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DOUBLE IMMOLATIONS  
IN ANCIENT MEXICAN  
SACRIFICIAL RITUAL

Human sacrifices were of prime importance in Aztec thought and society. Often described and studied,<sup>1</sup> they still remain badly understood in many respects. My purpose is twofold: first, to define more accurately the deities to which the ordinary sacrifices of prisoners of war were addressed and, second, to show that those immolations were always double, involving both extraction of the heart and decapitation.

Durán describes an ordinary ritual killing of captives as follows:

Surrounded by guards . . . , the victims were forced to ascend to the long platform at the foot of the skull rack—all of them totally nude. A hierarch delegated for this task then came down from the temple. In his arms he carried a small idol which he showed to those who were to die, and, having passed by the entire line of prisoners, he descended from the platform,

<sup>1</sup> On Aztec human sacrifice, see Eduard Seler, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach- und Altertumskunde*, 5 vols. (Berlin, 1902–23). It is somewhat dated but still useful. Some more recent studies are Christian Duverger, *La fleur létale: Economie du sacrifice aztèque* (Paris, 1979); and González Torres, *El sacrificio humano entre los mexicas* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Instituto Nacional de Antropología Historia [INAH], 1985). Michael Harner (“The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice,” *American Ethnologist* 4 [1977]: 117–35) tries to explain human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism by the lack of proteins; this idea is as old as it is fanciful and was first proposed in 1523 when the emperor Charles V suggested importing as much cattle as possible to the New World in order to replace human flesh. Compare Georges Baudot, *Utopie et histoire au Mexique: Les premiers chroniqueurs de la civilisation mexicaine* (Toulouse, 1977).

followed by all. Then he went up to the place where the satanical priests were ready. They seized the victims one by one, one by one foot, another by the other, one priest by one hand, and another by the other hand. The victim was thrown on his back, upon the pointed stone, where the wretch was grabbed by the fifth priest, who placed the yoke upon his throat. The high priest then opened the chest and with amazing swiftness tore out the heart, ripping it out with his own hands. Thus steaming, the heart was lifted toward the sun, and the fumes were offered up to the sun. The priest then turned toward the idol and cast the heart in its face. After the heart had been extracted, the body was allowed to roll down the steps of the pyramid. Between the sacrificial stone and the beginning of the steps there was a distance of no more than two feet.

All the prisoners and captives of war brought from the towns we have mentioned were sacrificed in this manner, until none were left. After they had been slain and cast down, their owners—those who had captured them—retrieved the bodies. They were carried away, distributed, and eaten, in order to celebrate the feast.<sup>2</sup>

The author mentions the usual recipient of those sacrifices, the sun god (Tonatiuh), to whom the palpitating heart was offered. For the heart (*y-oll-otl*) symbolized movement (*oll-in*) and was for this reason the preferred aliment of the Sun.<sup>3</sup> According to a myth of fundamental importance, when after many years of almost complete darkness the sun appeared in heaven for the first time, it refused to move. The world being in danger of burning, the dwellers had to sacrifice themselves and supply the sun with their hearts in order to propel the sun on its daily course. This sacrifice also initiated the alternation of night and day and of rainy season and dry season, the latter an indispensable alternation that prevents the world from being rotted by water or burned by the solar fire. Since this time men have been condemned to wage war and capture sacrificial victims so that the “world machine” be kept going. They have to fight so that time may follow its course and the seasons alternate, so that rain and burned fields may succeed each other. Not surprisingly, war was called “water-burned fields” (*atl tlachinolli*).<sup>4</sup>

The alternation—one is reminded of yin and yang—was essential and human sacrifice its mover. But human sacrifice could not be

<sup>2</sup> Fray Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y Islas de Tierra Firme escrita en el siglo XVI*, ed. A. M. Garibay, 2 vols. (Mexico City, 1967), 1:32–33.

<sup>3</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, *La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes*, Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, Publication no. 26 (Mexico City, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, ed. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, 12 vols. (Santa Fe, N.M.: University of Utah, School of American Research, 1950–69), 7:3–8; *Leyenda de los Soles* (in *Codex Chimalpopoca*, in *Die Geschichte der Königreiche von Colhuacan und Mexico*, ed. Walter Lehmann, Quellenwerke zur Alten Geschichte Amerikas, no. 1

directed to only one of the opposite terms, to the sun god Tonatiuh alone. Earth, associated with the night and the rainy season, also exacted its tribute of victims—and indeed had been doing so for a longer time than the sun. It was told that at the beginning of time, the gods Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcóatl tore the monster Tlaltecuhltli into two pieces, one of which became the earth and the other the heavenly vault. All plants were born from the body of Tlaltecuhltli who at times “cried during the night, desiring to eat hearts of men, and she would not keep silent unless she received some, nor would she bear fruit unless she was moistened with blood of men.”<sup>5</sup> As long as the world was in semidarkness only Earth required immolations of human beings. When Sun rose for first time he also began to demand immolations. The equilibrium of the universe being henceforth secured by the alternation of the two opposing principles, humans had to maintain this equilibrium by nourishing both Sun and Earth. This fact appears very clearly from a passage of the *Leyenda de los Soles*, a mid-sixteenth century Nahuatl chronicle. According to this source, shortly after his first appearance Sun initiated the sacred war by entrusting five persons—notably Mixcoatl, a hunting deity closely related to the morning star—with the killing of 400 Mimixcoa warriors in order to nourish him and Tlaltecuhltli for they were, he added, father and mother of mankind.<sup>6</sup> Those 400 who were exterminated became the prototypes of the prisoners of war to be sacrificed, as shown by their attributes: the “black stellar painting called the night” around their eyes, the red color around their mouths, the chalk stripes covering the body, the down balls on the head, the occipital ornament composed of two heron or eagle feathers, the red leather headband<sup>7</sup>—attributes that are equally those of the warrior victims of sacrifice.<sup>8</sup>

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[Berlin, 1938]], pp. 340–48; Michel Graulich, “Mythes et rites des vingtaines du Mexique Central préhispanique” (Ph.D. diss., Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1979), pp. 106–57.

<sup>5</sup> “Histoire du Mechique: Manuscrit français inédit du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris* 2 (1905): 30–31.

<sup>6</sup> Lehmann, ed., pp. 352–58.

<sup>7</sup> Durán, 1:73; Seler, 1:264–65, 3:240, 3:242, 4:66–67, 4:72–75, 4:84–85; Karl A. Nowotny, *Codex Borbonicus*, vol. 44 of *Codices Selecti* (Graz, 1974), p. 33; Alfonso Caso, *El Pueblo del Sol* (Mexico City, 1953), p. 53; Walter Krickeberg, *Las antiguas culturas mexicanas* (Mexico City, 1964); Hermann Beyer, “Obras completas I: Mito y simbología del México antiguo,” *México Antiguo* 10 (1965): 321–24; Henry B. Nicholson, “Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico,” in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Robert Waichope, 16 vols. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964–76), 10:426.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Sahagún, 2:106; J. Corona Nuñez, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis, Antigüedades de México* (Mexico City, 1964), pls. 18–23, 1:295–305; *Codex Borgia*, ed. Karl A. Nowotny, *Codices Selecti* 58 (Graz, 1976), pp. 19, 21, 50.

Chalk and down (*tizatl*, *ihuitl*) were the most characteristic ornaments: they alone were sufficient to mark a captive doomed to perish on the sacrificial stone. In Soustelle's opinion the white down symbolizes the happy fate of the victim, white being "the colour of the first glimmering of dawn" and therefore "of the first steps of the resuscitated soul, the sacrificial warrior's departure to the heaven."<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Seler interpreted down as representing clouds, while the souls of the dead became messengers of rain.<sup>10</sup> In my opinion, feathers and chalk served essentially to indicate that the victims belonged simultaneously to heaven and earth. Feathers are aerial elements; balls of down were said to be the "clothes of heaven."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, chalk is terrestrial. The ritual consisting in humiliating oneself by eating earth was called "tasting chalk."<sup>12</sup> In the *Popol Vuh* of the Quiché Mayas it is for having eaten a bird covered with chalk that the gigantic Cabracan, made heavy, collapsed and got buried, becoming earth in the earth.<sup>13</sup>

So there are two beneficiaries of the immolations of prisoners of war, Sun and Earth. This fundamental fact has not received due attention from the specialists of ancient Mexican religions. Because most of them feel that ritual killings of captives were only on behalf of the sun deity Tonatiuh, the Aztecs have been called the "People of the Sun." Few are the authors who, like Preuss and sometimes Soustelle, mention the double need of feeding both heaven and earth.<sup>14</sup> Still, the fact is well corroborated by other sources.

If noble,<sup>15</sup> the newborn baby was given weapons and was told:

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Soustelle, *La pensée cosmologique des anciens Mexicains: Représentations du monde et de l'espace* (Paris, 1940), p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Seler, 4:96-97.

<sup>11</sup> Durán, 1:47, and pl. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Sahagun, Ritos, sacerdotes y atavíos de los dioses, ed. M. León-Portilla (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [UNAM], 1958), pp. 50-51; Durán (n. 2 above), 1:147-48.

<sup>13</sup> *The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh of the Quiche Maya of Guatemala*, ed. Munro S. Edmonson, Middle American Research Institute Publication no. 35 (New Orleans, 1971), pp. 56-47.

<sup>14</sup> Konrad T. Preuss, "Die Feuergötter als Ausgangspunkt zum Verständnis der Mexikanischen Religion in ihrem Zusammenhange," *Mitteilungen der Wiener Anthropologischen Gesellschaft* 33 (1903): 188; Jacques Soustelle, *La vie quotidienne des Aztèques à la veille de la conquête espagnole* (Paris, 1955), p. 124. On only the sun as beneficiary, see Seler (n. 1 above), 4:57; Fritz Röck, "Der Sinn der aztekischen Menschenopfer," *Völkerkunde* 1 (1925): 87; Soustelle, *La pensée cosmologique des anciens Mexicains*, p. 21; Caso, *El Pueblo del Sol*, p. 24; Ignacio Bernal, *Tenochtitlan en una Isla*, INAH (Mexico, 1959), p. 129; Krickeberg; Duverger (n. 1 above); Pietro Scarducci, *Gli aztechi e il sacrificio umano* (Turin, 1980), p. 202; Gonzáles Torres (n. 1 above), p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, ed. E. O'Gorman (Mexico, 1962), p. 265; Josefina García Quintana, "El Baño Ritual entre los nahuas según el Códice Florentino," *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 8 (1969): 191.

Thou hast been sent into warfare. War is thy desert, thy task. Thou shalt give drink, nourishment, food to the sun, the lord of the earth. [Corresponding Spanish text: "Tu officio es dar a veuer al sol, con sangre de tus enemigos, y dar de comer a la tierra, que se llama tlaltecutli, con los cuerpos de tus enemigos."] . . . And when war hath stirred, hath formed, it will be introduced into the hands of the eagle warriors, the ocelot warriors, the brave warriors. They go giving it to thy mother, thy father, Tonatiuh, Tlaltecuctli; they go entering into the center, the middle, of the plains. And thereby thou hast been assigned, thou hast been vowed to the sun, to Tlaltecuctli.<sup>16</sup>

The umbilical cord was buried in the battlefield so as to mean that the boy was dedicated to the two deities.<sup>17</sup> Besides, the battlefield was called "the place where Tonatiuh and Tlaltecuctli eat and drink."<sup>18</sup> When a war started, the almighty and tenebrous Tezcatlipoca was addressed in the following terms: "The earth deity opens her mouth thirsty for the blood of humans who will die numerous in this war. One would say that the Sun and the god of the earth called Tlaltecuctli want to rejoice inviting the gods of heaven and hell to eat and drink at a banquet where shall be served flesh and blood of the men who shall perish in this war."<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, men and especially noblemen had been sent down to earth for no other end than providing "food to the sun and the earth with their flesh and their blood."<sup>20</sup> When welcomed with great display in the city after a campaign, the prisoners of war were called "sons of the Sun and the Earth who will devour them."<sup>21</sup> "Sun and Earth" probably also meant the universe, for it was one of those extremely frequent Mexican figures of style, called *difrasismo*, which consisted in designating something by two important aspects. According to Cristóbal del Castillo, the national god of the Mexicas, Huitzilopochtli, told his men that it was their duty to feed all the gods: in other words, the whole universe.<sup>22</sup>

It goes without saying that the historian should always try to take into account as many relevant sources as possible, including

<sup>16</sup> Sahagún (n. 4 above), 6:171–72.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 6:50, 106; Angel Maria Garibay, ed., *Poesía Nahuatl*, 3 vols. (Mexico City, 1964–68), 1:71.

<sup>19</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, ed. A. M. Garibay, 4 vols. (Mexico City, 1956), 2:62–64 (translation mine).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, *Crónica Mexicana precidida del Códice Ramírez*, ed. M. Orozco y Berra (Mexico, 1878), pp. 502, 606, 626; Durán (n. 7 above), 2:169, 182.

<sup>22</sup> Cristóbal del Castillo, *Fragmentos de la obra general sobre historia de los mexicanos, escrita en lengua Náuatl por Cristóbal del Castillo a fines del Siglo XVI*, ed. Fray del Paso y Troncoso (Mexico, 1908), p. 85.

archaeological and iconographical ones. The latter are of particular importance to the historian of religions, for they are often the very visualization of the suprahuman world, they may have played an essential part in cult, and they sometimes allow useful confrontations of fact and discourse.

Iconographical data are especially valuable in Mesoamerica where they actually constitute our primary sources. All the *written* accounts on Central Mexican religion are post-Conquest and relatively late. Our main authorities, for example, the friars Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego Durán, collected their ethnographic data mainly in the second half of the sixteenth century. Their Indian informants' accounts were written down in Nahuatl or in Spanish more than thirty years after the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan and the triumph of Christianity. So Aztec iconographical data are *the main pre-Hispanic sources*. They consist of pictographic books, statues of deities, reliefs, and carved sacrificial vessels that had a definite function to fulfill in ritual and will always be more reliable testimonies than colonial writings of European or europeanized chroniclers, however outstanding these works may be.

The iconography confirms the double destination of warrior immolations. The most striking example is perhaps an engraved thigh-bone from Colhuacan.<sup>23</sup> It represents a warrior in eagle disguise who is about to strike a victim; streams of blood ascend from the victim to the sun and others fall into the mouth of Tlaltecuhli holding hearts in her claws.

The typical stone vessels made to deposit the hearts of victims (*cuaauh-xicalli* or "eagle vessels") were decorated with reliefs so as to signify that the sacrifice was destined to both Earth and Sun. Carved on the side walls are motifs such as "precious water," that is, human blood, surmounted by a row of eagle feathers and in some instances also a row of human hearts; the bottom is decorated with the image of the sun and on the underside there is a representation of the earth monster. There is also the *ocelo-cuauhxicalli*, the "eagle-jaguar vessel," a colossal sculpture representing a crouching jaguar whose back is hollowed out in the shape of an "eagle vessel," as made clear by the relief frieze of eagle feathers on the periphery. Hearts deposited in such recipients were thus necessarily offered simultaneously both to the eagle (Sun) and the jaguar (Earth).<sup>24</sup> The same is

<sup>23</sup> Hasso von Winning, *Pre-Columbian Art of Mexico and Central America* (London, 1969), p. 397.

<sup>24</sup> Seler (n. 1 above), 2:704–9; Henry B. Nicholson and Eloise Quiñones Keber, *Art of Aztec Mexico: Treasures of Tenochtitlan* (Mexico: National Gallery of Art, 1983), pp. 30–31, 37.

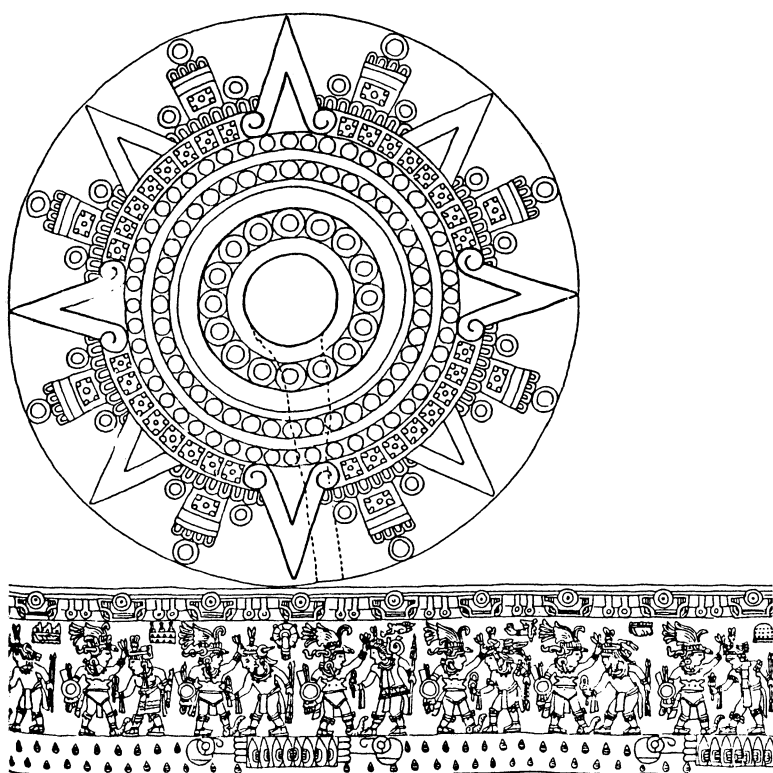


FIG. 1.—The stone of Tizoc (after Orozco y Berra, 1877)

true for the Tizoc Stone, a famous monument that was also a huge *cuauhxicalli*. Diameter and height of this cylindrical monolith are, respectively, 235 centimeters and ninety-three centimeters. The mantle is carved with reliefs representing the ruler Tizoc submitting personifications of fifteen cities. The scene is fringed with a celestial band above and a celestial band at the bottom. Four representations of the wide open mouth of the earth monster divide the terrestrial band in four equal parts. The upper surface is decorated with an image of the sun, or better, its crown. Four rays divide the disk into four parts corresponding to those defined by the four Tlaltecuhltli mouths. The center of the image is hollowed out so as to present a cavity for depositing offerings. A kind of channel conducting from the cavity to the edge of the monument allowed the blood of the offering to flow into one of the mouths of Tlaltecuhltli at the bottom (fig. 1).

Several investigators consider the cavity and the ditch as post-Conquest alterations because they are somewhat irregular and because they damage the obviously more ancient image of the Sun.<sup>25</sup> In my opinion, however, ditch and cavity are definitely pre-Hispanic. First of all, Durán mentions the monument and speaks of the streams of blood that flowed through the channel.<sup>26</sup> Second, the cavity is exactly at the center of the image of the sun, at the very spot where on other comparable sculptures like the famous "Aztec Calendar," there is a representation of the face of Tonatiuh. And, third, the ditch avoids as much as possible one of the solar rays while drawing as close as possible to one of the open mouths of Tlaltecuhli. The stone has doubtlessly been reused already in pre-Hispanic times. Possibly it had first been designed as a huge immolation stone or a monument for so-called gladiatorial sacrifices to be turned later into a *cuauhxicalli*. As sculptures of this kind were generally stuccoed and painted, it was perfectly possible to conceal the alterations inflicted on the relief of the sun.

The double destination of warrior sacrifices is also illustrated by another monument. The "*Teocalli* (Temple) of the Sacred War" is an imposing stone sculpture shaped as a pyramid crowned by a shrine and adorned with reliefs related to the sacred war men have to wage in order to obtain victims for sacrifice. Now this sculpture presents the image of the sun on the front of the sanctuary and the image of Tlaltecuhli on the preceding platform. The balustrades flanking the steps are decorated, on one side, with a jaguar-*cuauhxicalli* and the date 1 Rabbit, year of the birth of Earth and its name and, on the other side, with an eagle vessel and the date 2 Reed, date associated with New Fire and the sun that New Fire helps to reappear every fifty-two years. Once again there is a clear reference to and a depiction of both beneficiaries of sacrifice, represented as opposites and complementaries.<sup>27</sup>

These data have mostly been neglected by Americanists who mention only the sun as the beneficiary of the warrior immolations. It is beyond question that in the written sources Tonatiuh is almost always

<sup>25</sup> Jesus Sanchez, "Notas arqueológicas II: Vaso para contener los corazones de la víctimas sacrificadas en ciertas solemnidades religiosas," *Anales del Museo Nacional de México* 3 (1886): 128; Marshall Saville, *Tizoc, Great Lord of the Aztecs, 1481-1486*, Contributions of the Heye Foundation, vol. 7, no. 4 (New York, 1929), pp. 44-45; Ignacio Bernal, *Cien obras maestras del Museo Nacional de Antropología* (Mexico City, 1969), p. 23. One wonders how Esther Pasztory (in *Aztec Art* [New York, 1983], p. 64) can write that the canal is an alteration dating to 1792 (the year when the stone was unearthed) when Durán had already seen it in the sixteenth century.

<sup>26</sup> Durán, I:100.

<sup>27</sup> George A. Kubler, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America: The Mexican, Maya, and Andean Peoples* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pl. 23b; Alfonso Caso's



designated as the one to whom the heart of the victim was offered. Examples are the quoted description by Durán or the following passage in Sahagún where his Aztec informants describe in their own language the ordinary way of killing victims:

Thus were performed the sacrificial slayings; thus died captives and slaves who were called the divine dead. Thus they took [the victim] up [to the pyramid temple] before the devil: [the priests] just went holding him by his hands. And he who was known as the arranger [of victims], this one laid him out on the sacrificial stone. And when he had laid him upon it, four men each pulled on his arms, his legs. And already in the hand of the fire priest lay the flint knife with which he was to slash open the breast of his ceremonially bathed one. And then, when he had laid open his breast, he at once seized his heart from him. And he whose breast he laid open lay quite alive. And when [the fire priest] had taken his heart from him, he raised it in dedication to the sun.<sup>28</sup>

Motolinia, Clavijero, and many others testify in the same sense.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that the ritual immolation by excision of the heart was directed more in particular to the sun was quite logical since the heart symbolized and indeed *was* the movement the sun needed to keep going. It was a sacrifice to heavenly fire and to carry it out only a flint knife could be used, for flint was or contained a spark descended from heaven.<sup>30</sup>

For telluric deities, on the contrary, beheading was the typical way of immolation. In several "monthly" festivals, for example, Ochpaniztli, Quecholli and Izcalli, slaves personifying earth and maize goddesses were beheaded. Children were offered in the same way to Tlaloc, god of earth and rain.<sup>31</sup> Decapitation produced a flow of blood by which the earth was copiously irrigated; we know already that Tlaltecuhltli did not bear fruit unless drenched with blood. In iconography the blood issuing from the victim's neck is often represented as serpents, symbols of fertility. Such is the case with the Mexican Museum of Anthropology's colossal statues whimsically

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interpretation in *El Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada* (Mexico, 1927) is to be preferred to that of Richard Townsend in *State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan*, Studies in Pre-Columbia Art and Archeology no. 20 (Washington, D.C., 1979) and to that of Pasztory, pp. 168–69, who appears to ignore Caso and also to misunderstand the relationships between ritual dates, eagle and jaguar vessels, and the sun and earth.

<sup>28</sup> Sahagún (n. 4 above), 2:197.

<sup>29</sup> Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinia, *Memoriales e historia de los Indios de la Nueva España* (Madrid, 1970), p. 216; Durán, 1:32–33, 2:174, 2:193–94.

<sup>30</sup> Motolinia, p. 226. On flint and obsidian, see Michel Graulich, "Mythes et rites des vingtaines du Mexique Central préhispanique" (n. 4 above).

<sup>31</sup> Durán (n. 2 above), 1:76, 138, 146; Motolinia, p. 33; Juan Bautista Pomar, "Relación de Texcoco," in Garibay, ed. (n. 18 above), 1:168.

called Coatlicue and Yolotlicue and showing the earth goddess decapitated.<sup>32</sup> The same is true for more ancient representations where decapitation is associated with the ritual ball game. In this game the passage of the ball from one side to the other was supposed to secure the alternation of the seasons. Ball game courts were mythically supposed to have a central aperture through which the moisture indispensable for the harvests entered or disappeared.<sup>33</sup> Classic period reliefs from the Gulf Coast (Aparicio), Southern Guatemala (Escuintla Teotihuacan-influenced vases), and Chichen Itza show beheaded ball players with serpents sprouting from their necks.<sup>34</sup> This relationship with soil fertility is more evident than anywhere on the Chichen Great Ball Court reliefs where there is also a luxurious plant sprouting from the victim's neck.

In Mexico City and elsewhere flint and obsidian knives have been found in offertory caches with remains of sacrifices.<sup>35</sup> As only flint could be used for extracting the heart, one may assume that the obsidian knives were probably used to decapitate and dismember the victims. In opposition to flint, black, cold and nocturnal obsidian was considered as coming from the inside of the earth<sup>36</sup> and, therefore, perfectly fitted for the rituals on behalf of Tlaltecuhltli.

Excision of the heart for the sun, decapitation for the earth: but since immolations of prisoners of war were directed to both deities simultaneously, we are to expect the use of both types of sacrifice. And this was precisely what happened: first the heart was extracted and then the head of the victim was cut, at the top of the pyramid or possibly at the bottom where the body had been thrown. This second part of the immolation, the beheading, has always been interpreted as the taking of a trophy, nothing more. Actually, the action consisting in beheading the victim and throwing it down to the earth was inversely symmetrical to the extraction of the heart and its elevation toward the sun. The terrace at the base of the pyramid where the body was to fall was called the "banquet table," in other words the place where Tlaltecuhltli ate.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Kubler, pl. 28.

<sup>33</sup> Tezozomoc, *Crónica Mexicana precidida del Códice Remírez* (n. 21 above), pp. 227–29. On the symbolism of the ball game, see Graulich, "Mythes et rites des vingtaines du Mexique Central préhispanique."

<sup>34</sup> Esther Pasztory, ed., *Middle Classic Mesoamerica: A.D. 400–700* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 18–80; Kubler, pp. 206–7.

<sup>35</sup> Angel Arana, Raul M. Arana, and Garcia Cook, *Rescate arqueológico del Monolito Coyolxauhqui*, INAH (Mexico City, 1978).

<sup>36</sup> *Anales de los Cakchiqueles: Titulo de los Señores de Totonicapán*, ed. A. Recinos (Mexico City, 1950), p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Sahagún calls the terrace *ylacuaian Huitzilopochtli*, "his table of Huitzilopochtli," but Huitzilopochtli here means the temple, not the god (see Sahagún, vol. 2 passim and 9:63–69).

So heart excision and subsequent decapitation were in fact two ways of "killing" the warrior, first on behalf of the sun and next of the earth. I see a confirmation of this double immolation in the fact that sometimes one proceeded inversely, beginning with the decapitation and extracting the heart afterward, apparently in rituals in which the victim was dedicated in the first place to the earth. Examples are the immolations of Copil shortly before the foundation of Tenochtitlan and of the personification of the young goddess Xilonen during the monthly festival of Huey Tecuilhuitl:

And thereupon they took her up to the Temple of Cinteotl. They then laid her upon the back [of a priest]—not upon the offering stone; rather she died upon [a priest's] back. And when there was dying upon his back, it was called "it has a back."

Thereupon she performed her service. [The sacrificing priest] severed her head. When she had [thus] performed her service, when they had slain her, thereupon he took her heart from her; he placed it in the blue gourd.<sup>38</sup>

In certain cases at least<sup>39</sup> the corpses thrown from the top of the pyramid to the west were compared with setting heavenly bodies that finally disappear at the horizon, as if swallowed by the earth or penetrating it to fecundate it.<sup>40</sup> As for the heads, they were exhibited on skull racks (*tzompantli*), which undoubtedly represented trees: for instance, the Codex Borgia and on the Ixtapantongo rock paintings the *tzompantli* are trees.<sup>41</sup> One cannot help but remember the famous tree of Xibalba, of the underworld, mentioned in the *Popol Vuh*. According to this source the Lords of Xibalba put the head of the vanquished ball player Hun Hunahpu in this tree, and immediately fruit grew out everywhere. Later on, the head changed into a calabash and managed to fecundate a young earth and moon goddess by spitting in her outstretched hand.<sup>42</sup> Clearly, decapitation was a sacrifice on behalf of the earth in order to nourish and fecundate her.

The suggested interpretation of warrior sacrifices as double immolations make it possible to explain the function of a well-known

<sup>38</sup> *Anales de Tlatelolco: Unos annales históricos de la Nación Mexicana y Códice de Tlatelolco*, ed. H. Berlin and R. H. Barlow (Mexico City, 1948), p. 35; Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, *Crónica Mexicáyotl*, ed. A. Leon (Mexico City: UNAM, 1949), p. 43. In Aztec times heart excision nearly supplanted other types of immolation and was used even for sacrifices in honor of the rain and earth deities, the Tlaloque.

<sup>39</sup> Durán, 2:194.

<sup>40</sup> Graulich, "Mythes et rites des vingtaines du Mexique Central préhispanique" (n. 30 above), pp. 717–31.

<sup>41</sup> Nowotny, ed. (n. 8 above), p. 19; Agustín Villagra Caletí, "Mural Painting in Central Mexico," in Wauchope, ed. (n. 7 above), 10:150, fig. 27.

<sup>42</sup> Edmonson, ed. (n. 13 above), pp. 74–77.

recently discovered Aztec monument, the famous goddess Coyolxauhqui. The discovery of this huge rounded stone disk decorated with a remarkable relief representing the decapitated and dismembered moon deity initiated the Mexico City Templo Mayor excavations in 1978.<sup>43</sup> According to myth, the earth goddess Coatlicue was miraculously fecundated by a ball of feather down. Her daughter Coyolxauhqui and her 400 sons felt ashamed and decided to kill her. They ascended Snake Mountain where Coatlicue dwelt but Huitzilopochtli arose fully armed from his mother's womb and defeated the enemy. He beheaded his sister whose dismembered body rolled to the bottom of the mountain.<sup>44</sup>

Mexico-Tenochtitlan's main pyramid represented Snake Mountain. Now the Coyolxauhqui monument has been discovered exactly at the bottom of the pyramid, on the terrace before the stairway leading to Huitzilopochtli's shrine. So it stood perfectly at the right place according to the myth, and more so still if one considers its function. For it probably was a sacrificial altar or, more precisely, the "banquet table" on which the bodies of the victims offered to the earth fell and were dismembered, exactly like the goddess figured on the stone. This is all the more likely as the captives thrown from the top of the pyramid almost necessarily had to fall on this altar whose diameter reaches some 340 centimeters.

In the foregoing analysis, I have drawn on a variety of sources—mythic, calendric, and iconographic—which illustrate the dual aspect of ancient Mexican sacrifice. Too many scholars in the field have relied solely on written evidence, the incompleteness of which results in an unbalanced depiction of Aztec sacrifice. As we have seen, the sources tell a different story. They clearly indicate the prisoners of war were "killed" twice, first by extraction of the heart and next by decapitation.

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<sup>43</sup> Nicholson and Quiñones Keber (n. 24 above), p. 20; Annie Dorsinfang-Smets and Michel Graulich, "Nouvelles découvertes d'archéologie mexicaine: Les peintures de Cacaxtla et les fouilles du Grand Temple de Mexico," *Annales d'Histoire de l'Art et d'Archéologie* 2 (1981): 53–65.

<sup>44</sup> Sahagún (n. 4 above), 3:1–5.