Cihuacoatl, Her Song, from the Florentine Codex

Willard Gingerich

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CONTENTS

Myths and Mythic Images  x
Acknowledgments  xiii
Guide to Pronunciation  xv

I  INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK  1

II  THE FIGURE OF THE GODDESS: THE MYTHOLOGICAL IMAGES OF THE VILLAGE CULTURES  29
Introduction  30
The Mythic Images  46

III  OF TIME, SPACE, AND EARTH: THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE URBAN TRADITION  57

IV  THE FOURFOLD UNFOLDING: THE MYTHS OF CREATION  63
Introduction  64
Maya Creation Myths  97
Aztec Creation Myths  120
Mixtec Creation Myths  149
An Izapan Creation Myth  154
Cosmological Images  156

V  FLAYED GODS, SNAKE WOMEN, AND WERE-JAGUARS: THE MYTHS OF FERTILITY  173
Introduction  174
The Flayed God  204
The Great Goddess  212
The Gods of Rain and Storm  228

VI  FEATHERED SERPENTS AND HERO TWINS: THE MYTHIC STRUCTURE OF RULERSHIP  267
Introduction  268
The Mythic Paradigm of the Ruler  302
The Maya Hero Journey  316
The Aztec Hero Journey  352
The Migration Myth in Its Aztec Embodiment  380

Notes  427
Bibliography  437
Illustration Sources and Credits  447
Index  449
MYTHS AND MYTHIC IMAGES

Image 1: The First Figurine: The Goddess of Zohapilco 46
Image 2: The Goddess as Mother: A D-1 Figurine from Tlatilco 48
Image 3: The Pregnant Goddess: A Figurine from Copalche, Guatemala 50
Image 4: The Mask of Life and Death: A Ceramic Mask from Tlatilco 52
Image 5: Cuicuilco’s Old God of Fire 54
The Birth of the Uinal, from The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel 97
The Birth of All of Heaven and Earth, from the Popol Vuh 104
The Creation of the Sun and the Moon, from the Florentine Codex 120
The Creation of the World, from the Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas 126
Myth of the Suns and the Toltec-Chichimec Origins of the Mexica People: The Entire Leyenda de los Soles 131
The Mixtec Creation Myth, from the Origen de los Indios del Nuevo Mundo e Islas Occidentales 149
Image 6: The Tree of Origin, from the Codex Vindobonensis 152
Image 7: An Izapan Creation Myth: Izapa Stela 5 154
Image 8: The Vertical Dimension of the Cosmos, from the Codex Vaticanus A 156
Image 9: The Image of Time: An Architectural Detail from Palenque 158
Image 10: The Image of Time: Yaxchilan Stela 10 158
Image 11: Time, the Gods, and Man, from the Codex Borgia 160
Image 12: Time, the Gods, and Man, from the Codex Vaticanus A 160
Image 13: Huehuetotl and the Quincunx 162
Image 14: The Aztec Calendar Stone 164
Image 15: Xiuhotecuhltli and the Four Directions, from the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer 166
Image 16: Tlaloc as the Four Quadrants of Space and Time, from the Codex Borgia 168
Image 17: Time Turning into Space: The Pyramid of the Niches at El Tajín 170
Image 18: Time Turning into Space: The Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan 170
Song of Xipe Totec Iouallauan, from the Florentine Codex 204
Image 19: Xipe Totec: The Flayed God: A Ceramic Image from Veracruz 206
Image 20: The Ritual Act of Sacrifice: Ballcourt Scene from El Tajín 208
Image 21: The Ritual Act of Sacrifice: Ballcourt Scene from Chichen Itza 208
Image 22: Life Born from Death: Izapa Stela 50 210
The Myths of Tlaltecuhltli and Mayahuel, from the Histoire du Mechique 212
Teteo Innan, Her Song, from the *Florentine Codex* 214
Cihuacoatl, Her Song, from the *Florentine Codex* 217
Image 23: Coatlicue 220
Image 24: Coyolxauhqui 224
Image 25: Tlaltecuhtli, the Earth Monster 226
Image 26: Ehecatl 228
The God and Goddess of Water, from the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* 230
A Prayer to Tlaloc, from the *Florentine Codex* 231
Tlaloc, His Song, from the *Florentine Codex* 239
Image 27: The Olmec Were-Jaguar: San Lorenzo Monument 52 242
Image 28: Cocijio: The Zapotec Rain God: Monte Alban I Funerary Urn 244
Image 29: Cocijio: The Zapotec Rain God: Monte Alban II Funerary Urn 246
Image 30: Cocijio: The Zapotec Rain God: Monte Alban III Funerary Urn 246
Image 31: The Teotihuacan Tlaloc: An early Tlaloc Urn 248
Image 32: The Teotihuacan Tlaloc: An early Tlaloc Urn 248
Image 33: The Teotihuacan Tlaloc: The “Plancarte” Urn 248
Image 34: Tlaloc After the Fall of Teotihuacan: Xochicalco Stela 2 250
Image 35: Tlaloc After the Fall of Teotihuacan: Cacaxtla Mural Figure 250
Image 36: The Aztec Tlaloc: Castillo de Teayo Relief Sculpture 252
Image 37: The Aztec Tlaloc: Castillo de Teayo Tlaloc Sculpture 252
Image 38: The Aztec Tlaloc: Tlaloc Urn, from the Templo Mayor 254
Image 39: Izapa Stela 1 256
Image 40: The Chac of the Codices: The Quadripartite Chac, from the *Dresden Codex* 258
Image 41: The Chac of the Codices: Painted Pottery Funerary Plate 260
Image 42: The Architectural Chac 262
Image 43: Tlaloc as Tlaltecuhtli or Tlaltecuhtli as Tlaloc 264
The Aztec Ruler’s Entreaty to Tezcatlipoca, from the *Florentine Codex* 302
Image 44: “El Rey”: Chalcatzingo Monument I 308
Image 45: The Olmec Throne: La Venta “Altar” 4 310
Image 46: The Olmec Throne: Oxtotitlan Mural C-1 310
Image 47: The Ruler and the God: La Venta Monument 19 312
Image 48: The Ruler as the God: Yaxchilan Stela 11 314
The Hero Journey of the Hero Twins, from the *Popol Vuh* 316
Image 49: The Fall into Xibalba: The Palenque Sarcophagus Lid 348
Image 50: Dancing out of Death: A Limestone Panel from Palenque 350
Quetzalcoatl’s Hero Journey, from the *Florentine Codex* 352
Quetzalcoatl’s Hero Journey, from the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* 368
The Birth of Huitzilopochtli, from the Florentine Codex  380
The Aztec Migration Myth, from the Florentine Codex  386
The Finding and Founding of Tenochtitlan, from the Crónica Mexicayotl  394
Image 52: The Beginning of the Migration, from the Codex Boturini  410
Image 53: The Seven Caves of Chicomoztoc, from the Historia Tolteca Chichimeca  412
The Return to Chicomoztoc, the Place of Origin, from the Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme  414
Cihuacoatl, Her Song, from the Florentine Codex

This is yet another in the series of the sacred hymns recorded by Sahagún in both the Codex Mattritensis and the Florentine Codex, a series that includes the “Song of Xipe Totec Iauallauan” and “Teteo Innan, Her Song,” both of which are presented above.

Generally considered an aspect of Tlazolteotl, “Mother of the Gods,” Cihuacoatl’s name means “snake woman,” and it is generally agreed that she was one of the most important Aztec gods at the time of the Conquest. The stone images depicting her or manifestations of her outnumber those of any other Aztec god. In another sense Cihuacoatl was probably an aspect of Teteo Innan, although as is the case with most Mesoamerican deities, she had her own individual identity as well. That identity was particularly important because it provided the Aztecs “the direct antecedent for their own image of Huitzilopochtli’s mother, Coatlicue, culminating avatar of the devouring woman.”

The hymn contains a great deal of imagery related to fertility, some of it directly tied to rituals devoted to agricultural fertility. The “sweeping of the roads” is an obvious reference to the festival of Ochpaniztli, which in fact means “sweeping of the roads,” a festival dedicated to Toci, “Our Grandmother,” and to the promotion of fertility. The hymn itself was sung as a part of the festival devoted to Cihuacoatl, a festival culminating in a fire sacrifice that was essentially a firstfruits ceremony celebrating the arrival of the first flowers after the renewal of the rainy season.

But it is important to note that “the imagery of agricultural process is invoked in this Hymn in terms of human sexuality” in such images as the “timbrelled staff” and “the cactus shaft, his glory,” which will “fill” the goddess. Gingerich suggests that this “filling of the goddess” was probably understood as a reference to her insatiable appetite for sacrificial victims, and once again we have a suggested relationship between fertility — on all its levels — and sacrifice.

Essentially, the hymn describes “the supposedly intimate relation between earthly fertility and human acts of war and sacrifice: the earth-fertility numen, Quilatzli, towering protectress of the Chalmea who maintains the precious maize erect in its mythic holy field is one and the same as the sacrificial eagle, the consuming and warring sun, the were-deer of Colhuacan, consumed and consuming — in short, Our Mother Yaoicihuatl, ‘Enemy Woman.’” And all of these — Quilatzli, Yaoicihuatl, and Cihuacoatl — are aspects of the Great Goddess, simultaneously the guarantor of fertility and receiver of human sacrifice. She surely is, as Gingerich calls her, the “Terrible Mother.”
CIHUACOATL, HER SONG


The Eagle, the Eagle, Quilastli,
of snake-blood circled face,
emplumed,
in eagle plumes, she comes.

She comes sweeping the roads,
Protectress of Chalma and spreading tree
over the Colhua, Huíya!
In the place of Sun’s acxoyatl tree,
in the Divine Fields the maize ear
is supported on the timbrelled staff.

Thorns, thorns fill my hands;
Thorns fill my hands.
In the Divine Field the maize ear
is supported on the timbrelled staff.

The grass broom fills my hands;
In the Divine Field the maize-ear
is supported by the timbrelled staff.

13-Eagle, Our Mother, Aya,
Ruler of the Chalmeca.

“His cactus shaft, his glory;
Let him fill me, He
my Prince, Mixcoatl, Aya.”

Our Mother, Enemy Woman, Aya;
Our Mother, Enemy Woman, Aya;

The Deer of Colhuacan
in her costume of feathers, Aya.
Ahuiya!
Already had Sun declared his war:
“Aya! Let men be dragged forth,
All shall be destroyed!”
The Deer of Colhuacan
in her costume of feathers.
Ahuiya!
She of the eagle plumes, unmasked;
Ahuiya!
The rising one, unmasked.