

REPORTS

THE EMPERORS' CLOAK: AZTEC POMP, TOLTEC CIRCUMSTANCES

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The official cape of the Aztec emperors characteristically is pictured with a blue, geometric design. A pictorial codex illustrates tribute textiles incorporating a portion of that same pattern. These sixteenth-century Aztec weavings came from geographic areas previously part of the twelfth-century Toltec empire; it is from that revered power that this motif derived. The imperial blue cloak of the Aztec rulers thus served as their "charter," reflecting the empire's legitimacy based on the emperors' claim to a Toltec genealogy. The design's Nahuatl name plus recent dyeing experiments indicate the creation of the emperors' cloak involved the deliberate inclusion of a labor-intensive tie-dye technique in order to produce a specific motif that carried a powerful symbolism. This design's occurrence in other contexts confirms its importance and indicates the motif had pre-Toltec origins relating to geopolitical/mythological bases of authority in ancient mesoamerican societies.

La capa oficial de los emperadores Aztecas se caracteriza en sus representaciones por un diseño azul geométrico. Un códice pictorial enseña textiles de tributo que incorpora un porción de la misma decoración. Estos tejidos Aztecas del siglo XVI vienen de áreas geográficas que formaban parte del imperio Tolteca del siglo XII; tal poderío reverado es la fuente del diseño. La capa azul imperial de los gobernantes Aztecas servió entonces como una "cedula" que refleja la legitimidad del imperio basado en la relación geneológico de los emperadores a los Toltecas. El nombre del diseño en Nahuatl e experimentos recién hechos de procesos de teñir indica que el elaboración de la capa imperial incluye, a proposito, una técnica laborioso del tiñamento anudado (plangi) para producir el motivo específico que contiene un simbolismo poderoso. La ocurrencia de este diseño en otros contenidos confirma su importancia e indica que el motivo tiene orígenes pre-Toltecas con relación a bases geopolítico/mitológico de autoridad en sociedades del antiguo Mesoamerica.

The ceremony and grandeur surrounding the court of the Aztec emperor Moctezuma encompassed a degree of elaboration unrivaled in Europe (Cortés 1971:109, 111–112). One of the most impressive visual aspects of palace life was the apparel of the nobles. Spanish conquistadors, missionary chroniclers, and pictorial manuscripts all attest to the lords' finely woven, brilliantly colored costumes and accoutrements, many lavish with intricate designs and lush ornamentation of shimmering tropical feathers, gems, and precious metals. Appropriately, the clothing donned by the emperor is reported to have been the most impressive of all. Yet in illustrations of the Aztec official royal attire the cape that is always worn is not imposing.

The imperial cloak repeatedly depicted on sequential emperors—the garment whose very presence denotes a ruler—is decorated with a seemingly unexceptional geometric pattern. This motif, however, proves to have served an important, fundamental purpose. A detailed investigation of the design reveals the iconographic influence of earlier mesoamerican polities and the tenacity of their ancient symbols.

When contemplating repeated depictions of the Aztec emperors' cloak, many questions arise: What does the cape's simple but potent design represent? Where did this motif originate and through what technological process was it created? It is possible to answer these questions despite the fact that no actual examples of the rulers' cape are still extant; Mesoamerica's humid climate and

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Figure 1. Example of a tribute textile ideogram incorporating the blue-and-white diaper motif (*Codex Mendoza* 1938:III:27r).

predominantly cremation burial practices were not conducive to the survival of textiles. Fortunately, the area's indigenous pictographic writing system performed its own unique form of clothing conservation, providing modern scholars with multiple depictions of Aztec apparel.

The mesoamerican pictorial codices contain hundreds of images of Prehispanic garments, many drawn in remarkable detail. Whether worn by deities or humans, displayed in scenes of offerings or pictured in tribute tallies, these garments reflect a wide array of social variation. Because each rank, status and ethnic group dressed in a characteristic manner, a great deal of ethnographic and historical information is contained in their attire. Thanks to such evidence, it is now possible to understand not only what the design on the emperors' cloak represents and how it was produced but also something of the motif's ancient past.

THE TEXTILE DESIGN MOTIF

The initial data for this research come from the *Codex Mendoza*, an Aztec pictorial compiled in the early 1540s by Indian scribes under the supervision of Spanish priests (*Codex Mendoza* 1938, 1991). The manuscript's purpose was to illustrate the Prehispanic life of these recently conquered peoples for the edification of their new master, King Charles I of Spain. One portion of the document consists of the Aztec imperial tribute tallies; it is on textile ideograms found in this section that the enigmatic design motif appears.

Of the 38 Aztec provinces, 11 sent tribute textiles that contain a section of a blue-and-white diaper pattern composed of contiguous diamonds, each with a dot in the middle (Figure 1).

The blue design shared by these textiles suggests a common cultural heritage but all conventional

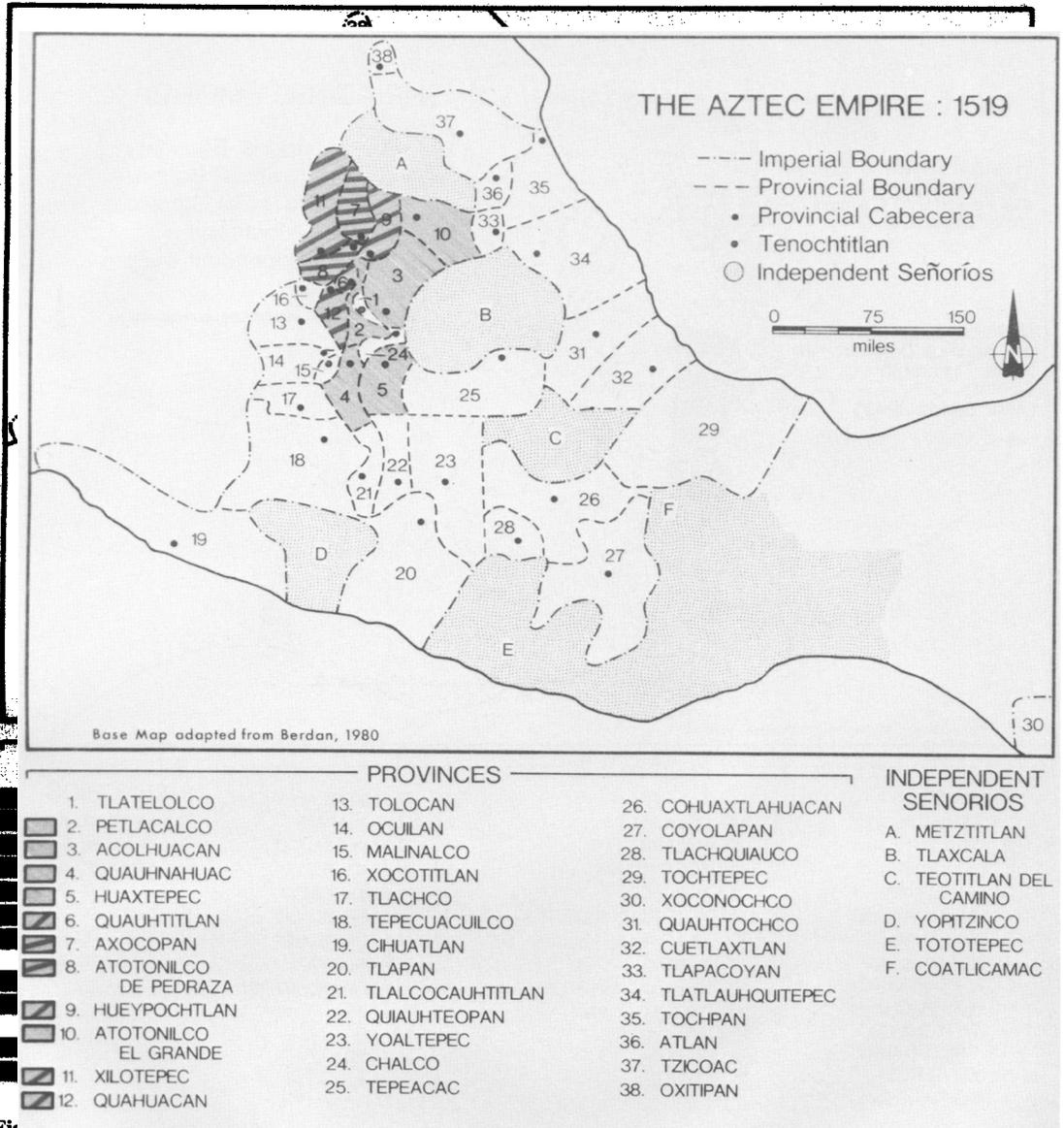


Fig. 2. Geographic distribution of the 38 provinces that sent tribute textiles containing a section of the blue diaper motif.

attempts to determine the meaning of the motif failed. The research progressed only after the focus shifted to the original locales of the weavings.

THE GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF THE TRIBUTE TEXTILES

Textiles displaying equally divided fields of the blue diaper design and a solid yellow were sent in tribute to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan by five provinces that formed a contiguous north-south band encompassing the imperial city. The two provinces that included weavings combining the blue pattern with a section of red in their tribute payment were located to the northwest of

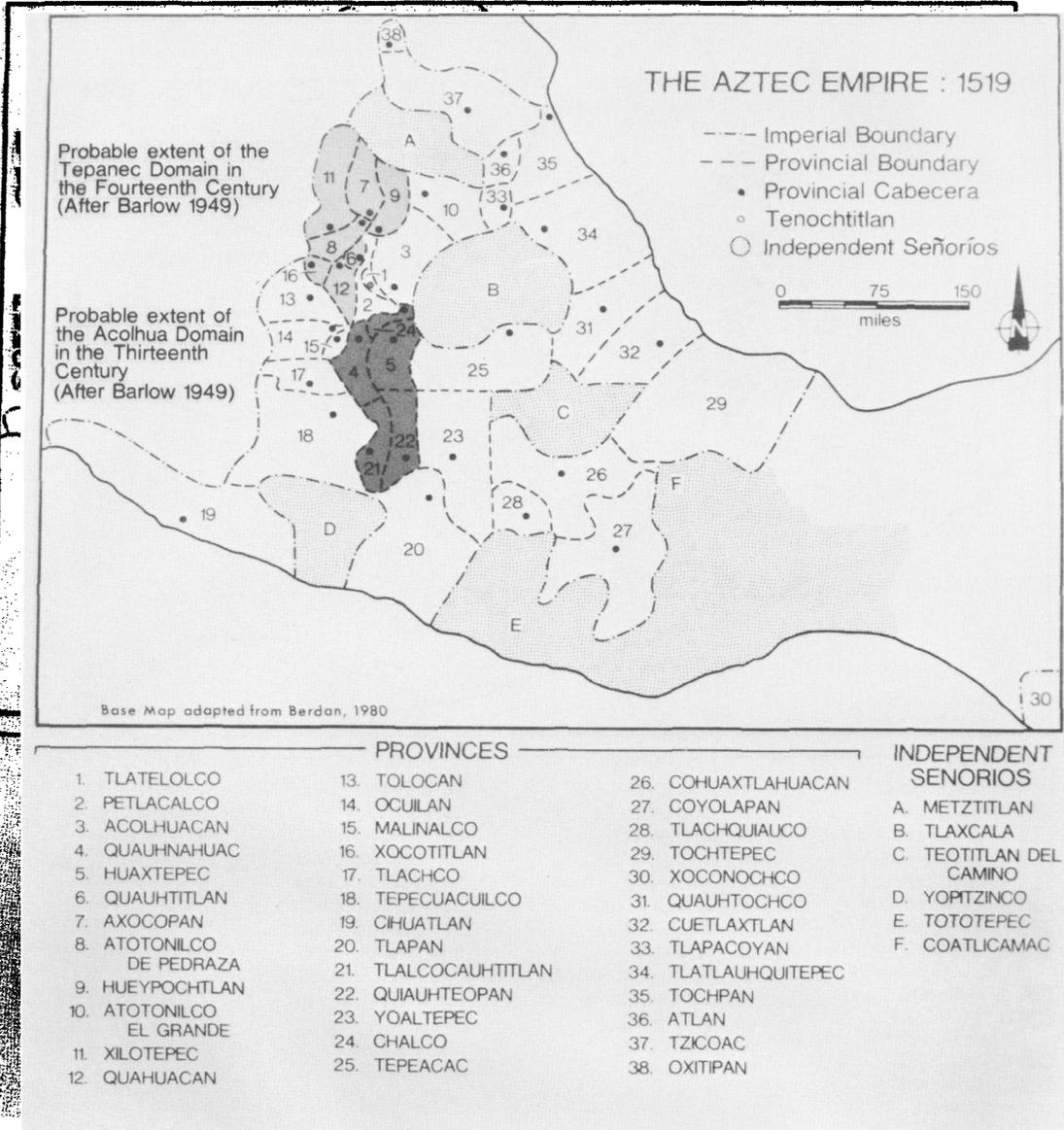


Figure 3. Probable extent of two pre-Aztec kingdoms.

Tenochtitlan; immediately adjacent were the four provinces that sent textiles with one-half containing the blue motif and the other field divided equally between red and yellow.

All 11 of these provinces were adjacent to one another (Figure 2). Such compact grouping had to be more than coincidence. As it turns out, this collective set of provinces closely outlines a portion of two pre-Aztec kingdoms: thirteenth-century Acolhua and fourteenth-century Tepanec (Figure 3).

The Acolhuaque and Tepanec, like the later Aztecs themselves, were among the nomadic invaders into the Valley of Mexico after the fall of the Toltecs in A.D. 1150. The attaining of legitimacy for all of these Chichimec parvenus was through marriage into the royal house of Colhuacan, a small city-state just south of Tenochtitlan. Only the noble Colhuacan lineages could lay claim to an unbroken heritage back to the revered Toltecs (Davies 1982:165), and only from that preexisting

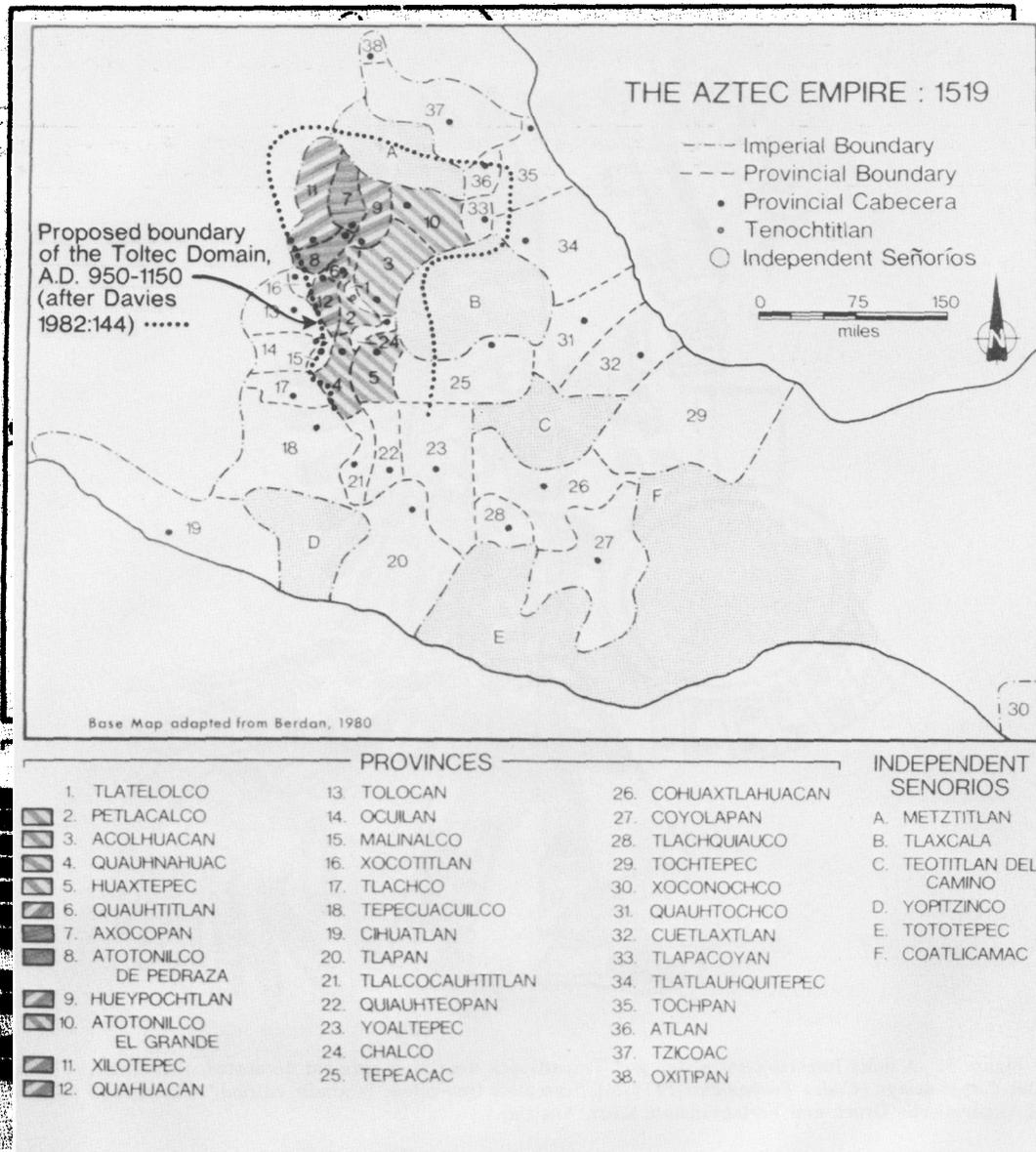


Figure 4. The juxtaposition of the proposed extent of the twelfth-century Toltec domain and the geographic distribution of the sixteenth-century Aztec blue-diaper-design-textile provinces.

high culture could a legitimate continuity of leadership flow. To the Aztecs and their neighbors, the Toltecs represented a Golden Age that embodied the epitome of aesthetic sensibility, military prowess, and political élan. A bona fide ruler had to be able to demonstrate descent from that venerable line in order to maintain valid authority.

Just as a goodly portion of both the Acolhua and Tepanec kingdoms was located within the confines of the earlier Toltec empire, so too were the Aztec provinces that sent textiles in tribute that contained a portion of the blue motif (see Figure 4). The contiguous geographic distribution of these 11 provinces implies the claim of their provincial lords to a Toltec heritage. The tribute textiles



Figure 5. A detail of the blue diaper design (*Codex Borbonicus* [1974:26], "complete true-colour facsimile edition," photograph courtesy of Akademische Druck-und Verlagsanstalt, Graz, Austria).

displaying the blue diaper pattern combined with a field of yellow, of red, or of yellow and red suggest that these three sets of weavings served as heraldic emblems reflecting the Toltec-descended noble lineages of their respective areas.

INFERENCES INHERENT IN THE DIAPER DESIGN

In further support of the hypothesis that the Toltec-connected blue diaper design was associated with Colhuacan are certain images found in *Codex Borbonicus*. This Aztec ritual pictorial, which may have originated in Colhuacan (Nicholson 1988), contains two depictions of deity impersonators wearing garments decorated with elements of the blue diaper motif (*Codex Borbonicus* 1974:26, 28) (e.g., Figure 5). A design deemed worthy to grace a god must carry powerful symbolism. This assumption is confirmed when turning to the secular realm.

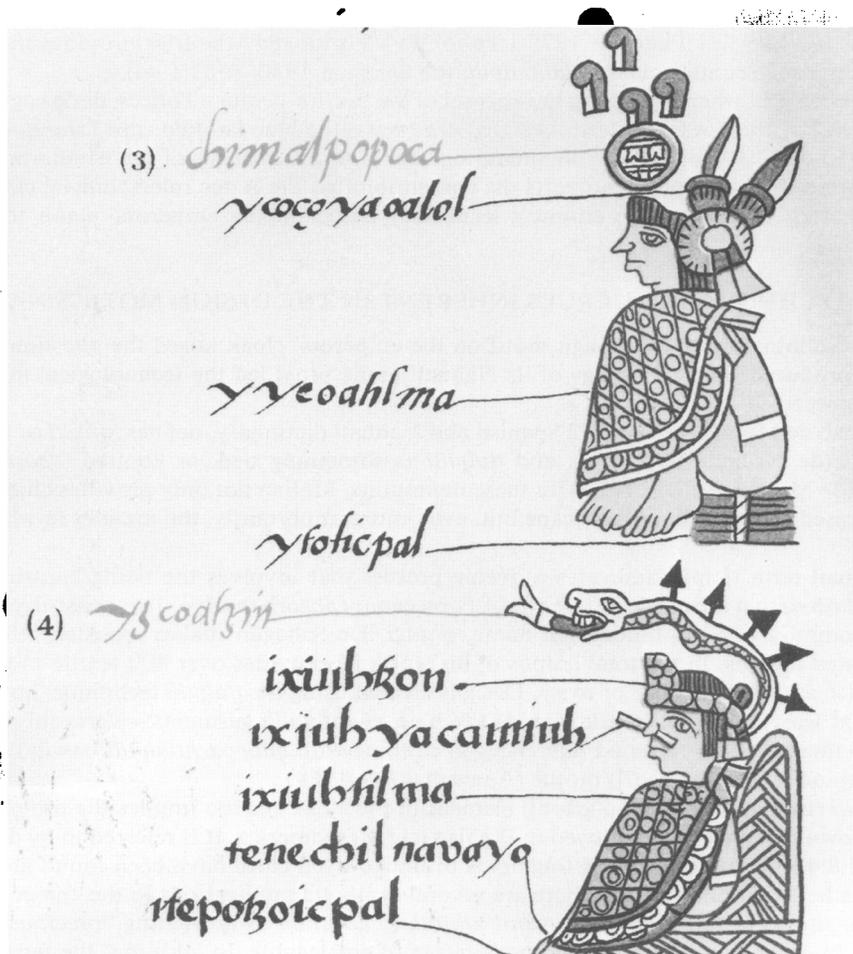


Figure 6. A detail from *Primeros Memoriales* (1926: *estampa XVIII*) depicting the successive ruling lords of Tenochtitlan. The cloaks of Chimalpopoca and Itzcoatl are glossed as “yecoatlma” (his skin cape) and “ixiuhfilma” (his blue cape). The wearing of the imperial blue cloak begins with the fourth ruler, Itzcoatl, the first Aztec emperor, and ceases with the Spanish Conquest.

It is the blue diaper motif that appears on the cloak of office worn by the most powerful males of Late Postclassic Mesoamerica, the Aztec emperors. The imperial connotation of these capes becomes very evident in an illustration of the successive rulers of Tenochtitlan (Figure 6). The first three lords are clad in identical tan cloaks, but this apparel changes following the Mexica’s defeat of the Tepanec hegemony. With that decisive victory, the Aztec empire came into being. Accordingly, the fourth Mexica ruler, Itzcoatl—and all subsequent Preconquest emperors—are depicted in full imperial trappings, which included a stylized version of a blue, diaper-design cape. This iconography served an essential purpose: The rulers’ cloak was the heraldic device that asserted these Aztec nobles’ claim to a Toltec genealogy.

Additional confirmation for the Toltec/diaper-motif hypothesis comes from the Nahuatl term for the emperors’ cloak. The source for the information is the *Florentine Codex*, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s encyclopedic chronicle of the Aztecs. This work is regarded as the most detailed account for any of the newly discovered people in the Age of Exploration. Among a myriad of subjects, de Sahagún illustrates and describes the raiment of the Aztec deities. The merchant god Yacatecuhtli (Lord of the Vanguard) is depicted wearing a blue-green cape almost identical to that of the emperors

(de Sahagún 1950–1982:1:Plate 41, 1979:1:Folio 39v). Fortunately the friar provides the name of the design on Yacatecuhtli's cloak: *xiuhtlalpilli* (de Sahagún 1950–1982:1:44).

In another context, when discussing the apparel of the twelfth-century Toltecs, de Sahagún relates, “[The Toltecs] clothing was—indeed their privilege was—the blue knotted cape [*xiuhtlalpilli*]” (de Sahagún 1950–1982:10:169). This statement, together with the analysis of the tribute-textile ideograms discussed earlier, strongly supports the contention that the Aztec rulers' official cloak served as their “charter,” reflecting the empire's legitimacy based on the emperors' claim to a Toltec genealogy.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL CLUES INHERENT IN THE DESIGN MOTIF'S NAME

A careful examination of the design motif on the emperors' cloak raised the question of how it might be reproduced. The etymology of its Nahuatl name provided the technological information needed to proceed.

Fray Alonso de Molina, in his 1572 Spanish and Nahuatl dictionary, defines *xihuitl* as blue-green (“*turquesa*”) (de Molina 1977:159v), and *tlalpilli* as something tied, or knotted (“*cosa atada, o añudada*”) (de Molina 1977:124v). With these definitions, Molina not only provides clues as to the type of dye used to create the rulers' cape but, even more importantly, the manner in which it was applied.

The Nahuatl term *tlalpilli* indicates a dyeing process that involves the tying/knotting off of a portion of cloth so that the resulting reserved section cannot absorb the dye. This resist-dye technique is known commonly by its Indonesian name, *plangi*. De Sahagún makes repeated references to *tlalpilli*-created designs. In the total corpus of his work, he provides over 400 textile-motif names, most of which appear only once or twice. Designs created using the *tlalpilli* technique, however, are referred to at least 33 times. In addition to the blue *xiuhtlalpilli* garments—worn only by deities and rulers—there also are repeated references to clothing with *quappachtlalpilli* (tawny) and *colotlalpilli* (scorpion [a gray-orange?]) motifs (Anawalt 1988–1989).

The *xihuitl* (turquoise [i.e., blue-green]) element in the cloak's name implies the use of indigo, a blue dye known to have been employed in Prehispanic Mesoamerica. It is referred to by de Sahagún (1950–1982:8:47–48, 10:91–92) and fragments of indigo-dyed cloth have been found archaeologically (Mastache de Escobar 1974). There are several symbolic implications to the choice of blue as the color for the emperors' cloak. The word *xihuitl*, in addition to translating “precious turquoise stone,” can by extension also refer to other objects of great value. In addition, the term refers to the hue blue-green, the quintessential Toltec color (de Sahagún 1950–1982:10:169).

Returning to the problem of re-creating the blue diaper motif, it quickly became apparent that what was needed first was a carefully detailed depiction of such a pattern. Most drawings of the emperors' cloak are too highly stylized to be of help (see Figure 6), but *Codex Ixtlilxochitl* contains an ideal example. The royal raiment of King Nezahualpilli,¹ ruler of Texcoco—one of the three city-states that controlled the Aztec empire—proved an excellent model both for its clarity and the arrangement of the small, repeated elements of the diaper motif into a revelatory pattern (Figure 7).

The repeating geometric design on Nezahualpilli's cape is formed by two interlocking step frets, one composed of squares containing dots and the other of dot-encasing diamonds. Guided by the Nahuatl name of the emperors' cloak, the initial attempt to re-create the pattern involved dyeing cloth with indigo using the *plangi* tying technique. The result was disconcerting.

Because of the propensity of woven cloth to stretch when pulled on the bias, it proved impossible—using only the *plangi* method—to create both squares and diamonds in such close configuration. No matter how the reserved sections were manipulated, only diamonds running along the warp and weft of the material would emerge (Figure 8).

Still convinced that the term *xiuhtlalpilli* held the key to the technology used to create the rulers' cape, I consulted two artists sophisticated in dyeing techniques: Virginia Davis of New York and Pamela Scheinman of New Jersey.



Figure 7. King Nezahualpilli of Texcoco, clad in his *xihuitlapilli* cloak (Códex *ixtlixochitli* [1570: folio 108r], “complete true-colour facsimile edition,” photograph courtesy of Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, Graz, Austria).

EXPERIMENTS TO RE-CREATE THE IMPERIAL CLOAK

A detailed study of the overall pattern on King Nezahualpilli’s cape indicated the interlocking step frets had not been created by repeated applications of textile stamps. The artist’s meticulous rendering of each unique diamond and square suggests the intention of conveying variation within

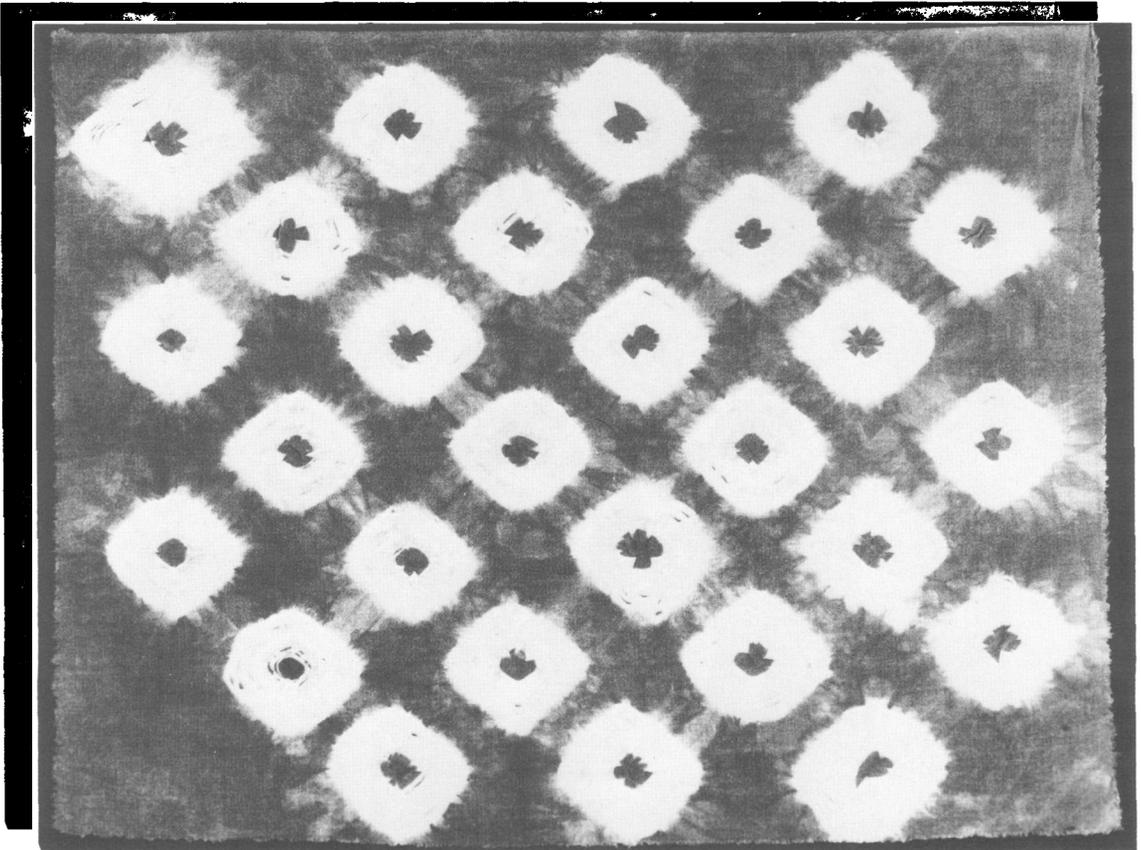


Figure 5. The initial *plangi* resist-dyeing experiment that produced only diamond shapes.

the design. Further, the depictions of these patterns appear boldly on *both* sides of the cloak, implying a complete penetration of dye which does not occur with textile stamps. As a result of these observations, we accepted the sixteenth-century scribe's portrait of Nezahualpilli as an attempt at photographic realism and accordingly took clues directly from the picture itself.

Judging from the height of the ruler, the probable dimensions of the cloak were calculated to be 1.4 m long by 1 m wide. To re-create the repeating pattern, a 28- \times -25-cm diagram of one step-fret sequence was traced from a photocopied enlargement of the image (Figure 9). Using this cartoon, a series of resist-dyeing experiments were carried out. These included combining the *plangi* diamonds with squares created through the use of *tritik*, a *plangi*-like technique that involves forming the reserved section by stitching rather than tying. This tying-plus-sewing solution had to be ruled out, however, because *tritik* produces a feathery, ill-defined edge on the resulting reserved sections (Figure 10).

After repeated experiments involving tying, knotting, stitching, folding, clamping, and creating the resist solely by applying beeswax, it was determined that Nezahualpilli's cloak did indeed have a knotted element in its composition. Although the overall geometric pattern would have been produced most easily through the use of the *batik* process alone (i.e., create the entire pattern only by painting on a waxy resist), there is evidence in the depiction of Nezahualpilli's cloak itself that it could have been possible to have used both *batik* and *plangi* to create the pattern. A careful study of the cape shows that the diamond elements of the pattern float in more open ground than do the squares: More space was needed to tie the *plangi*-created diamonds than to apply a waxy resist on the closely grouped, *batik*-produced squares.

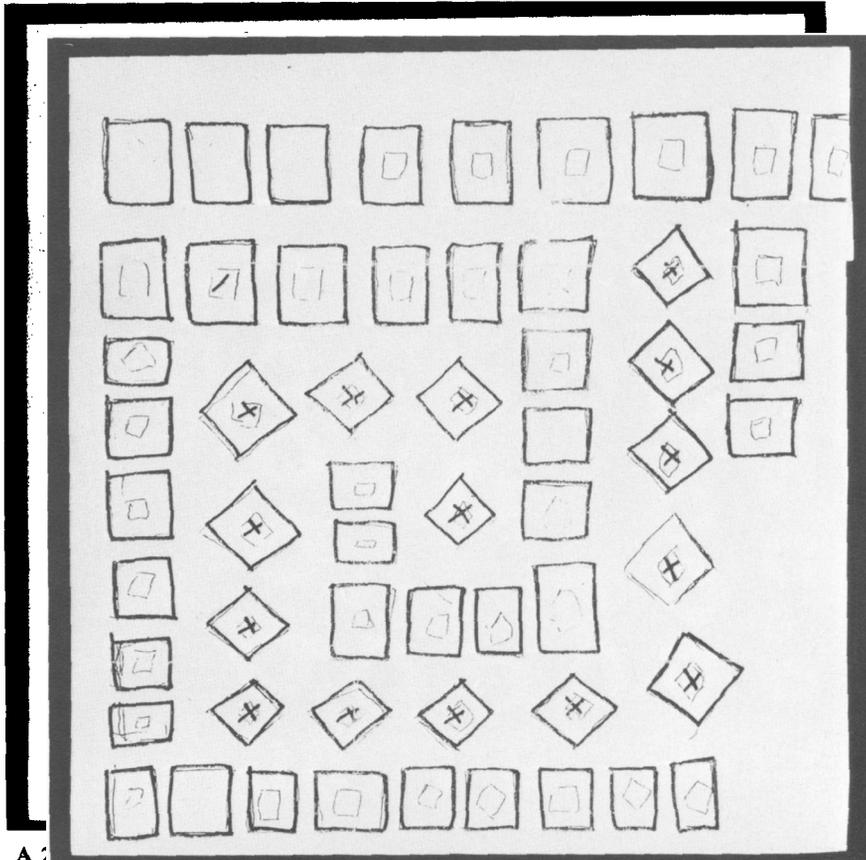


Figure 9. A : from an enlarged photocopy.

When the techniques of *plangi* and *batik* were combined by Davis and Scheinman, the original pattern finally was reproduced (Figure 11).

SYMBOLIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIAMOND-DOT MOTIF

The dyeing experiments, together with the *tlapilli* element in the cape's name, indicates a resist-dye method involving knotting was used to create the diamond sections of the repeating pattern on Nezahualpilli's cloak. The deliberate inclusion of this labor-intensive technique in order to incorporate diamond-dot images in the overall step fret design suggests both of these elements carried a powerful symbolism, and indeed this appears to be the case.

The step fret was an important mesoamerican decorative motif. It was associated with many of the powers of nature, including the ancient and venerable concept of the "Feathered Serpent" (Sharp 1981:9-10). This interlocked step-fret design was a particularly propitious symbol to appear on a ruler's cape because of the potency inherent in its sky/earth dualism.

As for the iconographic significance of the *plangi*-created diamond-dot, that motif also had a wide mesoamerican distribution in both time and space. Among the Aztecs, the design appears in sacred contexts other than the emperors' cloak. One such example suggests that in addition to the diamond-dot's Toltec symbolism, an even more ancient meaning was encoded into this potent motif.

The diamond-dot design was used to represent the skin of the fearsome goddess Coatlicue, "Serpent Skirt," whose massive stone sculpture is now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City

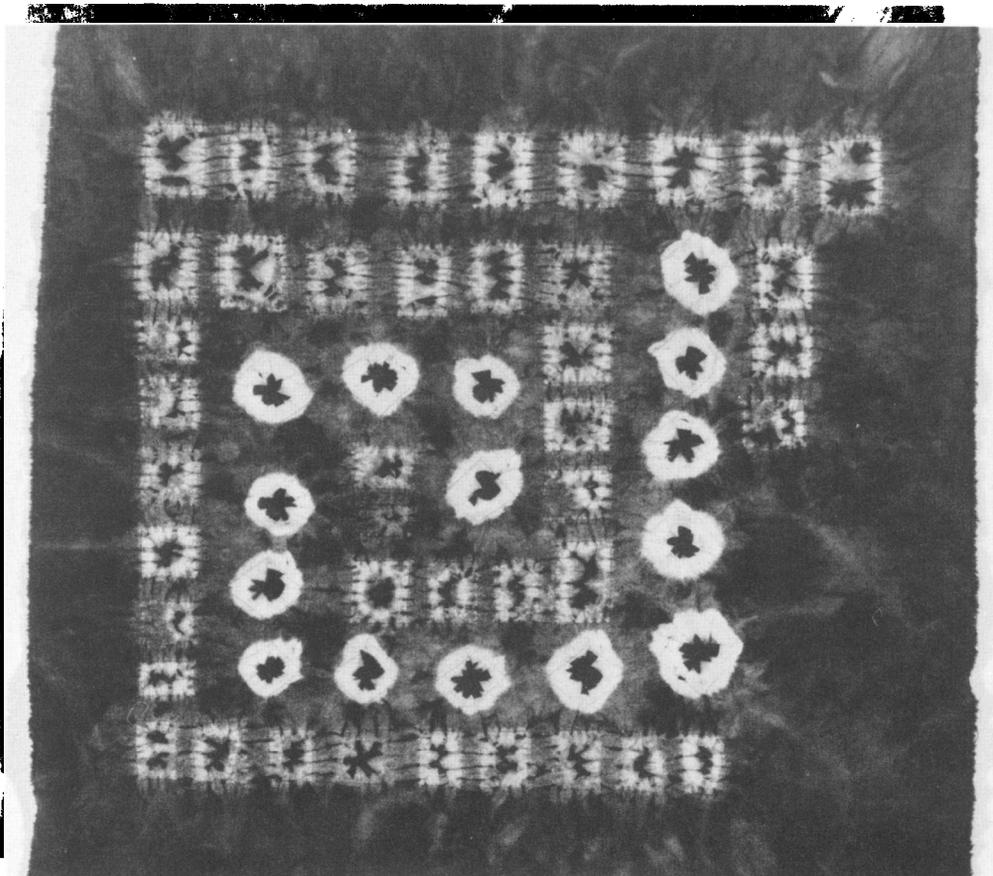


Figure 10. The stepped design created by using a combination of the *pungi-ueing* technique and *trunk*, a resist-dyeing method involving stitching.

(Figure 12). Pasztory (1983:79) refers to this decorative device as the “snakeskin pattern.” The diamond-dot/reptile association, however, is not confined simply to snakes, as is demonstrated by evidence originating far from highland Central Mexico.

Codex Dresden (1975), a ritual Maya pictorial, includes an intriguing scene of a torrential downpour (Figure 13). This inundation is depicted as a stream of water emerging from the mouth of a crocodile decorated with the now-familiar blue-and-white-diaper design. What is a motif that appears on the official cloak of highland Mexico’s Aztec emperors doing on a crocodile in a pictorial manuscript from the Maya lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula?

There is great time depth to the appearance of crocodiles in the art of the Maya; these tropical people imbued the saurian creatures of their jungle waters with sacred power (Schele and Miller 1986:45; Thompson 1966:11–12, 1970:216–217). This same reverence of crocodiles was shared by the Aztecs of the arid central plateau (Boone 1987:188, 215, Figure 11, 222, Footnote 14, 459). Analyses of only half the cache material from the 1980–1985 excavation of the Aztecs’ Templo Mayor already has revealed the collective remains of 12 crocodiles, with many more anticipated (O. J. Polaco R., personal communication 1989). The high incidence of these tropical lowland creatures as votive offerings in a distant highland temple clearly indicates the ritual significance of the impressive reptiles, which may have been associated with divine authority. There is an intriguing similarity between the reticulated skin of the crocodile and the diaper pattern found on the stylized depictions of the rulers’ capes (see Figure 6).

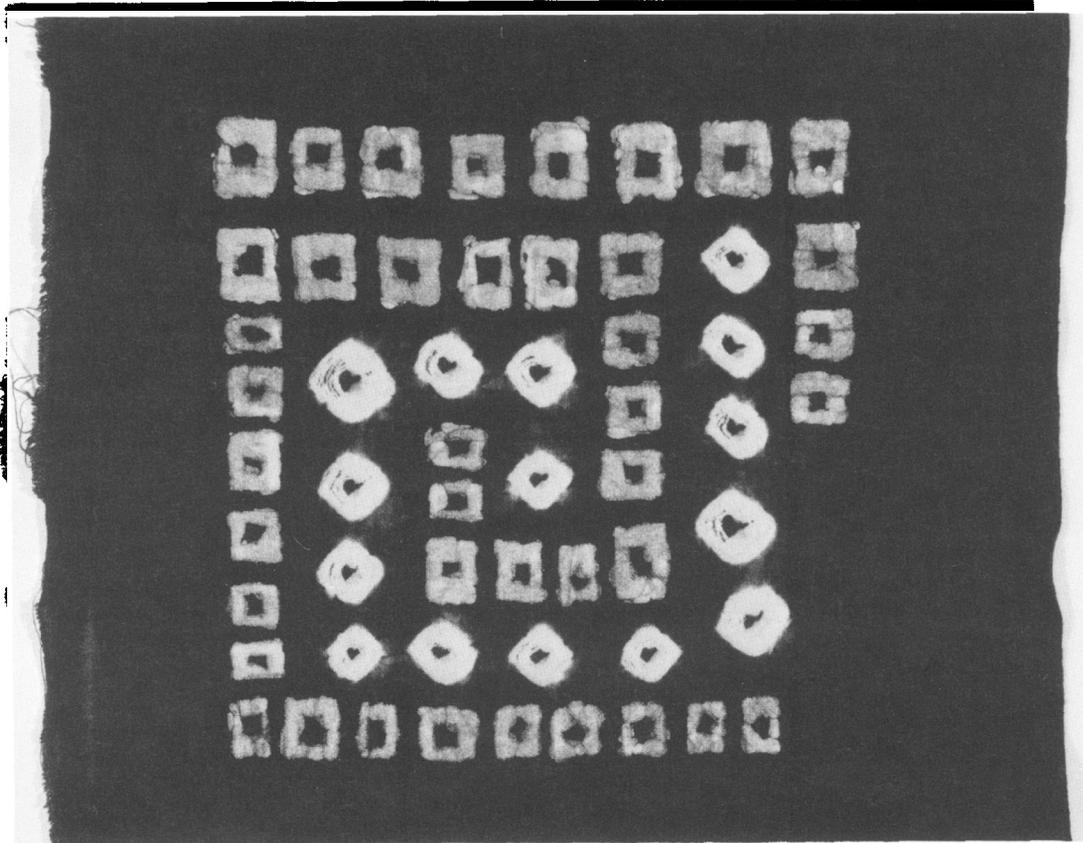


Figure 11. The step-fret design of King Nezahualpilli's cloak composed of *batik*-created squares and *plangi*-tied diamonds. This is the most probable method used to produce the original garment.

Clemency Coggins (1987) has hypothesized a linguistic connection between the sixteenth-century Aztec emperors' blue tie-dye cloak and a headdress worn by a fourth-century ruler of Tikal, whose name can be interpreted "Blue-Green Knot." The Maya lord was portrayed in—and buried with—a ceremonial crocodilian mask composed of knotted-on disks. This impressive costume was worn to honor the great creator god Quetzalcoatl, a principal mythological figure of Mesoamerica. The deity's name most often is translated, "Feathered Serpent," one interpretation of the interlocking-fret design on Nezahualpilli's cloak (Sharp 1981:9–10). The Aztec inclusion in their rulers' capes of a tie-dye-created motif that involved knotting suggests that the Mexica, like their Toltec predecessors, valued the diamond-dot design for its powerful, ancient symbolism.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has followed clues inherent in the blue-diaper-pattern section of three sets of Aztec tribute textiles. Mapping of the involved provinces suggests the design was a heraldic, genealogical insignia denoting royal Toltec descent. This association is further confirmed by de Sahagún's reference to the Toltecs' having the privilege of wearing the *xiuhtlalpilli* cape, the same design displayed by the later Aztec rulers. The prestigious associations of this motif made it the ideal pattern to appear on the emperors' official cloak of office, a garment that served to display the Aztec empire's royal Toltec "charter."



Figure 12.
(Pasztory 1983: plate 117)

design

But if the diaper design conveyed such an important and exclusive symbolism, what social role could be played by the tribute textiles that carried a portion of this powerful blue motif? There were a considerable number of such weavings; the 11 provinces annually sent some 9,600 of them to Tenochtitlan (*Codex Mendoza* 1991:19v–32r). These prestigious capes no doubt were a part of the politically advantageous textile redistribution system controlled from the palace. Quantities of richly decorated capes of many patterns were presented—apparently often in large lots—on a regular basis.

According to de Sahagún, on the occasions of the great ceremonial feasts important textiles were



Figure 13. A Lowland Maya depiction of a torrential downpour. Note the crocodile, at upper left, decorated with the diaper design (*Codex Dresden* [1975:74], “complete true-colour facsimile edition,” photograph courtesy of Akademische Druck-und Verlagsanstalt, Graz, Austria).

apportioned as gifts by the emperor himself. He regularly dispensed a variety of decorated capes for a wide array of accomplishments, ranging from military valor (e.g., de Sahagún 1950–1982:8: 76–77) to exceptional skill at hunting (e.g., de Sahagún 1950–1982:2:137). There would have been no dearth of appropriately high-born recipients for cloaks with a section decorated with the blue diaper design. The polygamous practices of the lords had produced a burgeoning class of nobles among Tenochtitlan’s 200,000 inhabitants.

The custom of bestowing textiles as gifts was not limited to only the residents of the capital. Visitors were similarly honored, and the weavings they received were both plentiful and of great value. The *Florentine Codex* makes reference to such gifts as “costly capes” (de Sahagún 1950–1982:8:52) and “capes without price” (de Sahagún 1950–1982:8:64–65). Particularly germane to the concerns of this paper is de Sahagún’s report that a newly installed ruler distributed bundles of such weavings among visiting lords, presenting them with “the precious capes, appropriate to them, the ones to which they were entitled” (de Sahagún 1950–1982:4:88–89). Obviously, at least some of the cloaks given as gifts were lineage and/or area specific.

Nor were all of the recipients of such textiles allies. De Sahagún states that the emperor gave appropriately decorated capes to “the lords from everywhere—friends of the ruler, and all the lords unfriendly to him” (de Sahagún 1950–1982:8:44). Among the latter category of visiting dignitaries are listed nobles from Tlaxcala, Cholula and Huexotzinco (de Sahagún 1950–1982:8:65). Although each of these polities was a long-time adversary of the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, the lords from those unfriendly areas were all Chichimec/Toltec descended. As a result, these wary guests would have shared the high-born Aztecs’ appreciation and privilege of wearing textiles bearing a section of the blue diaper motif, heraldic emblem of royal Toltec descent.

The above investigation of the blue diaper motif demonstrates the power of a method of cultural reconstruction based on depictions of Prehispanic weavings. This textile-focused approach is enriched by using evidence from several media produced by different artists of varying backgrounds. From such a data base, new understanding of long-familiar images emerges. Perhaps even more important, unexpected insights are gained into the functioning of ancient societies, the nature of past political divisions, and the tenacious continuity of prestige symbols handed down from earlier civilizations. In the case of the Aztec emperors’ cloak, analysis of its decorative design provides new understanding of the geopolitical/mythological bases of authority in ancient Mesoamerica.

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NOTE

¹ For information on the technique used to create the border pattern on King Nezahualpilli's cloak see Johnson 1989.