

## Mortuary practices among the Aztec in the light of ethnohistorical and archaeological sources

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### Introduction

“Life and death are not worlds of opposition, we are one single stalk with twin flowers”  
(Octavio Paz 1979)

Death in ancient Aztec Mexico formed an integral part of daily life and was considered just a further stage in the continuation of life towards the individual's final resting place. Death was to be found everywhere in the form of sacrificial rites, religious rituals, mourning celebrations and funerary festivities. Therefore it comes as no surprise to us that so much attention was paid to the whole idea of death and the implications involved with it. The present paper will deal with one particular aspect of the so-called 'death cult' among the Aztecs, which concerns the disposal of the dead and the supernatural and cosmological ideology behind it. The latter aspect is best represented by the extensive ethnohistorical evidence provided by the written and pictorial sources dating to before and after the conquest of the New World. Although the physical disposal of the dead is widely depicted in the ethnohistorical sources and particularly those represented by the Mexican pictorial manuscripts, I will seek at least partial corroboration of this evidence by comparing it with the existing archaeological record.

### Ethnohistorical sources

#### *Background*

The use of writing techniques, together with the associated practice of hieroglyphic writing, picture painting and symbol depiction is a characteristic and distinctive trait particular to the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica.

Aztec, Maya, Mixtec and various local and regional cultures were particularly concerned with representing and depicting multiple aspects of their daily life, such as traditional and ancestral customs, rites, feasts, calendrical observations, historical events, socio-political and religious life, economy, genealogical and dynastic themes, etc. They found an acceptable medium for displaying all this information in a visual and expressive manner through the use of the codices.

Since the 19th century, historians, archaeologists and Mesoamerican scholars have used the word 'codex' or the equivalent Spanish term 'códice' to designate any pictorial manuscript in the native tradition (Glass 1975: 7-8). Some, have mistakenly ascribed such a term to written manuscripts with no pictorial character or content whatsoever.

However, we owe to John B. Glass a good definitive description for the usage of the word 'codex'. “The foremost criteria are that the paintings, drawings, or manuscripts, display traits of pictorial content, style, composition, or formal symbolic conventions derived from indigenous traditions” (Glass 1975: 4). Hence this definition also includes those pictorial books dealing with indigenous lifestyle produced and manufactured by Spanish officials and friars in the colonial period.

The format of the various surviving codices varies greatly and ranges from a canvas type made from cloth to the typical prehispanic screen-folded pattern. The raw materials consisted mainly of bark paper from the fig tree, but also of cloth or animal hide, mainly that of deer. The panels of bark paper were then “glued together to form long strips, then folded screen fold style and painted with ritual or

calendrical images" (Boone 1983: 2).

Despite the destruction that the pictorial manuscripts have suffered prior to and especially in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest, enough material has survived to permit us a detailed study of the treatment and disposal that the dead were awarded in prehispanic Aztec Mexico.

In the present article I shall concentrate on two representative examples among the pictorial manuscripts which successfully epitomise the complex mortuary ritualistic process and the philosophy behind it.

### *Codex Borbonicus*

This is probably the earliest surviving Aztec codex. Although there is some controversy as to its prehispanic date, there is no doubt that it is at least prehispanic in content and style. It is mainly calendrical and ritual in its nature and the native style is preserved in a less 'acculturated' fashion than the Magliabechiano example discussed later. Of all the manuscripts it was the ritual, calendrical type such as this one that were selected for destruction by the ecclesiastical authorities. "Manuscripts of this type survived systematic extirpation of native paganism due to their having been sent to Europe as curiosity pieces immediately after their discovery" (Glass 1975: 29).

The funerary aspect that is of interest to us is largely neglected here, since death was not a major trait of the calendrical nature of this codex. I have however managed to locate one panel (Fig. 1) which illustrates the ritualistic use of death both at supernatural and an earthly level. *Micilantecuhli*, the god of the underworld appears, on the left carrying a snake, sceptre and a shield with its accessories; at his back there is an adornment, consisting of a type of blue and red attire from which a *Miquiztli* (death) head in relief emerges. *Chachalmeca* is in front of him, adorned with a special head-dress with white and black stripes that secure the head and also with the characteristic *metl* decorations: spiral shell and flat circle, ending in a large cone. This funerary deity also has a black and white mirror chest, and the bones, crudely painted, appear underneath the textiles. Above him there is a funerary or mortuary bundle (Fig. 2) with two flags, one of which has the easily recognisable insignia of *Centeotl*, the god of corn (Paso y Troncoso 1988).

This panel is extremely important for two reasons. Firstly, this is the earliest known representation of an Aztec mortuary bundle, a recurrent feature found in pictorial manuscripts across Mesoamerica with minor alterations and stylistic variations involved. Secondly, it concerns one of the most important deities in the Aztec pantheon, *Micilantecuhli*, who is of great relevance in the world of the afterlife. The importance of this codex is that it provides first hand information of Aztec funerary procedures without one of the possible misconceptions and biases imposed by the western mentality. It therefore forms a solid background against which the written and pictorial colonial sources can be compared.

### *Codex Magliabechiano*

Figure 3 shows the funerary proceedings relating to the death of a lord. The deceased was shrouded in a squatting position and then, depending on the cause of death, was either burned or cremated. In this case we can see the symbol of fire on top of the funerary bundle, hinting at the imminent cremation of the deceased. In front of him a slave is sacrificed by extracting his heart so he can accompany the noble lord to the other life. Wives were also buried alive in order to serve their husbands in the afterlife.

Figure 4 also represents the mortuary ritual of a high ranking individual. His children and relatives are mourning and they give him *cacaualt* (chocolate) for the journey. "They also buried their grinding stones and corn so it could be ground and they buried food and riches according to his class position" (Tudela de la Orden 1980: 117).

Also present is a metate or grinding stone, on top of which a human arm lies, relating to the chronicles and other colonial sources which describe how food made out of human flesh was prepared

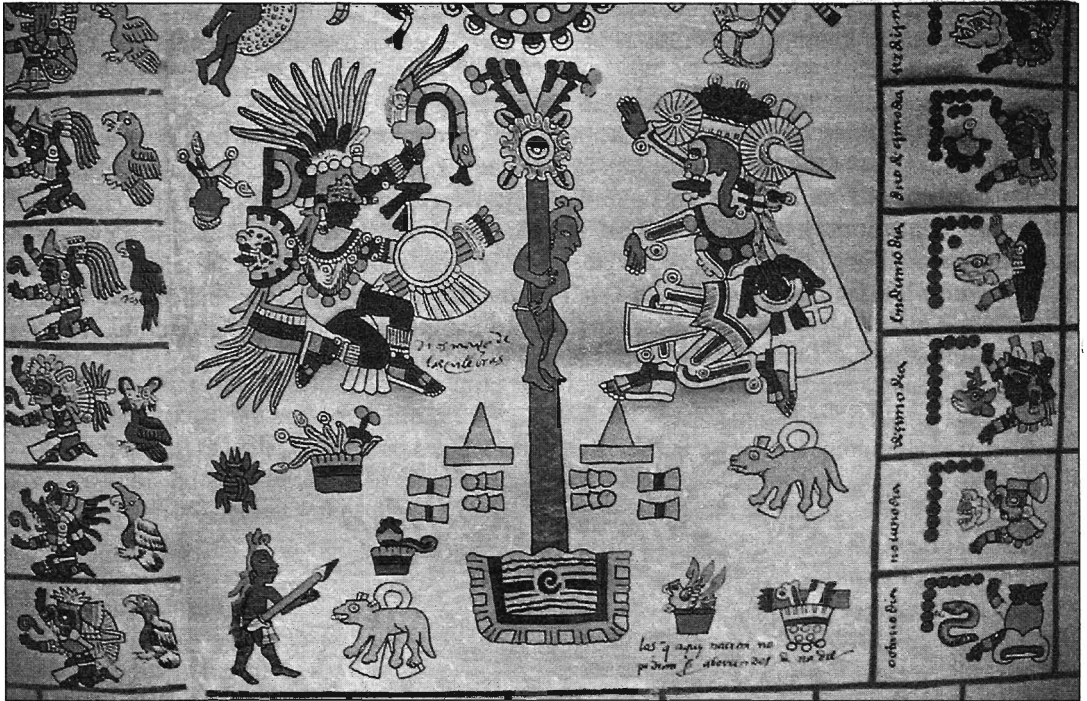


Fig. 1 Representation of two funerary deities, *Mictlantecuhli* on the left and *Chachalmeca* on the right (after Paso y Troncoso 1988)

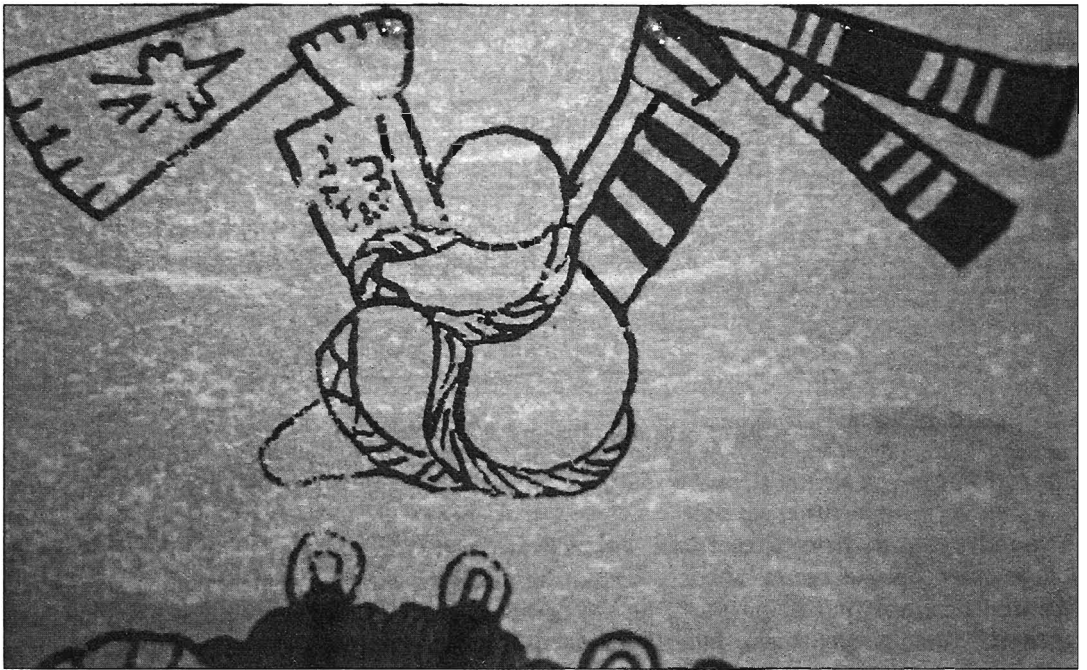


Fig. 2 Detail of Figure 1 depicting a mummy or funerary bundle (after Paso y Troncoso 1988)

for the deceased. On the left margin of the panel is a burial ditch where the remains of the deceased lie. The corpse is represented by a skull, and on either side are *coas* or primitive spades that were used to dig the ditch.

Figure 5 represents the death of a merchant. He was cremated and his remains buried together with his wealth. Feline skins were placed around him holding everything else that he had: sandals, gold and precious stones, feathers, etc. to enable him to continue his occupation in his final resting place.

The death rite of *Titiil* is depicted in figure 6. This is a representation of the feast called *Titiil*, which the Indians celebrate in memory of their dead. A replica of the deceased was built and a mask was made for that purpose. They placed in his nose a piece of blue paper and the inside of the wooden mask was stuffed with white feathers. They placed a staff adorned with some papers they called *amath*, and on the head was placed a head-dress of grass. In front two Indians sing and play a kettle drum. This was repeated for four years following the death and was then discontinued.



Fig. 3. Funerary proceedings relating the death of a lord (after Boone 1983)

### *The cult of death among the Aztec*

As we have seen, the perception of death was taken to a level of deep religious cult among the Nahuatl indigenous people of central Mexico. Durkheim offers an alternative interpretation stating that "Funeral rites and rites of mourning do not constitute a cult, though this name has sometimes wrongfully been given to them. In reality, a cult is not a simple group of ritual precautions which a man is held to take in certain circumstances; it is a system of diverse rites, festivals and ceremonies which all have this characteristic that they reappear periodically. They fulfil the need which the believer feels of strengthening and reaffirming at regular intervals of time, the bond which unites them to the

sacred beings upon which he depends” (Durkheim 1965: 80).

The ethnohistorical record has clearly demonstrated that the Aztec preoccupation with death was not just a spontaneous or sporadic attempt to try and come to terms with it but a conscientious, elaborated and systematic process of rites, ceremonies and carefully calculated proceedings whose background originates in the deepest of the Mesoamerican traditions. I suggest that this profound expression of sentiment does deserve to be called a veritable religious cult which was deeply embedded into the daily life of the Aztec population. This death cult was also disseminated in the Aztec literature, history and myths and as we shall see later it was carried further by means of the Spanish chronicles.

“To the Mexicans death was not an altogether abhorrent idea being little more than an incident in the continuity between this life and the next”. (Joyce 1920: 101-102).

Contrary to western religious ideology, the Aztec believed that it was the manner of death and the direct cause of it which was relevant to an individual’s final destination in the afterlife, not the behavioural pattern that he had followed during his lifetime. In other words, the manner of death was more important than the manner of life since it had a direct bearing upon the destiny of the soul.

The important colonial chronicler, brother Sahagun depicts the various regions where individuals could go upon dying. Warriors who died in battle or as sacrificial victims were destined to depart to the eastern paradise of the sun or *Ichan Tonatiuh Ilhujcan*, where assembled on a great plain, they greeted its rising by beating upon their shields and escorting it on its journey to the zenith. After four years in the ‘heaven sun’ they descended to the earth in the form of beautiful birds of bright plumage spending their time among flowers. Women dying in childbirth were equally fortunate. As the counterpart of the warriors they also went to the paradise of the sun bearing to it a litter of bright feathers from the zenith to the horizon, when they descended to the earth in the form of moths. Thus the sun was eternally kept in motion through the constant alternating help of the warriors and the women, the former helping in its daily rise and the latter in its diurnal setting. Equally the *pochteca* or professional merchant who died while trading would also earn a privileged place in the sun. The deceased would be put in a seated position and subsequently wrapped in a mortuary bundle which would be later cremated. The burned remains would then be put in a stone box or jar together with the offerings related to the deceased. However, the women who died in childbirth and the merchants were not cremated but buried (Sahagun 1981).

The second region where the souls of the dead could go was the terrestrial paradise *Tlalocan*, the home of the god *Tlaloc*, the rain god, a place of delight “where plants and flowers flourished in a miraculous fertility and summer was perpetual” (Joyce 1920: 102). To it were designated those who had died of dropsy, gout, scabies and leprosy; also either by drowning or being struck by lightning. Anyone who perished in connection with aquatic themes was assured a place there. No cremation took place in this case and the ‘mummy’ bundles of the deceased were directly inhumed. For the lower classes the burial would take place under the floor of the house so the deceased could keep a strong connection with the living.

The third location where the soul of a deceased could go was a place called *Mictlan* or the realm of the underworld, which was erroneously regarded by Christian writers as the equivalent to hell. To it went those who died of natural death or old age. In it resided the god *Mictlantecuhli* and his female counterpart *Mictlancihuatl*. The literature disagrees as to the physical nature of this underworld. On the one hand it is depicted as being an area of darkness situated below the earth on which the sun never shone, having been called “the kingdom of obscurity and death” (Gonzalez Torres 1975: 38). It has also been translated as a “place without exits or holes” (Dibble and Anderson 1950-69) and Sahagun describes it as follows: “Though living in the underworld, the souls of the dead were not deprived of the light of the sun, since the latter was supposed to pass through the infernal regions during the night on its journey back to the east” (Joyce, 1920: 102-103).

In any case, to go to *Mictlan* “the ninth and deepest new stratum of the unknown” (Matos Moctezuma 1971: 89) it was essential to undertake a long road full of perils and menaces, through the eight



Fig. 4 Representation of a further death rite (after Boone 1983)



Fig. 5 Mortuary proceedings related to the death of a merchant (after Boone 1983)

underworld levels prior to *Mictlan*'s final abode. The soul had to pass between two clashing mountains, to run the gauntlet of a great snake and huge lizard, to traverse eight deserts and eight hills, and to encounter a wind full of stone knives. Finally, but not until the end of four years, the soul reached the great river which must be crossed by swimming. The aid of a red dog was necessary for this final stage and a dog of this colour was reared in the house and slain at the funeral by thrusting an arrow down its throat. The body was placed by the side of the defunct, with a cotton string around its neck for guidance purposes. "The dog was to perform the part of *Charon*, and carry the king on his back across the deep stream called *Chicunahuapan* 'nine waters', a name which points to the nine heavens of the Mexicans" (Bancroft, 1883: 605).

A further location to which the deceased could go has been described by Nagao: "*Tonacatecuhtli ichan* was the final resting place for children who died. Like *Tlalocan* it was conceived as a garden paradise, full of trees, flowers, and fruits ..... innocent babies or children destined for this heaven were metaphorically compared to precious greenstone, bracelets and turquoises. These dead children were buried in front of maize beans to signify that they went to a 'good and fine place'" (Nagao 1985: 40).



Fig. 6 Funerary proceedings carried out at *Tiitil* or feast of the dead (after Boone 1983)

Those who died in wars and whose bodies could not be recovered were assured of adequate rites that were conducted through the use of paper figures representing the deceased. We are unaware of any ghosts or spectres wandering on the earth due to the individual's lack of adequate funerary rites or proper burial procedures. "However, there are references concerning ghosts that took the shape of skeletons or even mortuary bundles. This, on the other hand, does not imply a relation between the deceased and the wandering spectres" (Yolotl Gonzalez 1975: 37). Nevertheless we should keep such a possibility in mind.



## Archaeological sources

We have so far described the sort of evidence that archaeology does not usually provide, that is the kind of data that contain information relating to certain aspects of life such as the socio-religious background and the cosmic vision and ideology behind particular burial proceedings. Although the ethnohistorical sources are of great value, we have to bear in mind the political and religious framework behind their creation, which could be misleading unless the biases within them are taken account of. I am referring in particular to the fanaticism with which the religious practices of the New World were viewed by the intruding Spanish population.

The limited archaeological record available, nevertheless permits us to establish a direct relationship between the written and pictorial sources and the burial record. Due to the limited scope of this paper and the high cultural diversity existing within the vast Aztec empire, I shall concentrate mainly on the heart of the Aztec political, religious, social and economic life which is found in the capital Tenochtitlan and the so called 'sister city' of Tlatelolco and other nearby sites in the valley of Mexico.

The characteristic disposal of the dead shown in the pictographic evidence dates as far as the Classic period (100 - 900 A.D.), where we can already see the predominance of the typical seated and crouched position at sites like La Ventilla, Teotihuacan (Serrano and Lagunas 1975).

From the Postclassic period (900-1519 A.D.) there are mortuary bundles preserved in the north of the country in the state of Coahuila. There, at the site of La Candelaria, the remains of several individuals wrapped in bundles (Fig. 7) with their respective offerings were beautifully preserved inside a cave due to the semi-desertic conditions present in the area (Martinez del Rio 1953:177-204; Romano 1974). The organic remains of the bundles, such as ropes and textiles, were found intact together with the associated offerings which included bows, arrows, fishing nets, cloaks, fabrics, baskets, sandals and the remains of a semi-mummified dog, possible companion of one of the deceased in the journey to the underworld. Fragments of mats were found which could have served as bases for the mortuary bundles as are found in most pictorial representations.

In the Mixtec area, at the site of Coixtlahuaca, another funerary bundle was found facing the entrance of the pit where it was placed. In front of it dogs, some pots and a jade bead were laid.

### *Aztec burial practices*

Unfortunately no funerary bundles belonging to the Aztec cultural tradition have been recovered intact, although, as we shall see later, there is sufficient evidence to believe that they were widely used.

The archaeological record is rather scanty regarding burial evidence from pure funerary contexts among the Aztec inhabitants of central Mexico. This is due to two main factors. The primary one is the failure to make a distinction between sites under the influence of the Triple Alliance forces which still retained its cultural integrity and those sites that were completely overtaken by the Aztecs despite preserving traces of their past ritual activities. To what extent can we regard a site to be Aztec considering that Aztec expansion and supremacy lasted for less than two hundred years? We have to bear in mind that to be under Aztec hegemony does not mean to be Aztec in nature, least of all regarding the disposal of the dead.

The second factor affecting the record concerns information that has been recovered from the ground but is now missing due to either theft, loss or negligence.

### *Templo Mayor*

Due to the immense destruction to which Mexico-Tenochtitlan was subjected in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest in 1521 AD, the great temple, once an overpowering monument symbolising the very heart of the Aztec empire, crumbled and collapsed into ruin. It is not surprising to find so few mortuary



practices regarding the disposal of the dead in a place highly charged with ceremonial meaning at the summit of the Aztec ritualistic procedures. This is partly the reason why only one inhumation has so far been found in the great temple. The rest of the osteological material has largely been made up of bones of children pertaining to collective sacrificial burials in honour of the *Tlaloques* (minor deities that helped the rain god *Tlaloc*).

Since I am only dealing with the disposal of the dead in a mortuary situation, the sacrificial and ritual offering of human life is not relevant to this study. As Nagao has pointed out: "A cache is distinct from a funerary or mortuary offering.... Caches generally function to commemorate or consecrate the erection of a monument, a calendrical event, or the construction or destruction of a building. They may also be dedicated to a specific deity or cult. A cache sometimes contains human remains, however, these remains constitute a part of the offering itself. In burials on the other hand, skeletal remains are the focus of homage. The deceased individual is buried with offerings that probably serve as useful or symbolic objects in the afterlife" (Nagao 1985: 1-2).

Only eight true burials have been located in Templo Mayor. All were cremated except one. With one exception all were found beneath stucco floors. This was carried out by making a cavity on the surface of the floor where the burial (usually in an urn) and its offering were subsequently placed, then it all was covered in fine soil and the floor resurfaced (Lopez Lujan 1990: 374). The raw materials, forms and dimensions of the funerary urns vary but the most interesting examples were one in the shape of a dog and two orange vessels with relief carvings representing two deities. Another urn contained the cremated remains of an individual and a silver mask with a semi-skinned face and a gold bell with the glyph of *Ollin* (Matos Moctezuma 1983: 17). The interesting find of the inhumed body of a woman remains unique among the Templo Mayor funerary settings. She was in a crouched position and although the organic remains that would indicate the presence of a mortuary bundle are lacking, the position of the body would suggest this was originally present.

### *Tlatelolco*

Tlatelolco, the funerary site par excellence, has been the focus of archaeological research since the last century. Hamy (1884) already provides evidence of a burial found in a seated position under a low seat made of straw (Ibid: 25).

The first systematic attempts at excavation were undertaken in the 1940's by R. Barlow and A. Espejo and the results published in a report called *Tlatelolco a través de los tiempos*. Several bodies were found together with some modest pottery offerings. "The individuals were in a squatting position, the arms pressed against the trunk, the thighs bent towards the chest and the legs flexed over the thighs, they were therefore reduced to the smallest volume a human corpse can occupy" (Barlow 1944: 35).

The site was again under close examination during the early 1960's, this time excavation included the whole ceremonial precinct in an ambitious project in which more than 1000 burials were discovered. Unfortunately not many publications have made their appearance, as all the offerings associated with the burials together with the field notes have apparently disappeared without trace. In 1966 the archaeologist Eduardo Contreras found a clay 'olla' which had been used as an urn. It contained the skeleton of a child in a good state of preservation. A green stone had been placed in the mouth, which in Aztec mythology is taken to represent the soul of the deceased (Castillo Tejero and Solis Olguin 1975: 52-53). It has also been regarded as a protection piece and a soul accessory, used when a jaguar tries to steal the deceased soul while travelling to the underworld. If under attack the bead can be thrown to the beast, distracting the ferocious animal, who takes the bead to be the deceased's soul and thus enabling the individual to escape with an unharmed *teyolia* or soul. We can find the ethnohistorical equivalent in the Florentine Codex (Fig. 8).

"The orientation of the burials bears a direct relation to the cosmogonic ideas of the prehispanic inhabitants" (Serrano and Lopez 1972: 59). The predominant direction at Tlatelolco towards which

most of the burials are directed, is the east (Fig. 9). In La Ventilla the same orientation predominates in more than 100 burials. As we know, the earthly paradise of *Tlalocan* is situated in the east “which suggests a continuity in the religious concepts and the persistence of Teotihuacan cultural currents in later periods” (Ibid: 59). Both cremations and inhumations have been found in Tlatelolco and, as the chronicles suggest, the remains of the deceased would be cremated unless the final destination of the individual was the *Tlalocan*. “The burials that have been described would come under this category since they are also oriented towards the latter region” (Ibid: 59). It seems improbable that all the inhumated remains found would belong to individuals who either died of dropsy, gout, scabies and leprosy or else by drowning or struck by lightning. As mentioned earlier, we could be dealing with women who died in childbirth or professional merchants.

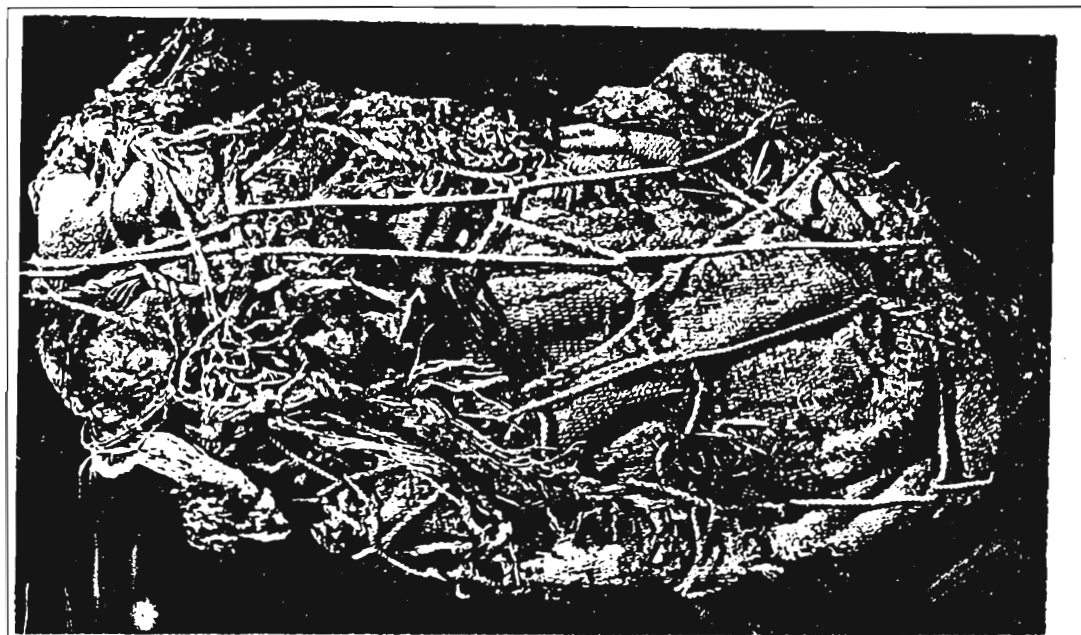


Fig. 7 Perfectly preserved mummy bundle found at La Candelaria cave (after Romano 1974)

Eneida Baños provides us with more funerary data coming from a rescue excavation in Tlatelolco. In one case a female was buried with a staff. She had apparently suffered from yaws. This phenomenon coincides with Sahagun’s chronicles which mention people dying from dropsy, gout, scabies and other diseases “were not burned but were buried..... and in the hand they placed a staff” (Baños in press).

A major rescue operation dealing with another part of Tlatelolco was completed in the summer of 1992. The organic remains of wickerwork and textiles, probably belonging to parts of a mat and a mortuary bundle respectively, were recovered (María Flores Hernández, Margarita Carballal Staedtler, Carmen Lechuga, pers. comm.). Almost 80 burials were recovered of which only one was found to lie in an extended position. The reasons for such a position remain unknown to the author and only speculative answers can be suggested at this early stage.

### *Iguala*

This site was invaded by the Triple Alliance during the reign of Iztcoatl (1427-1440 AD). Out of 71 burials excavated, two deserve special mention.

The first was that of an adult male in a seated position placed on a boulder. The bells which were part of the offering were flattened due to the fact that the individual had been wrapped in a bundle, as indicated by prints of the mat or petate. The second also had a boulder bed and this time there were prints of the bundle on the sand.



Fig. 8 Moment in which two attendants introduce a 'soul' in a deceased mouth (after Sahagun 1926)

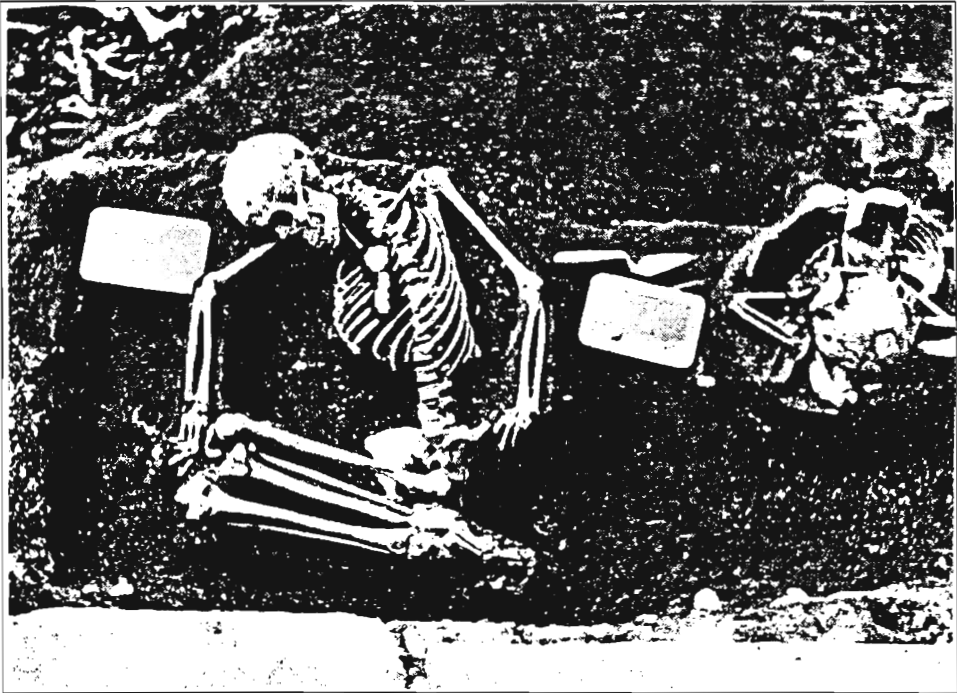


Fig. 9 Burial from Tlatelolco with pottery offerings (after *Anales del Inah* 1962)

Once again the mummy bundle tradition is found in the archaeological record (Goncén Orozco 1991). We are unable to specify the contextual reference of this find since we do not know if such a tradition existed in the area before the Aztecs violent arrival or whether it was introduced during their

domination. Equally we are uncertain whether the inhabitants were of Aztec stock or whether they were part of the subjugated population.

## Conclusion

It has become apparent that the disposal of the dead was not a random process but a carefully thought out undertaking which depended exclusively on the manner in which the individual died. This principle cut across all levels of Aztec society making everybody equal in the event of death. The rites of inhumation and cremation coexisted in a widespread fashion although there was an understandable inclination towards the latter one since the cause of death was likely to have cremation as an end result. Generally, interred bodies were in the crouched, flexed or foetal position. A possible explanation for such an arrangement has been postulated by Eduardo Matos: "Just before birth, water is released from the womb. The uterus is a dark cave, with no light, just as Mictlan is described. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Aztecs arranged a dead person's body in a foetal position, with legs drawn up and sprinkled water on the corpse. In this way an individual might return to the same position and environment as in the womb" (Matos Moctezuma 1988: 130).

As for those whose body was burnt and then placed in jar, their disposition might have an underlying reason too: ".....in ancient Aztec mythology, the cave, the uterus of the earth, gives birth to individuals and to entire ethnic groups. The placing of the remains of some individuals in large jars may also be considered a return to the womb, to the original cave" (Ibid: 130).

Therefore "darkness, water and the flexed position of the deceased, all relate to the Aztec anatomical and physiological knowledge, and are metaphorically associated with life and death. The phenomenon that holds back the flow of blood for nine occasions and at the end of this period produces life can be seen inversely in the need to follow the nine steps to return to the great womb of the earth" (Ibid: 130).

The similarities between the two types of evidences presented here has allowed us to understand more fully the Aztec's treatment of the dead permitting us to understand an elaborate and meticulous cult.

The best accordance between the archaeological and ethnohistorical data is without doubt the similarity in the positioning of the body that is found with an astonishing resemblance in both cases. The foetal position is repeated constantly in various contexts: funerary bundles, pottery jars, under habitational floors, direct placing in the ground, etc. A vital connection with the creation of life has already been suggested by Matos as an explanation for this funerary posture. Whether he is right or not, it is certain that the final position of the deceased played a vital role in the beliefs of Aztec religious life.

Matos (1975: 42) and the majority of Mesoamerican scholars have all considered that the Aztec religion and therefore its funerary affinities had been influenced by other cultural groups in the basin of Mexico. According to Matos they were shared with all Nahuatl groups in the Postclassic period.

Death was not taken at face value in Aztec religion but was seen as the essence of life itself and the creation of a renewed beginning. It was not the life of an individual that determined his final resting place but his death. This reminds us of the words of the Mexican poet Octavio Paz:

"Tell me how you die  
and I will tell you who you are"  
(Octavio Paz 1967)

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