed below.) Ritual and pilgrimage are nevertheless indispensable for interpreting iconography and composition in the representation of the Temple of Death.

Divination and Ritual at the Place of the Ancestors

The Temple of Death is often represented in the religious manuscripts. Codex Vaticanus B depicts it twice in two sets of temples coupled as a contrasting set (pp. 13 and 15). On page 13 (fig. 2-3), the structure is made of bone and decorated with skulls and bleeding hearts on the temple roof. A centipede strangles the temple as blood gushes from its orifices. Inside the Temple of Death, is an owl, a well-known death symbol. In the Mixteca the hoot of an owl is a sign of death. The nocturnal bird is also a *ñihna*, a little image or idol used to scare away animals.¹⁰ Pilgrimage is a human activity in which coordinates of time and space come together, and the destination is reached when rules of conduct are observed. The careful disposition of subsequent days in the pages seem to suggest that only certain days are good to enter the temple, while others should be spent in activities around it. First, the day count starts inside the temples and proceeds all around them. Then count starts at the center and after four days proceeds towards the temples.

Codex Borgia also depicts four temples in a linear composition to be read from right to left (pp. 49-52; fig. 2-4). A complex calendrical division in the

⁹ Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, *La dinastía de Añute. Historia, literatura e ideología de un reino mixteco*, 130.

¹⁰ Jansen, *Huisi Tacu. Estudio interpretativo de un libro mixteco antiguo: Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I*, 255.

lower portion of the section points indeed to a more specific cardinal orientation of the four temples. The days are not placed consecutively, but rather according to their cardinal association, so that we follow a path from east, to north, and finally west to south, the last associated with the Temple of Death. In this case the picture is completed by the presence of a death god presenting an offering to the idol inside the temple.

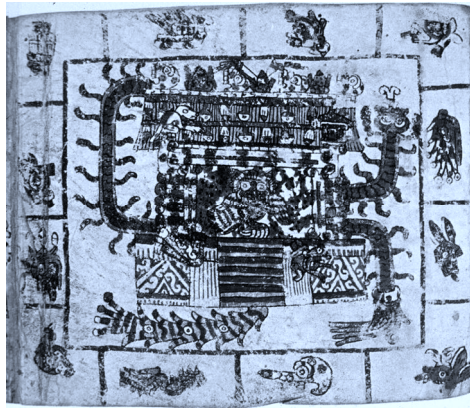


Fig. 2-3 Codex Vaticanus B, p. 13 (Photo: Alessia Frassani, courtesy of Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt)



Fig. 2-4 Codex Borgia, p. 52 (Photo: Alessia Frassani, courtesy of Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt)

Linear and spatial reading and a particularly complex calendrical division come together in the Codex Borgia, usually regarded as the most sophisticated of the religious manuscripts. A sophisticated iconographic placement shows every direction and temple associated with a tree topped by a bird. Trees are well known directional symbols in ancient Mesoamerican belief. They are the pillars at the corners of the world, and vertically connect the different realms of the entire cosmos. According to the tradition, Mixtec progenitors populated the world after emerging from a gigantic ceiba tree in the village of Apuala (Codex Vindobonensis, p. 37). The pages in the Codex Borgia are of particular importance for understanding a series of pilgrimages and ritual activities undertaken by Lord 8 Deer and his attendants after the visit at the Vehe Kihin, as illustrated in the Codex Colombino (p. IV-1 and V-1; fig. 2-2). Lord 8 Deer is seen kneeling and placing an offering before a temple on top of a hill. Four more places are visited during established days that are unfortunately not readable anymore. Each of these four places combines a known Mixtec toponym of the cardinal direction with a tree. Again, the last place to be visited is the Vehe Kihin, the Mixtec Death Temple. Only after successful completion of complex rituals, is Lord 8 Deer able to establish himself as the ruler of the kingdom of Tututepec on the Mixtec Pacific Coast. This is followed by a campaign of political fortification that lasts over two years and ends with the recognition of his paramount rulership in the holy city of Cholula (Codex Nuttall, p. 52; Codex Colombino, p. XIII; Codex Bodley, p. 9-II.) It was probably with the guidance of a priest and a book such as the Codex Borgia that Lord 8 Deer, following the appropriate route and timing, was able to successfully complete his pilgrimage.

The poorest of the religious manuscripts, Codex Tututepetongo is of particular importance because it is the only one whose origin is known. It comes from the village of San Francisco Tututepetongo, Oaxaca, and most of it is dedicated to the heroic story of a local leader. It contains a brief but important section with clear ritual and mantic content. Simple drawings, with only a black contour line and no color, exhibit the clear Mixteca-Puebla style characteristic of the religious manuscripts. Figure 2-5 (p. 33) is one of the most interesting sections of the Borgia Group. Along with the Fonds Mexicain 20, it is the only page in which mantic and cosmological information typical of the religious manuscripts, are clearly associated with toponyms from the historical manuscripts. A comparison of this page with the Codex Colombino (pp. IV-1 and V-1; fig. 2-2) shows a similar iconography of the north direction (a split and checkered mountain), the west (a cross section of a riverbed with overflowing water), and again last, the Temple of Death with the usual structure of bones. As Anders and Jansen note,

This most important final section of the codex Tututepetongo, a Cuicatec member of the Borgia Group, establishes a firm relationship between the religious and

ritual representation of the four directions and its reflection in the spatial and temporal organization of the ancient city-states.¹¹

The link that the Cuicatec codex establishes with Mixtec landscape indicates that the religious manuscripts are not the product of abstract cosmological speculations, but, like historical manuscripts, represent the pictorial counterpart of a ritual perception of physical space.

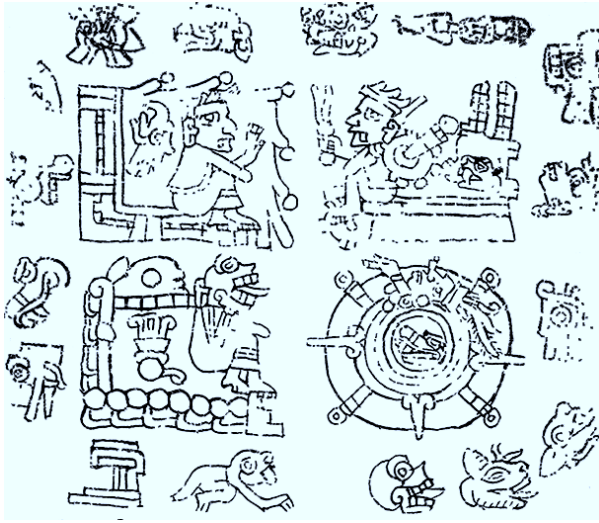


Fig. 2-5 Codex Tututepetongo, p. 33 (Drawing by the author)

On page 33 a significant change also occurs in the reading order, for which the manuscript has to be turned 90° and the page read vertically. A similar change in the Codex Borgia (p. 29), at the beginning of a long ritual scene, has been interpreted as a sign that we are leaving a normal ritual and temporal sequence and entering a ceremonial center.¹² On these pages, it is the placement of

¹¹ “Con este importantísimo último capítulo, el códice Tututepetongo, el miembro cuicateco del Grupo Borgia, establece una firme relación entre la temática religiosa de las cuatros direcciones y su reflejo en la organización espacial-temporal-ritual de los señores antiguos...” (author’s translation). Ferdinand Anders and Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen, *Pintura de la muerte y de los destinos. Libro explicativo del llamado Códice Laud* (Mexico City: FCE, 1994), 295.

¹² Ferdinand Anders, Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen, and Luis Reyes García, *Los templos del cielo y de la oscuridad. Libro explicativo del llamado Códice Borgia* (Mexico City: FCE, 1993), 175.

temples and other ritual structures that guides the composition and not calendrical elements.

The comparative analysis of historical and religious manuscripts allows us to observe the specific relationship in the Precolumbian period between the southern direction and the Temple of Death (or *Vehe Kihin*), the sacred place where the ancestors are buried. It was the center for a cult of the ancestors that the living were addressing during specific rituals. Moreover, the southern direction is consistently the last listed in the sacred landscape. In order to address this important feature related to the representation of the Temple of Death, I will discuss the mighty patron of the place as it appears in another parallel scene in religious and historical manuscripts.

Cihuacoatl (Lady 9 Grass in the Mixteca) appears throughout the religious codices. In the Codex Vaticanus B (p. 72; fig. 2-6), she participates in the ceremonial drinking of *pulque*, an alcoholic beverage still associated with community rituals.¹³ The last in a procession of animals and deities, she sits on a throne of bones and a speech volute emerges from her mouth.¹⁴



Fig. 2-6 Codex Vaticanus B, p.72 (Photo: Alessia Frassani, courtesy of Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt)

¹³ Ubaldo López García, *Uso del lenguaje cotidiano y ceremonial en Apoala* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 1998).

¹⁴ In the parallel scene in Codex Vindobonensis (p. 25), Lady 9 Grass follows a twelve-figure retinue. All participants hold a foaming cup of *pulque* and a maguey thorn, possibly alluding to sacrifice and to the plant from which this beverage is brewed.

Rhetoric, mnemotechnics, and cosmological knowledge were integrally combined in ancient Mesoamerican ritual practice. Both historical and religious texts were used as springboards for oral recitation and chanting.¹⁵ Recurrent compositional patterns not only helped the memorization of the content, but also conveyed deeper philosophical knowledge. The placement of the Temple of Death and its patron at the end of the composition offers a visual pun for the chanting and suggests a rhetorical pattern that might read, "...at last the Vehe Kihin comes," or "...at last Lady 9 Grass comes." The diviner also intended to express a moral meditation on human destiny. The complementary stories from the historical and religious manuscripts tell us that devotees to the Temple of Death will pay the highest price for their earthly ambitions.

¹⁵ For an example of Mixtec historical recitation, see Ferdinand Anders, Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen, and G. Aurora Pérez Jiménez, *Crónica mixteca: el rey 8 Venado "Garra De Jaguar" y la dinastía de Teozacualco-Zaachila. Libro explicativo del llamado Códice Zouche-Nuttall* (Mexico City: FCE, 1992). For a reading of a religious manuscript, see Peter van der Loo, "Voicing the Painted Image: A Suggestion for Reading the Reverse of the Codex Cospi," in *Writing without Words. Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica & the Andes*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 77-86.