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CITY AS SYMBOL IN
AZTEC THOUGHT: THE
CLUES FROM THE
CODEX MENDOZA

One of the most significant developments in recent decades in the study of Mesoamerican cultures has been the realization that the Aztec society discovered by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century was a world dominated by that form known as the traditional city. This realization has been the outgrowth of long-term debates on the "nature" of pre-Columbian peoples and the eventual rejection of the anthropological theory that "the pueblo of Mexico" was, according to Lewis H. Morgan, peopled by "ragged Indians" living in the "middle status of Barbarism."¹ The Aztecs, said

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¹ Morgan and his energetic disciple, Adolph F. Bandelier, were engaged in a hot and belligerent critique of the romantic image of Aztec society as articulated in William Prescott's "cunningly wrought fable," *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (New York, 1843), and Hubert Howe Bancroft's *Native Races of the Pacific States* (New York, 1875). Following the leads of E. B. Tylor, who argued that the white race was best endowed for civilized life, and Robert Wilson, who categorized the Aztecs in his *Mexico and Its Religion* (New York, 1855) as an "ordinary tribe of North American savages," Morgan reconstructed a view of Aztec society as much to save the reputation of American ethnology as to force his view that there was an essential "Indianness" shared by all New World aborigines which bound them to the middle status of barbarism—in the middle, that is, between the savages below and the civilized peoples above. His famous scheme of society's progress appears in the first chapter, "Ethnical Periods," of his *Ancient Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

Morgan, were the Iroquois of the south, and their loose and democratic institutions were proof of "how distant yet were the conceptions of a state or nation among the aborigines of Mexico."² A new, less Eurocentric perspective, which began, in part, with the Marxist studies and grand conceptual schemes of V. Gordon Childe and Karl Wittfogel,³ who articulated theories of urban revolutions and specialized bureaucratic elites, has been applied and tested with surprising results by Americanists concerned with reconstructing the Aztec image. In more recent times, it was Paul Kirchhoff who illuminated Aztec studies by talking of Mesoamerica as an urban civilization.⁴ Research in this direction was highlighted by Pedro Armillas's pioneering work, *Program of the*

For a cogent and flowing analysis of this debate, see Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* ([New Brunswick, N.J., 1971], esp. chap 12, pp. 380-411). According to Morgan, the "Aztec Romance," which pictured the Aztecs as civilized, was the "most deadly encumbrance upon American ethnology . . . that must be got rid of." Attacking directly the writers of this encumbrance, he states that "it caught the imagination and overcame the critical judgement of Prescott, our most charming writer, it ravaged the sprightly brain of Brasseur de Bourbourg, and it carried upon a whirlwind our author at the Golden Gate (Bancroft)" (Keen, p. 392). For an elaborate view of his position, see Lewis Henry Morgan, "Montezuma's Dinner," *North American Review* 122 (1876): 265-308. In this review of Bancroft's book, Morgan wrote of the Aztecs, "They were still a breech cloth people, wearing the rag of barbarism as the unmistakable evidence of their condition." Throughout the long response to his opponent, Morgan presents one of the most arrogant and outrageous anthropological interpretations of Aztec life. Riddled with overt racial discriminations, Morgan's method was to quote generously from eyewitness and secondary-source descriptions of the Aztec capital. No doubt these passages contain some examples of fancy, but Morgan's tactic is to ridicule those parts which do not fit into his view of Aztec barbarism as libel, lies, and "gossip of a camp of soldiers suddenly cast into an earlier form of society, which the village of Indians of America, of all mankind, best represented." The palaces described by Cortés and Díaz del Castillo were, according to Morgan, who could see it all more clearly 350 years later, "joint tenement houses" which "reflected the weakness of Indian family and ability to face alone the struggle of life." The halls described by Díaz del Castillo were similarly dismissed: "upon this rhapsody it will be sufficient to remark that the halls were entirely unknown in Indian architecture." The report that Montezuma had military guards posted at his dinner was pure invention, as "it implies a knowledge of military discipline unknown by Indian tribes." That the barbarian chief Montezuma might have eaten at a table with a tablecloth scandalized Morgan, who concludes his attack on Bancroft and the Aztecs with, "There was neither a political society, nor a state, nor any civilization in America when it was discovered, and excluding the Eskimos, but one race of Indians, the Red Race" ("Montezuma's Dinner," p. 308).

² The persistence of Morgan's view can be seen in the following comment by A. L. Kroeber, who dissented only partially from Morgan's reduction: "The Aztecs had some sort of empire, loose and simple indeed when judged by old world standards" (Keen, p. 494).

³ V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself* (New York, 1951), and "The Urban Revolution," *Town Planning Review* 21 (1950): 3-17; Karl A. Wittfogel, *New Light on Chinese Society* (New York, 1938), and "The Hydraulic Approach to Pre-Spanish Mesoamerica," in *Chronology and Irrigation, the Prehistory of the Tehuacan Valley*, ed. Frederick Johnson, 4 vols. (Austin, Tex., 1972), 4:59-80.

⁴ Paul Kirchhoff, "Mesoamérica: Sus límites geográficas, composición étnica y caracteres culturales," *Acta Americana* 1 (1943): 92-107.

History of American Indians, and by the more precise study of Philip Phillips and Gordon Willey, *Method and Theory in American Archaeology*, both of which describe the urban character of Mexican civilization as ancient and pervasive.⁵ Today this materialist approach has peaked in the delicate and penetrating analysis of Friedrich Katz and in Rene Millon's stunning work on Teotihuacan.⁶

In spite of this new focus on the urban character of the ancient Mexican world, there has been only scant attention given to the relation between cosmological symbols and the great capital cities which directed and dominated Mesoamerican cultural life for nearly 2,000 years.⁷ Those scholars who have emphasized symbolic structures and religious forms in their studies of ancient Mexico, such as Laurette Séjourné, Miguel León-Portilla, and, more recently, Burr Brundage, have spoken passionately and sometimes brilliantly about the religious symbols within the Aztec city but not about the Aztec city as a religious form.⁸ This concern, initiated in another cultural area by Fustel de Coulanges,⁹ has recently been tested indirectly against the Aztec materials by the urban geographer, Paul Wheatley. It is through his work that the historian of religions can find a valuable lead in exploring the relations of city and ideal image in Mexico.

In his extraordinary article, "City as Symbol," and elsewhere in

⁵ Pedro Armillas, *Program of the History of American Indians* (Washington, D.C., 1958); Philip Phillips and Gordon Willey, *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (Chicago, 1958).

⁶ Friedrich Katz, *The Ancient American Civilizations* (New York, 1972); Rene Millon, *Urbanization at Teotihuacán, Mexico: The Teotihuacán Map: Part One* (Austin, Tex., 1973).

⁷ Among the scholars who have concerned themselves with this relationship, one of the most outstanding is Walter Krickeberg ("Bauform und Weltbild im alten Mexico," in *Mythe, Mensch und Umwelt* [Bamberg, 1950], and *Las antiguas culturas Mexicanas* [Mexico, 1962]). Also see Paul Westheim, *Arte antiguo de México* (Mexico City, 1950).

⁸ Laurette Séjourné's *Burning Water* (Berkeley, Calif., 1976) discusses Aztec religion as a degradation and perversion of the golden age of pre-Hispanic thought which flourished, according to her, in Teotihuacán between 200 and 800 A.D. This position is elaborated in her stimulating *El universo de Quetzalcoatl* (Mexico City, 1962), which has an introduction by Mireea Eliade. Among the many works on Mesoamerican spirituality, see Miguel León-Portilla's popular, though imbalanced, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman, Okla., 1963). León-Portilla takes the questionable tack of utilizing Walter Jaeger's *Paideia, los ideales de la cultura griega* (3 vols. [Mexico City, 1942-45]) concerning Greek thought and culture as the norm to measure and interpret the philosophical and rational achievements of ancient Nahuatl thinkers. Burr Brundage's *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin, Tex., 1979) is the most articulate and vivid account of the interrelationship of Aztec myth, theology, and society to date. It also brings fresh insight to that still-undeciphered Aztec practice, human sacrifice. Also note Brundage's lofty *Two Heavens, Two Earths*, which does include some material on cities as symbols in Mexico and Peru.

⁹ Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City* (New York, n.d.).

that swollen seed of urban studies, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters, A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City*,¹⁰ Wheatley discusses the ceremonial complexes which served as integrating centers for the ancient city and focuses his attention on a "genre of urbanism characteristic of the traditional world," a genre which he calls "cosmo-magical thought." He argues that cosmo-magical thought gave form and structure to the ideal-type cities in the seven areas of pristine urban development, and notes that this thought "brought the city into being, sustained it and was imprinted on its physiognomy."¹¹ In this paper I wish to discuss the multivalent character of the "imprint" of cosmo-magical thought on the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan. As an initial strategy, I will focus on the frontispiece of the Codex Mendoza and show how this image, itself a reflection of pre-Columbian thought, demonstrates the Aztec conception of their city as a cosmic symbol. Special attention will be given to the cosmo-magical aspects of Tenochtitlan's founding, ceremonial center, and the tribute system which sustained the capital. I will also interpret the symbolic nature of the Templo Mayor, the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan presently being excavated. We will see how the mythology, shape, sculpture, and buried treasures of the shrine demonstrate the intense centripetal character of the Aztec capital. Finally, we will see how the Aztec version of the conquest of Tenochtitlan, articulated a generation after the city fell to Spanish cunning and aggression, reflected the persistence of their cosmo-magical view of the world. The discussion will begin with a short description of the context in which the codex and the majority of primary sources were generated in order to demonstrate the complex interpretive position in which the historian of religions finds himself when approaching these issues.

CONQUEST AND PATRONAGE

In 1535, just fourteen years after the military conquest of Tenochtitlan, Juan de Zumárraga, the Apostolic Inquisitor of New Spain,

¹⁰ Paul Wheatley, "City as Symbol" (inaugural lecture delivered at University College, London, Nov. 20, 1967), and *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* (Chicago, 1971).

¹¹ Wheatley, "City as Symbol," p. 9. The seven areas of pristine urbanism which Wheatley examines in *Pivot* are China, Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, Mesoamerica, the central Andes, and southwest Nigeria. See especially chap. 3, "The Nature of the Ceremonial Center" (pp. 225-370), for a comparative discussion. An intelligent critique of Wheatley's and Eliade's approach to this problem has recently appeared in S. J. Tambiah, "The Galactic Polity: The Structure of Traditional Kingdoms in Southeast Asia," *New York Academy of Sciences* 293 (1977): 69-98.

ordered the collection of the pictorial libraries from the cities and towns of the central plateau. Tradition tells us that the beautifully painted books were gathered into a small heap in the marketplace of Tezcoco and that, in a Christian ceremony marked by a religious fervor aimed at wiping out the devil's magic and idolatrous images, the brilliant intellectual and artistic treasures of ancient Mexico were committed to the flames and became ashes. Though this particular story may be apocryphal,¹² it is a fact, bitter to the minds of scholars, that of the thousands of pictorial manuscripts extant in Mexico in 1519, showing the histories, cosmologies, and cartographies of the ancient culture, only sixteen remain today.¹³ The Zumárraga book-burning episode is a dramatic example of the Spanish strategy of conquering and converting native American peoples and their religious traditions by destroying the images that contained and reflected Aztec perceptions of the cosmos. To gather, efface, and destroy religious images was a step toward the transformation of native consciousness. The destruction and defacing of ancient Mexican symbols and images included breaking the huge sacred stones, dismantling the ceremonial shrines and centers which contained them, and whitewashing religious idols and images.¹⁴ This approach to the project of the conquest attempted,

¹² See Juáquin García Icazbalceta, *Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga*, 2 vols. ([Mexico City, 1947], 2:87-162), for a spirited denial of Zumárraga's inquisitional burnings. His impressive scholarly research argues that this scene was the invention of later historians Juan De Torquemada and Fernando de Alva Ixtlixochitl. While Zumárraga may not have been the mad burner, as he is sometimes represented, Icazbalceta's strong pro-Spanish and anti-Indian biases have no doubt influenced his argument. Most contemporary scholars still credit Zumárraga with having presided over the destruction of manuscripts and indigenous beliefs, if not actually lighting the fires at Tezcoco. But Icazbalceta's study does include an important footnote to the manner in which picture books disappeared. The Indian owners of some picture books destroyed their own treasures for fear of being brought before the Inquisition and burned at the stake.

¹³ John Glass, "A Survey of Native Middle American Pictorial Manuscripts," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Robert Wauchope (Austin, Tex., 1964-76), 14:3-81 (hereafter referred to as *Handbook*). This volume is part of a series entitled *Guide to Ethnohistorical Sources*, which is dedicated to describing, listing, and evaluating the various groups of documentary-research materials relevant to the study of Middle American Indians. It contains highly valuable articles about both the pictorial and prose archives available to the historian of religions.

¹⁴ Díaz del Castillo tells that following the Spanish military victory at Cholula, during the march to the Aztec capital, Cortés "ordered all the priests, captains and other chieftains of that city to assemble, and explained to them very clearly the many matters concerning our holy faith, and told them they could see how their idols had deceived them, and were evil things not speaking the truth; he begged them to destroy the idols and break them in pieces. That if they did not wish to do it themselves, we should do it for them. He also ordered them to whitewash a temple, so that we might set up a cross there. They immediately did what we asked them in the manner of the cross, and they said that they would remove their idols but although they were many times ordered to do it, they delayed. Then the Padre de la Merced said to Cortés that it was going too far, in the beginning, to take away their idols until they should understand things better, and should see how the

in the words of Nahuatl literary genius Ángel María Garibay, to "put an end to everything indigenous, especially in the realm of ideas, even so far as to leave no sign of them."¹⁵ This hard line reflects a Christian approach to conquest and acculturation going back at least as far as the seventh century A.D., when Pope Saint Gregory articulated the principles of substitution and superimposition. Missionaries such as Saint Augustine were instructed to destroy and abolish pagan idols and ritual practices but to utilize the indigenous holy places and ceremonial occasions as the spots and times to build new churches and to teach the stories of Christian heroes and martyrs to the newly baptized. By utilizing the religious places and times familiar to the heathens, the conversion process would move systematically along. Just such an approach was used in the colonization of Nueva España.

The celebrated march of Hernán Cortés from Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz to the Aztec capital was punctuated by systematic destruction of shrines, temples, and other ceremonial paraphernalia, as well as the attempt to establish Christian symbols and structures in their places. Consider, for a moment, the amusing scene of Cortés's arrival at Tenochtitlan, as recorded by his faithful sergeant, Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Soon after the arrival of Spanish troops, the Aztec *tlatoani* Moctezuma Xocoyotzin invited Cortés and his inner circle of officers and priests to visit the Great Temple located in the heart of the city. Díaz del Castillo writes: "Let us leave this and return to our Captain, who said to Fray Bartolomé de Olmedo, who happened to be nearby him: 'It seems to me Señor Padre, that it would be a good thing to throw a feeler to Montezuma as to whether he would allow us to build our church here'; and the Padre replied that it would be a good thing if it were successful, but it seemed to him that it was not quite a suitable time to speak about it, for Montezuma did not appear to be inclined to so do such a thing."¹⁶ In the end, Moctezuma's inclinations mattered little, because the stones of the pyramid on which this scene allegedly took place were used to build the great cathedral of New Spain located fifty yards from this spot. The spiritual conquest of the Mexican kingdom was partially

expeditions to Mexico would turn out, and time would show us what we ought to do in the matter, that for the present the warnings we had given them were sufficient, together with the setting up of the cross" (Bernard Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* [New York, 1956], p. 180).

¹⁵ Quoted in Arthur J. O. Anderson, "Sahagún's Nahuatl Texts as Indigenist Documents," *Estudios de cultura Nahuatl* 2 (1960): 31-42, quote on p. 33.

¹⁶ Castillo, p. 219.

accomplished by the destruction of the material containers and images of that native spirit.

In the decades immediately following the fall of Tenochtitlan, another strategy concerning the Aztec religion and its images operated in the minds of the colonizers. Along with the energetic campaign to eliminate idolatrous documents, there developed a movement to collect, reproduce, and interpret the indigenous iconographic tradition in such a way as to ensure the effective conversion of the natives who had so abruptly become part of Spanish colonial society. This approach was informed by the discovery that the Aztec culture contained noble, trustworthy, and beautiful elements which could be "raised to the level of the culture" of New Spain. It was also informed by the discovery that the initial mass baptisms and conversions boisterously celebrated by the Spanish church were superficial and ineffective at changing the beliefs of the Aztec survivors. This second approach was expressed through a "patronage system" which developed a sizable body of European-style and mixed European- and native-style documents which contained genuine pre-Columbian materials. It is imperative for the historian of religions seeking to understand the world of the ancient American city to know the complex and colonial context for much of the evidence. Perhaps the finest and most trustworthy example of this approach is the work of Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan missionary who claimed that in order to change the religious attitudes and beliefs of the Indians, it was necessary to know what was being changed. In time, Sahagún himself, who spent over sixty years in the new world, was changed and wrote his massive *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* "to understand the excellence of the Mexican people which has not yet been known."¹⁷

¹⁷ This patronage approach resulted in the establishment of elementary, technical, and high schools which trained and educated Indians in the Spanish cultural traditions and produced some trilingual students who could read and converse in Spanish, Latin, and Nahuatl. This approach also demonstrated some respect for indigenous notions and cultural practices. Examples of this respect are the *Catechism de la doctrina Christiana*, which was printed in picture writing familiar to the Indians, and a devotional book written in Nahuatl and pictographs. But it must be said that whether it was the fires of Zumárraga or the fires of Sahagún's mind and conscience, all of the friars shared the goal of changing the social world through a change in the Aztec symbolic and religious world. For an exceptional analysis of Sahagún's contribution to the understanding of Nahuatl culture examine Munroe Edmonson, ed., *Sixteenth Century Mexico, the Work of Sahagún* (Albuquerque, N. Mex., 1974). This invaluable monograph contains a variety of articles by an international collection of scholars on such aspects of Sahagún's work as his research methods, the treatment of architecture in the Florentine Codex, the discoveries he made concerning Aztec medicine, and the social context and its influence on the twelve-volume opus. See also the intense analysis of Sahagún's work in *Handbook*, 13: 138-240.

Sahagún's efforts sought to preserve the ancient traditions, or at least reflections of the ancient traditions, which could be used in a handbook for the active clergy to ensure their alert identification of the persistence of idolatry and its elimination. His methods, known today as the "interview-round-table agreement method,"¹⁸ and his results were an ingenious mechanism for gaining access to and taking control of the content and transformation of the ancient thought system. The creation of New Spain through the acculturation of the Indian depended in part on this documentary control.

But there was another motive behind the creation of new documents in the native and acculturated styles, and this was to produce documents "more satisfying to the Europeans and make them more readable to one not versed in the native traditions." Sixteenth-century European society was very curious, indeed, fascinated by the New World, and some circles developed a taste for "reading" documents from New Spain. As a result there was an effort to produce more satisfying and more "readable" documents about and by the American Indian.¹⁹ This resulted in the limited but enthusiastic promotion of Indian painters, still conversant with the pre-Conquest picture-writing tradition, to reproduce picture books which would attract and please European eyes. Thus, a series of post-Conquest picture books were produced, which Donald Robertson has analyzed in terms of "schools" of style and content.

¹⁸ This method depended on two types of documents and three kinds of people. The documents were a questionnaire constructed by Sahagún, and native pre- and post-Conquest picture books. The participants were (a) Sahagún, (b) his native trilingual students, and (c) elderly native informants and interpreters who had lived in the pre-Conquest society and could recount the older traditions. The questionnaire aimed at opening up, in an orderly fashion, the minds of the "best equipped living informants interpreting picture books in their accustomed pattern" (Luis Nicolau D'Olivera and Howard F. Cline, "Sahagún and His Works," in *Handbook*, 13:188). Though Sahagún was after the currently held ideas of the natives, the honored traditions of the past came flooding through the responses of the informants. This method was used in three different centers in the central plateau during his ten years of research. He cross-checked his data "in such a manner," he says, "that the first sieve through which my work was sifted was Tepepulco, the second Tlatelolco and the third Mexico." Thus, the direction of the information was from Sahagún's questionnaire to native informants interpreting picture books and oral traditions, speaking to "colonized" scribes recording the responses in Nahuatl and later in Spanish. Finally, Sahagún gathered all this information and edited it into a series of documents which were ultimately integrated into the Florentine Codex. Howard Cline has mapped this intricate evolution. It is sufficient to note that the final thirteen volumes were completed in Nahuatl in 1569. This first complete document was lost, but fortunately, two bilingual copies (Spanish and Nahuatl) were made before the disappearance of this basic source.

¹⁹ This process of Europeanization makes it difficult for us to always separate neatly pre- from post-Conquest content and influence in the existing primary sources. But it is evident that some post-Conquest materials carry the pictorial style, content, and symbolic patterns of the indigenous culture in such a way that they are of greater value to the researcher than some pre-Conquest material.

The greatest patron of the native artists was the Viceroy of Mexico, Don Antonio de Mendoza, an enthusiastic collector of native "curios." Called by one scholar a "Renaissance Maecenas," he noted that the ravages of the conquest had destroyed countless native artifacts and had effaced the craft traditions which generated them. He responded by hiring native artists and establishing them in workshops where they could fabricate such "curios" for himself and the King of Spain.²⁰ One of the most beautiful and revealing pictorial documents composed under his patronage was the Codex Mendoza (1541-45), which consists of seventy-one folios bound at the spine in the manner of European books, but done largely in the native style. Picture pages alternate with the Spanish translation. This magnificent document is divided into three sections: (a) the pre-Columbian history of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, beginning with its foundation and recounting the wars and conquests of its kings, through to 1523; (b) a colorful account of the tribute paid to the capital by the 400 towns in the five regions of the empire; and (c) a pictorial account of the life cycle of the common man. The document was originally composed for the King of Spain, Charles V, known as "the king of two worlds, whose address was Spain," as an example "of the strange and the rare, of the arts of the natives of the new world, to explain Mexico to their King across the sea."²¹

The codex was probably painted by the "maestro de pinturas," Francisco Gualpuyogualcal, who copied it from one or several pre-Columbian manuscripts "now lost." It was translated into Spanish by either Juan Gonzalez of the cathedral of Mexico, a *nahuatlato*²² of great repute, or by J. Martin Jacobita, a student of Sahagún, who had attended the school set up by the Franciscans to train Indians in Spanish classical education, El Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlaltelolco. The interpretation of the pictorial material was full of elaborations, as the Spanish translation includes a great deal of information not directly communicated by the

²⁰ For a detailed and inspired analysis of the persistence and transformation of pre-Columbian pictorial traditions, see Donald Robertson's *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period: The Metropolitan Schools* (New Haven, Conn., 1959). Much of the following discussion on the history and nature of the Codex Mendoza is based on Robertson's fine work.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 2.

²² A "nahuatlato" is an expert translator of the Nahuatl language. This type of individual was thoroughly bilingual and functioned in a variety of ways in Nueva España. Nahuatlato translated Nahuatl speeches by Aztec priests for Spanish officials, interpreted pictorial signs, and assisted in the endless court cases which took place in the colonial period, quite often over land disputes. While there were many other Indian languages in Mexico, they were usually translated into Nahuatl before being translated into Spanish.

pictures. Whomever the translator from picture into script was, it is clear that the informants interpreting the pictograms and ideograms argued hard over some images, because the translator noted that controversy left him only ten days to complete the manuscript prior to the ship's departure for the Spanish court. Alas, this high destiny was rudely interrupted by French pirates who attacked the Spanish ship on the high seas and took, among other things, the codex and turned it over to the French court, where it became the companion of André Thevet, the royal cosmographer. Thevet was so excited by the document that he wrote his name and title on it five times. In 1553 he became friends with Richard Hakluyt and gave it to the English navigator. Soon it was given to Samuel Purchas, who translated and published the first section of it in *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas, His Pilgrimes*, calling it "the choicest of my jewels." Finally it came into the possession of John Selden, the English jurist who donated it to the Bodleian library at Oxford, where it sits today.

THE IMAGE

Our eyes are drawn to the opening folio of the codex, described by Donald Robertson as a map or symbolic representation of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan (see fig. 1). Beginning with the borders, we see that temporal signs frame the city and the significant acts below. Thevet's extravagant signature and title fill the gap at top left. The year count begins with the sign for "2 house" immediately to the left of the signature, continues down and around in a counter-clockwise fashion, and ends at the top with the year sign "13 reed." We know from scholarship that the life of the society was likewise framed by intricate intermeshing calendrical systems. Without going into the details of this pattern here, let me orient our investigation by noting the elevated sign, near the bottom right-hand corner, which is added by a slender dark thread to the year sign "2 reed."²³ This year sign, third from bottom right, is bound by a white knot. The elevated sign is a fire-drilling glyph signifying that this year marked the end of a fifty-two-year cycle, a period similar to our notion of a "century." It was at the end of

²³ Throughout this section, I am following the explanation of the pictographs and ideographs, which is found in the narrative part of the Mendoza and Robertson's analysis. A fine English version of the Mendoza exists: *Codex Mendoza: The Mexican Manuscript Known as the Collection of Mendoza and Preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford*, trans. James Cooper Clark, 3 vols. (London, 1938).

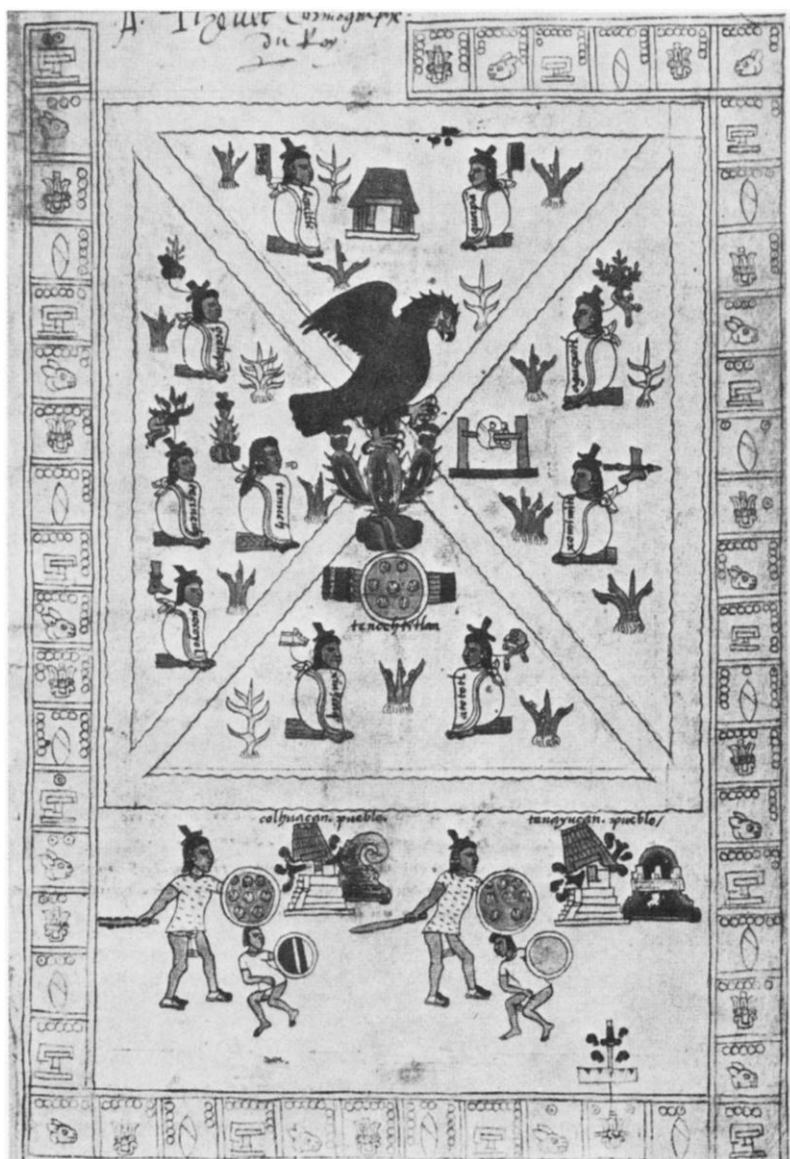


FIG. 1.—Frontispiece to the Codex Mendoza

this year that the extremely important "New Fire Ceremony"²⁴ was held to initiate a new and secure time period for the civilization. The central ceremonial act was the drawing of a new fire on the chest of a captured warrior, who was then sacrificed through heart extraction. The fire born on the sacrificial victim was then carried to all parts of the city and surrounding towns.

Within this temporal frame, the city appears as a large rectangle with stylized blue borders representing the waters of Lake Tezococo. Two blue intersecting lines, apparently representing canals, divide the city into four quarters. Within these four parts, we see various forms of vegetation, a skull rack,²⁵ the image of the town house or place of speaking, and ten men seated on mats, who represent the ten leaders chosen at the beginning of the city's existence. To demonstrate a few aspects of this iconographic tradition and to take us further into the map, I will translate two of these human images. The figure to the left of the large cactus in the center is the most prominent leader. He is distinguished by a blue speech glyph in front of his mouth signifying that he is the chief speaker of the new settlement. The mat on which he sits is finely woven, while the other figures sit on bundles of green reeds. This signifies that he is "lord of the mat" and occupies the place of authority. His elevation above the others is further marked by the elaborate

²⁴ At the end of a fifty-two-year cycle, the permutations of the several calendar systems were exhausted and a large ceremony was held which functioned to help "the years to burst into life" (Florentine Codex, 7:25). This ceremony, called the "Binding of the Years" and "When the Years Are Bound," initiated another calendar round of stability and motion. All the fires in the capital and the surrounding communities were put out, pots were broken, and houses swept clean. Then, on a high summit near the city, following a solemn and sacred procession led by fire priests, a new fire was drawn on the chest of a sacrificial victim. The relevant text reads, "Thus it was said; it was claimed that if the fire could not be drawn then (the sun) would be destroyed forever: all would be ended; there would evermore be night. Nevermore would the sun come forth. Night would prevail forever. . . . They drew it (the fire) upon the breast of a captive and it was a well-born one on whose breast (the priest) bored the fire drill. And when a little fire fell, when it took flame, then speedily (the priest) slashed open the breast of the captive, seized his heart, and quickly cast it into the fire." The fire was then taken to the temple of Huitzilopochtli. Then the fire was carried to the priestly schools, then to the other temples of the ceremonial center, then out to all the quarters and barrios of the city and to other cities of the realm.

²⁵ The skull rack, or "Tzompantli," was a permanent part of the Aztec ceremonial center. It was, according to Diego Durán's informants, "a finely carved palisade as tall as a great tree. Poles were set in a row, about six feet apart. All these thick poles were drilled with small holes, and the holes were so numerous that there was scarcely a foot and a half between them. . . . From pole to pole, through the holes, stretched thin rods strung with numerous human heads pierced through the temple. Each rod held twenty heads. . . . One of the conquerors assured me that they were so numerous that they were impossible to count, so close together that they caused fright and wonder" (Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, trans. and ed. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden [Norman, Okla., 1975], p. 79).

arrangement of his hair, set in the style of a high priest. This status is likewise marked by the red design around his left ear, denoting bloodletting. His name is expressed by the thin line attached to the sign above and behind him, which is a blooming cactus growing from a stylized rock. This translates as "Tenoch," written "tenuch" on the front of his white garment. In contrast, the man above and behind him, more simply groomed and smaller in size, has the name sign of a blue reed emerging from the head of a rabbit, translating as "Acacitl," or "hare of the grass reed."²⁶

All these signs surround the central image, which shows a huge blooming cactus growing from a stylized rock. This is the place sign for the city, Tenochtitlan. On it an eagle has landed, signifying the arrival of the Aztecs in the form of the hummingbird god of war and the foundation of the city. Below this sign of the city's origin, almost supporting the rock, is a large Aztec war shield with seven eagle-down feathers and seven spears attached. This is the sign for authority and government. The entire central image can be translated as "Tenochtitlan has been founded and is the seat of authority."

Now, as a way of gaining a significant advantage into the meaning of this rich image of Aztec origins and spatial order, I will return to Wheatley's discussion of city and symbol in traditional urbanism.

²⁶ Continuing counterclockwise below Acacitl (the interpreter has mistakenly written "Ocelopan") are (1) Metzineuh (the interpreter wrongly writes "Tecineuh") (the sign is a human rump attached to a maguey plant, meaning "he has rooted up"); (2) Xocoyol (the sign is a foot with a bell around it, the ideograph for Xocoyolli meaning "wood sorrel"); (3) Xiuheacui (the sign is a turquoise-blue sandal, the ideograph for caque meaning "shod"); (4) Atototl (the sign is a bird with a watery necklace, the ideograph for "the king of the water fowl"); (5) Xomimitl (the sign is a pictograph for "pierced foot"); (6) Avexotl (the sign is a willow branch attached to the sign for water, meaning "water willow"); (7) Quepan (the sign is a pictograph of "eagle banner"); (8) Ocelopan (the pictograph translates as "ocelot banner"). In classifying the "writing" system used by the Aztecs, it is helpful to refer to I. J. Gelb's lucid *A Study of Writing* (Chicago, 1963). It appears that in the case of the Mendoza we are dealing with what Gelb calls a semasiographic system of writing, which consists principally of two types of messages. First we have pictographs, where the images of the objects referred to are used singly or in a series to tell something in general terms. Charles Dibble writes concerning this method of communication, "Animals, plants, birds, mountains, streams and trees are recognizable as such; the scenes depicted are comparable to photographs of dances, processions, self castigation, sacrifice or battles. Gods, goddesses or priests and common people are recognizable by their actions, their postures, their clothing, painting and hairdress" ("Writing in Central Mexico," in *Handbook*, 10:324). Second we have ideographic pictures in which images of objects stand for ideas associated with the images. For instance, a picture of a flower can represent a flower in the case of the pictograph, while in the case of the ideograph it means sacrificial blood. Likewise, a bundle of reeds may mean a bundle of reeds, as in a pictograph, but it means the typing up of a fifty-two-year cycle as an ideograph. Often both pictograph and ideograph occur on the same page in a codex and appear to be of equal antiquity.

According to Wheatley, cosmo-magical consciousness was generally expressed in a world view which (a) saw the "real" powers of the cosmos as transcending "the pragmatic realm of textures and geometrical spaces," and one which (b) demanded that human beings, if they wished to participate in that reality, strive to bring the human social order into harmony and coordination with the divine society of the gods, and vice versa. By this I mean that in Wheatley's perception it is not basically a matter of imitating the archetype, a given structure, for this participation involves a process of discovery, an intricate analysis of cosmological forms, parts, patterns, interlocking conformities and incongruities, and the construction of a model of this discovery and analysis. More than imitation is at work here. Human beings in the ancient city understood their society to exist within what Jonathan Z. Smith calls a mythic-cosmic setting,²⁷ or, to borrow Cornelius Loew's term, the ancients practiced a "cosmological conviction." According to Wheatley, this cosmo-magical conviction consisted of a complex of ideas "which presupposed an intimate parallelism between the regular and mathematically expressible regimes of the heavens and the biologically determined rhythms of life on earth as manifested in the succession of the seasons, the annual cycles of plant regeneration and, within the compass of an individual life, birth, growth, and procreation and death."²⁸ Wheatley, who utilizes the works of Mircea Eliade and Rene Berthelot in this regard, is eager to point out the sense of confidence that early urban societies displayed in being able to regulate a tight fit between the patterns of the heavens and the pattern of society. He notes:

It must be emphasized at the outset, albeit perhaps supererogatively, that the various models of this kind which provided frameworks for the evaluation of spatial significance in the past were not simple-minded attempts by unsophisticated men of an earlier age to explain the causality of natural and human phenomena, but rather protosciences whose central objective was to demonstrate the unity of all existence. They were not "primitive," in the sense of undifferentiated thought systems as Levy-Bruhl employed that term, but often magnificent exemplars of associative, or coordinative thinking, utilizing a logic no whit less rigorous in its own way than that of contemporary science. Nor were the intellectuals who elucidated and elaborated them fanciful dreamers. Rather they were organizers of knowledge, codifiers, builders of systems, men who shared a corporate consuming passion for distinction, definition, and formalization, who conceived a universe

²⁷ See Jonathan Z. Smith's illuminating essay on rebellion and cosmic order, "Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up" (*History of Religions* 9, no. 4 [1970]: 281-303), for the elaboration of the meaning of this term.

²⁸ Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, p. 414.

ordered so precisely that, to borrow a metaphor from one of the Chinese exponents of this style of thought, one could not insert a hair between the parts.²⁹

This pattern of thinking, with its confidence in tight parallelism, was expressed in at least three aspects of spatial organization in the traditional city: the symbolism of the center, its cardinal axiality, and its architectural parallelism between macrocosmos and microcosmos. Wheatley notes that in the seven areas of primary urban generation there was a tendency to dramatize the cosmology by reproducing on earth a reduced version of the cosmos in which "terrestrial space is initially generated by and subsequently structured about, an existentially centered point of ontological transition between cosmic planes,"³⁰ an axis mundi, a center. This central point becomes the quintessential sacred precinct and is usually marked by the construction of a special ritual building. In this ritual construction and in a ritual return to this central point, people gain access to the source and flow of "reality" in the world. This symbolism of the center or "center oriented construct," as S. J. Tambiah terms the ancient city, is joined to techniques of spatial orientation which attempt to align the major causeways, thoroughfares, or sections of a capital city with the cardinal compass directions of the universe, "thus assimilating the group's territory to the cosmic order and constructing a sanctified living space or habitabilis within the continuum of profane space."³¹ These four guiding highways, which emerge from the central ceremonial precinct, the theater of sacred ritual, act as centripetal and centrifugal guides, magnetizing the sacred and social energies into the center and diffusing the supernatural and royal powers outward into the kingdom. This centering and cardinal orientation, these attempts to coordinate supernatural forces and social forces, are also elaborated plastically, that is, when a city or its ceremonial center not only "marks the spot" and controls the lines of force,

²⁹ Paul Wheatley, "The Suspended Pelt: Reflections on a Discarded Model of Spatial Structure," mimeographed (Chicago, 1975), p. 2. I quote this passage at length because it gives a different sense of the intellectual and spiritual enterprise involved in the construction of sacred space than the one implied when we utilize language like "imitation of the archetype." In Wheatley's formulation, the implication is clearly that the archetype is discovered but also constructed; it reveals itself but it is also mapped. Perhaps the notion of analogy is useful here. Man constructs the "analogy" and utilizes the active intellect and spiritual creativity to agree, imitate, and construct a resemblance of something which is both similar to and different from himself. Parallelism involves doing and interpreting a paradox.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*

but actually represents and signifies in its design and structure a cosmic struggle, a myth or divine drama.³²

Having looked briefly at these three aspects of urban spatial order articulated by Wheatley, let us now turn back to the frontispiece of the Mendoza and related materials to see if and where these elements of cosmo-magical thought are reflected.

THE FOUNDATION OF HEAVEN

As an Aztec poem reveals, the city of Tenochtitlan was considered a majestic place.

Proud of itself
Is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan
Here no one fears to die in war
This is our glory
This is Your Command
Oh Giver of Life
Have this in mind, oh princes
Who would conquer Tenochtitlan?
Who could shake the foundation of heaven?³³

The city was eulogized as a proud, invincible place, the center which linked the world of men with the Giver of Life—"the foundation of heaven." This line becomes more significant when we realize that the Aztecs conceived of their cosmos as containing three superimposed sections: the heavens, the surface of the earth, and the underworld. The written sources speak of thirteen heavenly layers, nine layers to the underworld and the surface of the earth in between, surrounded by a disc of seawater rising to the heavens like a wall. The city, as the foundation of this vertical cosmos, was appreciated as the axis mundi of the universe, the place through which the Giver of Life sent his commands for courage and conquest, as well as the point of communication to the underworld. The idea that Tenochtitlan was also considered to be the center of horizontal space is reflected in the comment by Diego Durán's informants that the capital was "the root, the navel, and the heart of this

³² Wheatley's model emphasizes the structuring of terrestrial space "in the image of celestial space" and that these two types of space are related by the exact sequences of ritual and worship. But it is important to emphasize that in the Mesoamerican evidence there is great attention given to the dynamics of space—the use of space for ritual dynamics which choreograph the motions and energies of celestial phenomena. Aztec cities were great theaters of motion, color, sound, and gesture. Even as we look at the image from the Mendoza we are impressed with movement as well as with space. The plants are growing, the waters rippling, the speaker, speaking, and the eagle landing. While Wheatley's work mentions this characteristic of ceremonial centers, much more needs to be done to understand the relationship of space and ceremonial motion.

³³ Quoted in Miguel León-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (Norman, Okla., 1968), p. 87.

whole worldly order.”³⁴ Most relevant for our consideration of parallelism is the fact that the city was founded through a prophecy, an omen. It was a promised land, promised by heaven. The key image of this prophecy appears in the center of the frontispiece, where a giant eagle is landing or has landed on the blooming cactus growing from the rock. While a number of versions of this founding event appear in the sources, I will utilize Diego Durán’s account found in volume 1 of *Historia de las indias de Nueva Espana Y islas de tierra firme*. Durán’s informants told him of the legend that Huitzilopochtli, the hummingbird god of war, appeared in a dream to the shaman priest of the wandering Chichimec tribes and commanded him to lead them to a place where a cactus was growing from a rock, upon which a giant eagle would be perched. This was to be the place of their new community, and at this very spot a city will arise, “which will be queen and lady of all the others of the earth, and where we will receive all other kings and lords and to which they will come as to one supreme among all the others.”³⁵ The text goes on to say that when the omen was sighted the people rejoiced and in a flurry of excitement built the first shrine to Huitzilopochtli, a shrine of reeds, grasses, and wood. This foundation myth, reflected in our image, states that the site for their city was divinely ordained, and that the city was not merely their new center but a royal city, the center to which all other peoples would come “as to one supreme among all the others.”

Another version of the city’s founding tells that one of the priests who saw the eagle dived into the lake and disappeared. When he failed to surface, his companions thought that he had drowned and they returned to their camp. Soon, the priest returned and announced that he had descended into the Rain God Tlaloc’s underworld, communicated with the deity, and was granted permission for the Mexica to settle in this sacred place. This shows that a true axis mundi, an opening to both the celestial and underworld realms, was ordained by the sun god and the water god of the earth. It was to be, as the place sign suggests, the center of authority on the horizontal plane as well as the vertical.

In a recent publication on Aztec urban life, Sonia Lombardo de Ruiz notes that the Templo Mayor, the great pyramid on which Cortés stood and made that fanatical request in 1519, was located at the site of the original shrine constructed on the day the Mexica

³⁴ Diego Durán, *Historia de las indias de Nueva España y islas de tierra firme*, 2 vols. (Mexico City, 1867), 2:343.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:39.

arrived at their promised location.³⁶ During the 200 years of the city's existence, an elaborate ceremonial center flourished around this shrine. It included numerous monumental structures, including schools, a ball court, a skull rack, temples to major deities, schools, and administrative buildings, all surrounded by a ten-foot-high serpent wall. This central area became the sacred center of not only the city but the empire as well. It continued to be the most sacred precinct of the city throughout an eccentric history of alliances and wars. Such centering is reflected in the alternate name for the capital, "Cem Anáhuac Tenocha Tlalpan," which means "The world is Tenocha territory." Thus, Tenochtitlan was appreciated as the point of ontological transition, the center of the political world, the pivot of the territory and cosmos. The multiple character of this centeredness extends to the relation of the city to the geography of Mexico, for as Octavio Paz has noted, the country "spreads out in pyramidal form as if there existed a secret but evident relationship between the latter and what I have called an invisible history. . . . If Mexico is a truncated pyramid, the valley of Anáhuac is the platform of that pyramid. And in the center of that valley stands Mexico City, the ancient Mexico-Tenochtitlan, seat of Aztec power."³⁷ The persistence of the image of Tenochtitlan's foundation and its function as a symbolic center is seen in the modern flag of Mexico, which has a version of the emblem pictured in the Mendoza in its middle section.

CARDINAL AXIALITY

Our image shows that the space of the city was divided into four parts, suggesting that the city was laid out to conform to the four directions of the compass. In his article "The Internal Structure of Tenochtitlan," Edward E. Calnek summarizes the present archaeological consensus on the spatial layout of the Aztec capital. "Tenochtitlan (but not Tlatelolco) was divided into four great quarters, marked off by four avenues that extended in the cardinal directions from the gates of the ceremonial complex."³⁸ According to one primary source, this spatial order was dictated by the deity who founded the city, Huitzilopochtli. The text reads that the god ordered the priest to "divide the men, each with his relatives, friends and relations in four principle barrios, placing at

³⁶ Sonia Lombardo de Ruiz, *Desarrollo urbano de México Tenochtitlan* (Mexico City, 1973).

³⁷ Octavio Paz, *The Other Mexico* (New York, 1974), p. 84.

³⁸ Edward Calnek, "The Internal Structure of Tenochtitlan," in *The Valley of Mexico*, ed. Eric Wolf (Albuquerque, N. Mex., 1976), p. 296.

the center the house you have built for my rest.”³⁹ The divine command is to lay out the new settlement on the model of the horizontal cosmos of the four directions, assimilating the form of the city to the form of the four quadrants which constitute the cosmos. Friedrich Katz notes that this spatial order was formerly achieved following the coronation of the first Aztec King, Acamapichtli, when the Aztec elites gave their four sectors the name “Nauchampa,” meaning the four directions of the wind. It is clear from archaeological evidence and other relevant maps that the city was divided by four major highways which crossed at the foot of the Templo Mayor and which drove straight and hard out of the heart of the city, passing through the coatepantli, or serpent wall. We must emphasize that these symbolic roads had a total impact on life in the city. As Jorge Hardoy, an urban geographer who has studied this city, notes, “These two streets, converging on the solid ground of the original island, were continuations of the causeways which served the dual purpose of crossing the lake and avoiding the swampy chinampa areas. The causeways not only connected the city with the mainland towns but also acted as dikes to contain floods, and to determine the direction of the city’s major streets and canals.”⁴⁰

In Aztec cosmology, the earth was imagined as a great cross, or a flower with four petals with a green stone bead at the center. This four-quartered universe is pictured in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, where the cosmos is divided into four precisely defined sections of space organized by sacred trees, deities, birds, and appropriate colors.⁴¹ Tenochtitlan’s four-quartered organization was an image of this cosmic scheme.

³⁹ Durán, *Historia de las indias*, 1:42.

⁴⁰ Jorge Hardoy, *Pre-Columbian Cities* (New York, 1973), p. 176.

⁴¹ A thorough analysis of the Aztec use of the pattern of four quadrants can be found in León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought*, pp. 44–50. My research shows that the influence of the four-cornered universe on the layout of the ceremonial precincts is much older than Aztec culture. For instance, in the tenth-century Toltec capital of Tollan Xicocotitlan, from whom the Aztecs claimed their legitimate right to rule Mexico, we find the construction of major ritual buildings modeled on the cardinal points of the compass. The relevant texts read, “He the Prince, I-Reed Quetzalcoatl, built his house as four: house of turquoise, house of redshell, house of white-shell, house of precious feathers. There he worshipped did his penance and also fasted” (quoted in John Bierhorst, *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature* [New York, 1974], p. 26). And excerpts from an extended and breathtaking description of Tollan, found in book 10 of the Florentine Codex, read, “Wherefore was it called a Tolteca house? It was built with consummate care, majestically designed; it was the place of worship of their priest whose name was Quetzalcoatl; it was quite marvelous. It consisted of four (abodes). One was facing east; this was the house of gold. . . . One was facing west, toward the setting sun; this was the house of green stone, the house of fine turquoise. . . . One was facing south, toward the irrigated lands. . . . One was facing north, toward the plains, toward the spear house” (Florentine Codex, 10:166).

Calnek goes on to note elsewhere in his article that each of the city's four quarters was a replication of the larger image of centeredness in that each quarter had its own central temple complex which housed the deities of the groups who inhabited that quarter of the city. A marketplace and administrative center were part of each quarter's central precinct. Thus, each quarter had its own sacred pivot, reproducing the image of the center which dominated the city as a whole.

This pattern of centering was further duplicated in the many barrios of each quarter, each of which had a local ceremonial precinct consisting of a temple, a small market, and a school. Calnek writes that

The barrios—conceived as territorial units—were marked by a structure that housed the patron deities of the group. This structure was evidently part of a large complex that also included a *telpochcalli* (young man's house) and in most or all cases, a plaza or market. . . . In addition to providing the locus for public and private rituals dedicated to local deities, the temple was also the meeting place for barrio elders and the focal point for large ceremonies organized by occupationally specialized groups. It provided, in short, a kind of civic center in relation to which the social identities of the greater part of the urban population were most immediately expressed, and additionally, where a great variety of activities essential to the urban neighborhood were conducted.⁴²

Recent research suggests that the Aztec practice of cardinal orientation went far beyond the ordering of space to include the ordering of the tribute system which, as Katz has shown, sustained the entire city. In her seminal article, "El tributo en trajes guerreros y la estructura del sistema tributario Mexica," Johanna Broda utilizes the abundant evidence concerning tribute patterns of warriors' uniforms sent to Tenochtitlan (found in part 2 of the Codex Mendoza) to demonstrate that the Mexica organized their tribute system into five great regions corresponding to the five major directions (north, west, south, east, and the center) in order to conform to their view of cosmic order. She speculates that the influence of cosmo-magical thought extended into the palatial structure of Moctezuma which, the Mendoza reveals, was divided into five principal rooms.⁴³ The Mendoza also shows that the apex of Aztec government consisted of Moctezuma at the center of power with four counselors assisting his royal judgments. Thus

⁴² Calnek, p. 297.

⁴³ Johanna Broda, "El tributo en trajes guerreros y la estructura del sistema tributario Mexica," in *Economía, política e ideología en el México prehispánico*, ed. Pedro Carrasco and Johanna Broda (Mexico City, 1978).

we can see that the Aztec perception of their universe as a four-cornered cosmos significantly influenced not only the spatial structure of their city but also the order of their tribute system, the image of the royal palace, and the balance of their government.

COYOLXAUHQUI: THE DISMEMBERED GODDESS

The third aspect of cosmomagical thought is the maintenance of harmony between the spheres through construction of ritual buildings which represent a myth or cosmic struggle in its shape, form, and interrelated parts. Recent excavations in Mexico City's central plaza have uncovered a stunning example of the architectural attempt to tell the divine drama of the birth of the god of war, Huitzilopochtli. In February of 1978 electrical workers putting down lines in the early morning uncovered a ten-ton magnificently sculptured circular stone with the image of the dismembered body of Coyolxauhqui carved on it. As a result of this discovery, Proyecto Templo Mayor was initiated to excavate the foundation of the great pyramid. A myth helps us to understand the meaning of this image and the relationship it has to our theme. Briefly, the story of Huitzilopochtli is this.⁴⁴ On Snake Mountain, Coatlicue (Lady of the Serpent Skirt), mother of the gods, was performing penance by sweeping out the temple. A ball of feathers "descended upon her" and she placed it in her bosom. Later, she could not find it and realized that she was pregnant. Her daughter Coyolxauhqui became furious. She "was as if bursting her heart" and "greatly excited and aroused" the 400 other children to attack and kill their mother. Coatlicue was frightened, but a voice spoke to her from her womb telling her to "have no fear, already I know what I must do." Coatlicue was consoled, but Coyolxauhqui and the others "dressed themselves in war array with paper crowns, nettles, painted paper streamers and bells and rushed" Serpent Mountain to attack. Just at the moment of attack, Huitzilopochtli sprang from her womb fully dressed as a warrior, grabbed a serpent of fire, charged Coyolxauhqui, and cut off her head. The text states that "her body went falling below and it went crashing to pieces in various places her arms, her legs, her body kept falling." Huitzilopochtli then chased the 400 brothers and sisters to exhaustion and destroyed them, taking "them into his destiny."

Interpreted variously as the rising sun which vanquishes the moon and stars, the rising of the Aztec era defeating all other eras

⁴⁴ Florentine Codex, 3:1-4.

and peoples, and the story of particular social groups, this myth is clearly represented in the parts and relationship of parts of the Templo Mayor. This structure consisted of a huge pyramid base with large stairways leading up to two temples, one to Huitzilopochtli and one to the rain god, Tlaloc. The Coyolxauhqui stone was found directly at the base of the stairway leading up to the temple of Huitzilopochtli. On both sides of it, completing the bottom of the stairway's sides, are two large serpent's heads, suggesting that the pyramid is a model of Serpent Mountain. Huitzilopochtli's temple has triumphed at the top, while the sculptured body of his sister lies dismembered at the bottom. This image of dismemberment was vividly repeated in some of the offerings to the temple uncovered as the excavations progressed. Around the Coyolxauhqui stone were found a number of offerings containing the decapitated skulls of young women, suggesting a ritual reenactment of the myth at the dedication of the stone during the latter part of the fifteenth century.⁴⁵ This temple pyramid, located on the spot of the foundation of the city, represents in its structure and the relationship of its prominent parts the dramatic cosmic struggle of Huitzilopochtli's birth. Just as in the emblem of the Codex Mendoza the solar deity is dominating the stone structure beneath. We see a dramatic example of the cosmo-magical parallelism in this most holy of Aztec holies, located at the center of the city where the four cardinal avenues converged.

SYMBOLS FROM THE PERIPHERY

The Templo Mayor, as recent discoveries have shown, was the symbolic container of valuable objects from distant parts of the empire. Over thirty incredible offerings have been uncovered at strategic points around the base of the pyramid which contain sea shells, finely carved masks, sacrificed humans and animals, burial urns, jewelry, and statues. More than 80 percent of these objects are from distant and frontier provinces under Aztec domination. Their presence in the heart of Tenochtitlan displays the attempt by Aztec elites to integrate symbolic and valued objects from the periphery of the Aztec cosmos in their central shrine.

For instance, a number of offerings contain small and large sea shells from the distant coasts. Carefully aligned within the offerings, these fertility symbols, which were also signs of wealth, were sometimes buried with crocodiles and swordfish. While they are

⁴⁵ I visited the excavations during the summer of 1978 and viewed these materials when they became visible and studied them during the restoration process.

clearly part of the attempt to incorporate the fertility powers of the ocean waters, they also demonstrate the Aztec drive to incorporate the edges of their world into the center of the universe.

This integration was repeated in one of the most stunning discoveries to date, the offering of over 200 finely carved masks in one burial at the shrine. These noble, frightening, and awe-inspiring stone faces came from the many cities under Aztec control and were collected as a special tribute payment to the Great Temple for some ceremonial event during the later part of the fifteenth century. Again, valuable objects from Tenochtitlan's frontiers were offered and buried at the world's axis.

OMENS OF CONQUEST

Focusing once more on the Mendoza image, I wish to draw your attention to the action and symbols on the bottom. We see two giant Aztec warriors, identified by their shields, subduing two smaller warriors from neighboring cities. The places of these conquests are identified up above by the two stylized mountains attached to temples. The image on the left shows a bent hill denoting "the place of the bent hill," or Colhuacan. On the right there is a hill surrounded by ramparts, or "the place full of ramparts," meaning Tenayucan. The tipped and smoking temple is the sign for the conquest of the respective city.⁴⁶ The statement here is that when the city's temple falls, the city falls. Even the Spaniards understood this in a way, for as a sign of their victory they dismantled the Templo Mayor and utilized the stones to build their great cathedral. This last example of "fallen temple equals fallen city" reflects the power in Wheatley's statement that cosmo-magical thought was "imprinted on the physiognomy of the city."

It is the experience of the conquest of Mexico to which I now return, having come full circle. When the informants of Sahagún and Muñoz Camargo reported their version of the fall of Tenochtitlan decades after the event, they displayed the persistence of their cosmo-magical thought in a vivid and pathos-filled manner. These valuable reports show that as in the foundation of Tenochtitlan, so in its fiery end, omens communicated a divine destiny. Just as the city was promised, so the end of the city was promised. This sense

⁴⁶ As the translator of the Codex Mendoza notes, this is one of the conventional signs used in the ideographic language of pre-Columbian Mexico to express the conquest of a city. In other codices, this event is expressed in a variety of ways. For instance, in the Zouche Codex, the conquest of a settlement is indicated by an arrow piercing the place-glyph. In the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, the conquest is signified by the pictograph of a captive, painted and stuck with feathers, carrying a paper shield and banner, about to be sacrificed.

of cosmic destiny is illustrated in the first chapter of book 12 of the Florentine Codex, which tells of the appearance of omens of great portent in Mexico. "Here are told the signs which appeared and were seen, when the Spaniards had not yet come here to this land, when they were not yet known to the natives here. When the Spaniards had not arrived by ten years."⁴⁷ It is extremely important to note that this text places the omens prior to the presence of Spaniards in Mexico because it suggests that these Aztecs understood the context of their collapse to be marked by the arrival of celestial signs, not just the arrival of the Spaniards. These signs were apparently seen and feared by the populace of the city, for we are told, "This great marvel caused so much dread and wonder that the people spoke of it constantly." Of the many omens which appeared, I will focus on three to demonstrate the thesis of this paper.

The first omen is described as a "fiery signal, like a flaming ear of corn, or the blaze of daybreak; it seemed to bleed fire, drop by drop, like a wound in the sky." The series of signs opens with the threatening image of a rip in the Aztec universe (Dibble and Anderson translate the passage as "piercing the heavens")—a rip of bleeding fire suggesting the beginning of death in the cosmos that encloses and is centered on the city. Then, however, a more direct hit is described: "The Temple of Huitzilopochtli burst into flames. It is thought that no one set it afire, that it burned down of its own accord. The name of its divine site was Tlacateccan (House of Authority). . . . The flames, the tongues of fire shoot out, the bursts of fire shoot up into the sky. The flames swiftly destroyed all the woodwork of the temple . . . and the temple burned to the ground." The temple of their founding deity, the victorious warrior who slew the darkness, located in the heart of the city, is destroyed, reflecting the image just discussed of the burning and falling temple symbolizing the fall of a city.

Other celestial omens appear, illustrating how the Conquest is clearly placed within a cosmo-magical setting in the Aztec mind. Following Moctezuma's death and near the end of the Spanish siege of Tenochtitlan comes the following scene. Just before the surrender of the city, we read:

At nightfall it began to rain, but it was more like a heavy dew than a rain. Suddenly the omen appeared, blazing like a great bonfire in the sky. It wheeled in enormous spirals like a whirlwind and gave off a show of sparks

⁴⁷ Florentine Codex, 12:1. The following quotes about omens are from Miguel León-Portilla, *The Broken Spears* (Boston, 1972), pp. 4–5.

and red hot coals, some great and some little. It also made loud noises, rumbling and hissing like a metal tube placed over a fire. It circled the wall nearest the lakeshore and then hovered for a while above Coyoacasco. From there it moved out into the middle of the lake where it suddenly disappeared. No one cried out when this omen came into view: the people knew what it meant and they watched in silence.⁴⁸

They knew that the magic of their cosmos had turned against them. This is a glaring example of the cosmo-magical consciousness which interpreted and sustained the Aztec sense of order long after it had been shattered. Thirty years after the Conquest, in a Spanish-run society, Aztec survivors poignantly reaffirm the cosmological conviction lodged in their minds: The collapse of their central city was influenced not primarily by Spanish arms and intentions but by the pattern of their heaven.

There is a strange persistence of all this today, for the center of Mexico has once again magnetized the glances of Mexico's citizens and archaeologists around the world. The Templo Mayor is being excavated as a modern effort to understand an ancient civilization. As Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, the director of excavations, said recently, reflecting our statements about centers and models, "we are not just trying to dig up a big pyramid, we are trying to understand the Aztec empire."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116.