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## Vitality Materialized

*On the Piercing and Adornment of the Body in Mesoamerica*

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**ABSTRACT** In ancient Mesoamerica, the human body was regularly adorned with finely crafted ornaments. These were often made of highly valued and symbolically charged materials that manifested a cluster of interrelated ideas connected to creative energies and natural fecundity. Much recent scholarly attention has been given to materials from which Mesoamerican jewelry was made, including their particular qualities, attributes, and place within the Indigenous worldview. This essay takes a complementary approach to such studies by considering the material and ontological implications of the way some ornaments were articulated with the human body: the piercing of the flesh. In addition to creating spaces to accommodate jewels, the perforation of the body was an activity that carried social significance, most notably in the form of auto-sacrificial bloodletting, but also in rituals that accompanied coming-of-age ceremonies and accession rites. It is argued that all such interventions into the human body should be viewed as a continuum of related behaviors and that holes made within the flesh served as a conduit for the flow of life and vitality. Placed within them, ornaments did more than merely indicate the wearer's status. They drew attention toward, alluded to, and made tangible and permanent the vital potency of the somatic voids they occupied and, by extension, the charisma of the bodies that hosted them.

**KEYWORDS** Mesoamerica, body, adornment, jewelry, bloodletting

**RESUMEN** En la antigua Mesoamérica, el cuerpo humano estaba adornado regularmente con adornos finamente elaborados. Estos a menudo estaban hechos de materiales altamente valorados y cargados simbólicamente que manifestaban un conjunto de ideas interrelacionadas conectadas a las energías creativas y la fecundidad natural. En recientes trabajos académicos, se ha prestado mucha atención a los materiales a partir de los cuales se diseñaba la joyería mesoamericana, con un enfoque particular en sus cualidades, atributos y función dentro de la cosmovisión indígena. El acercamiento del presente trabajo pretende complementar estos estudios al considerar las implicaciones materiales y ontológicas de la forma en que algunos ornamentos se articularon con el cuerpo humano: la perforación del cuerpo. Además de crear orificios en los que se podían acomodar joyas, la perforación del cuerpo era una actividad que tenía importancia social, especialmente cuando constituía un acto de auto-sacrificio en forma de sangrado, pero también en rituales que acompañaban las ceremonias de la mayoría de edad y los ritos iniciáticos. Se sostiene que todas estas intervenciones en el cuerpo humano deben verse como un continuo de conductas relacionadas y que los agujeros hechos en la carne sirvieron como conductos para el flujo de la vida y la vitalidad. Los adornos que se colocados en los agujeros no solo indicaban el estatus de una persona. Llamaron la atención, aludieron e hicieron tangible y permanente la potencia vital de los vacíos somáticos que ocupaban y, por extensión, el carisma de los cuerpos que los albergaban.

**PALABRAS CLAVE** Mesoamérica, cuerpo, adorno, joyería, flebotomía/sangrado

**RESUMO** Na antiga Mesoamérica, o corpo humano era regularmente adornado com ornamentos finamente trabalhados. Estes eram frequentemente feitos de materiais altamente valorizados e simbolicamente carregados que manifestavam um conjunto de idéias interrelacionadas ligadas a energias criativas e fecundidade natural. Uma atenção acadêmica muito recente tem sido dada aos materiais dos quais as jóias mesoamericanas foram feitas, incluindo suas qualidades, atributos e lugares dentro da visão de mundo indígena. Este trabalho faz uma abordagem complementar a esses estudos considerando as implicações materiais e ontológicas da maneira como alguns ornamentos foram articulados com o corpo humano: a perfuração da carne. Além de criar espaços para acomodar jóias, a perfuração do corpo era uma atividade que carregava significado social, mais notavelmente na forma de sangria auto-sacrificial, mas também em rituais que acompanhavam cerimônias de iniciação e ritos de acessão. Argumenta-se que todas essas intervenções no corpo humano devem ser vistas como um continuum de comportamentos relacionados e que buracos feitos dentro da carne serviam como um canal para o fluxo de vida e vitalidade. Colocados dentro deles, os ornamentos faziam mais do que apenas indicar o status do usuário. Eles chamavam a atenção para, aludiam a, e tornavam tangível e permanente a potência vital dos vazios somáticos que ocupavam e, por extensão, o carisma dos corpos que os abrigavam.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Mesoamérica, corpo, adorno, joalheria, sangria

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In a letter written to Pope Leo X in 1519 or 1520, Peter Martyr d'Anghiera described the six Totonac Indians he encountered in the Spanish court of Charles V, where they had been sent by Hernán Cortés along with his first letter:

Both sexes pierce the ears and wear golden pendants in them, and the men pierce the extremity of the under lip, down to the roots of the lower teeth. Just as we wear precious stones mounted in gold upon our fingers, so do they insert pieces of gold the size of a ring into their lips. This piece of gold is as large as a silver Carolus, and thick as a finger. I cannot remember ever to have seen anything more hideous; but they think that nothing more elegant exists under the lunar circle. This example proves the blindness and the foolishness of the human race: it likewise proves how we deceive ourselves. The Ethiopian thinks that black is a more beautiful colour than white, while the white man thinks the opposite. A bald man thinks himself more handsome than a hairy one, and a man with a beard laughs at him who is without one. We are influenced by passions rather than guided by reason, and the human race accepts these foolish notions, each country following its own fancy.<sup>1</sup>

This account is notable for prefiguring by over two and a half centuries Immanuel Kant's recognition that, although they are experienced and expressed as universal truths, aesthetic judgments are subjective and reflect culturally specific sentiments.<sup>2</sup> What disgusts Peter Martyr is not the practice of adorning the body with precious stones, which he notes is also done in Europe, but rather the fact that the Totonacs wear these jewels embedded within the flesh of their faces (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Marveling at the contrast between the Indians' standards of beauty and his own, he nevertheless stops short of probing these different aesthetic responses, instead writing them off with appeals to other examples based on natural conditions such as skin color or the presence or lack

of hair. However, divergent attitudes toward body modifications do not arise from innate differences in appearance, nor are they mere matters of taste or preference. Rather, they can be understood in relation to the underlying worldviews of these two civilizations. Peter Martyr's repulsion toward facial piercings derives from a Judeo-Christian theology and morality in which humans, having been created in the image of God, sin against their maker by permanently altering the appearance and integrity of their bodies.<sup>4</sup> In Mesoamerican cosmology, on the other hand, all things—organic and inorganic, including human beings—participate within an emergent field of relations that are in a constant state of renewal and transformation.<sup>5</sup> The practice of bodily adornment in Mesoamerica can only be fully understood with respect to this worldview.

Much recent scholarship has been conducted on Mesoamerican jewels, including the particular qualities and attributes of the materials from which these precious objects were made, and their place within the Indigenous worldview. This essay takes a complementary approach to such studies by considering the material and ontological implications of the fleshy piercings through which some ornaments were articulated with the human body. Unlike the jewels themselves, which were often made of durable materials that survive archaeologically and are able to be closely studied in the present, the holes into which they were placed are doubly immaterial: negative spaces in flesh that has long since deteriorated.<sup>6</sup> Although these circumstances have led to a privileging of the ornaments as objects of scrutiny, I argue that acts of piercing and the somatic voids they produced were an integral and meaningful aspect of adornment in Mesoamerica. In addition to creating spaces to accommodate jewels, the perforation of the body was an activity that carried social significance, most notably in the form of auto-sacrificial bloodletting but also in rituals

1. Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, *De Orbe Novo: The Eight Decades of Peter Martyr D'Anghiera*, trans. and ed. Francis Augustus MacNutt (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), Vol. II: 38–39.

2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987 [1790]), 79–84 (§17).

3. The illustration in Figure 1, made about a decade after Peter Martyr's letter, also reflects the early encounter of a European—the artist Christoph Weiditz—with Natives of Mexico (in this case, likely Aztecs), who were brought by Hernán Cortés to the court of Charles V when he visited Spain in 1529. In both the images and the accompanying text, Weiditz, like Peter Martyr before him, emphasized the facial piercings of the Indians. For more on these images, see Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Seeking Indianness: Christoph Weiditz, the Aztecs, and Feathered Amerindians," *Colonial Latin American Review* 26, no. 1 (2017): 39–61.

4. This view was made explicit in the sixteenth-century writings of John Bulwer, cited in Pamela L. Geller, "Altering Identities: Body Modifications and the Pre-Columbian Maya," in *The Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains*, ed. R. Gowland and C. Knüsel (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2006): 279–91.

5. James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014); John D. Monaghan, "Theology and History in the Study of Mesoamerican Religions," in *Ethnology: Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians, Vol. 6*, ed. John D. Monaghan with the assistance of Barbara W. Edmonson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000): 24–49.

6. For a similar reason, piercings have been much less extensively studied than other forms of body modification that leave surviving traces for osteological analysis, such as cranial deformation or dental inlays.



FIGURE 1. Christoph Weiditz, *Indian Men*, plates 2 & 3 from the *Trachtenbuch*, 1529. Ink and watercolor on paper, each page approx. 7 7/8 × 9 1/10 in. (20 × 15 cm). Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, Hs. 22474 (artwork in the public domain; image obtained from Wikimedia Commons). The texts read: “So go the Indians, they have costly jewels inset in their faces, they can take them out and put them in again when they wish”; “wooden bowl”; and “This is also an Indian man.”

that accompanied coming-of-age ceremonies and accession rites. Such interventions into the human body should be viewed as a continuum of related behaviors in that holes made within the flesh served as conduits for the flow of life and vitality. Placed within them, ornaments did more than merely indicate the wearer’s status. They drew attention toward, alluded to, and made tangible and permanent the vital potency of the fleshy holes they occupied and, by extension, the charisma of the bodies that hosted them. Within the Mesoamerican worldview, interventions within or upon the flesh could both enact and reflect the changing configurations of material relations in which people participated.

By broadly addressing the role of piercings in Mesoamerica, and collectively examining bodily perforations in a number of cultures belonging to different time periods, this essay considers both the piercing of the flesh and the worldview through which this activity was conceptualized as persistent and widely shared elements of Mesoamerican civilization, as

part of its *núcleo duro* (hard core).<sup>7</sup> Ever since art historian George Kubler cautioned those interpreting past cultures that the continuity of a form does not equate to a continuity of the meaning(s) attributed to it, there has been justifiable skepticism among many scholars with regard to assertions of continuity across great spans of time or between distinct cultures and linguistic groups, as well as the use of textual or ethnographic sources originating in the colonial or modern periods to interpret the pre-Hispanic cultures of the region.<sup>8</sup>

7. Alfredo López Austin, “El núcleo duro, la cosmovisión y la tradición mesoamericana,” in *Cosmovisión, ritual e identidad de los pueblos indígenas de México*, ed. Johanna Broda and Felix Báez-Jorge (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes and Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001): 47–65.

8. George Kubler, “On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Pre-Columbian Art,” in *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, ed. Samuel K. Lothrop (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961): 14–34; also see Kubler, “Period, Style and Meaning in Ancient American Art,” *New Literary History* 1, no. 2 (1970): 127–44.

However, a number of scholars advocating for the direct historical approach have argued that, even taking into account the upheavals associated with the Conquest, enough continuities exist between the cultures of the ancient past and those of more recent times to justify making use of the latter as an aid to the interpretation of the former.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, valuable distinctions can and should be made between the specific cultural practices and beliefs of different peoples and time periods. Yet, just as important as the probing of individual contexts and case studies is the synthesis of these to understand the large-scale commonalities and shared beliefs of the culture area. As archaeologist Jeffrey Quilter has stated, “With a paradigm built on disjunction, opportunities for explaining the past, especially in symbolic matters, may now lie in assuming or demonstrating continuities.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, rather than indiscriminately assuming a unity of culture and thereby flattening the past, we must proceed cautiously as we tease out those features that are broadly shared from the ones that are more limited. As one of the most valuable sources of evidence available to us, abundant recourse is made in this study to early colonial written accounts documenting Indigenous culture, but this is done in conjunction with other lines of evidence—archaeological, iconographic, epigraphic—that serve to demonstrate continuities of the practices and beliefs being discussed.

### THE MATERIALITY OF JEWELS

As in Europe, the wearing of jewelry in Mesoamerica was done as a means to demonstrate wealth and social status. Sumptuary laws enforced by the Aztecs, and possibly by other groups, declared that certain types of adornment were allowed to be worn only by select categories of people, making them visible metonyms for rank, standing, or personal achievement.<sup>11</sup> Raw materials such as gold, greenstone, turquoise, and rock crystal, among others, were relatively rare and often obtainable only through long-distance trade or

9. For example, see Gordon R. Willey, “Mesoamerican Art and Iconography and the Integrity of the Mesoamerican Ideological System,” in *The Iconography of Middle American Sculpture*, ed. Ignacio Bernal et al. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973): 153–62; Cecelia F. Klein, “Conclusions: Pre-Columbian Gender Studies,” in *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, ed. Cecelia F. Klein (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001): 374–79; and Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube, *The Memory of Bones: Body, Being, and Experience among the Classic Maya* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006): 1–4.

10. Jeffrey Quilter, “Continuity and Disjunction in Pre-Columbian Art and Culture,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 29/30 (1996): 307.

11. Patricia R. Anawalt, “Costume and Control: Aztec Sumptuary Laws,” *Archaeology* 33, no. 1 (1980): 33–43; John E. Clark and Arlene Colman, “Dressed Ears as Comeliness and Godliness,” in *Wearing Culture: Dress*

tribute. Yet, as much recent research has shown, these materials were not valued only for their scarcity, but also for their physical properties, sensual attributes, and qualitative associations.<sup>12</sup> Their glinting surfaces gave the impression that they possessed active properties, and their colors were identified with aspects of the natural world associated with life and growth: the green of foliage and abundance, the golden yellow of the sun, or the clear of fresh water. These qualities were not merely metaphorical, but were also understood to be intrinsic to the essence of these materials. In discussing the ways deposits of precious stones were located, the informants of the sixteenth-century friar Bernardino de Sahagún state that those who know what to look for

. . . know where it is: they can see that it is breathing, [smoking], giving off vapor. Early, at early dawn, when [the sun] comes up, they find where to place themselves, where to stand; they face the sun. And when the sun has already come up, they are truly very attentive with looking. They look with diligence; they no longer blink; they look well. Wherever they can see that something like a little smoke [column] stands, that one of them is giving off vapor, this one is the precious stone. Perhaps it is a coarse stone; perhaps it is a common stone, or something smooth, or something round. They carry it away. And if they are not successful, if it is only barren where the little [column] of smoke stands, thus they know that the precious stone is there in the earth.

and *Regalia in Early Mesoamerica and Central America*, ed. H. Orr and M.Looper (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014): 145–205.

12. The literature on materiality in Mesoamerica, particularly that related to the symbolic and cultural values associated with precious materials, is extensive. Some important recent works include Allison Caplan, “So It Blossoms, So It Shines: Precious Feathers and Gold in Pre- and Post-Conquest Nahua Aesthetics” (master’s thesis, Tulane University, 2014); Laura Filloy Nadal, “Forests of Jade: Luxury Arts and Symbols of Excellence in Ancient Mesoamerica,” in *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas*, ed. Joanne Pillsbury, Timothy Potts, and Kim N. Richter (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum and Getty Research Institute, 2017): 67–77; Stephen D. Houston, “The Best of All Things: Beauty, Materials, and Society among the Classic Maya,” in *Ancient Maya Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, ed. Joanne Pillsbury, Miriam Doutriaux, Reiko Ishihara-Brito, and Alexandre Tokovinine (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2012): 85–99; Diana Magaloni Kerpel, “The Colors of Creation: Materials and Techniques in the Florentine Codex,” in *Manuscript Cultures of Colonial Mexico and Peru: New Questions and Approaches*, ed. Thomas B. F. Cummins, Emily A. Engel, Barbara Anderson, and Juan M. Ossio A. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2014): 175–189; Karl A. Taube, “The Symbolism of Jade in Classic Maya Religion,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 16 (2005): 23–50; and Karl A. Taube, “The Symbolism of Turquoise in Ancient Mesoamerica,” in *Turquoise in Mexico and North America: Science, Conservation, Culture and Collections*, ed. J. C. H. King, Max Carocci, Caroline Cartwright, Colin McEwan, and Rebecca Stacey (London: Archetype Publications, 2012): 117–34.

Then they dig. There they see, there they find the precious stone, perhaps already well formed, perhaps already burnished. Perhaps they see something buried there either in stone, or in a stone bowl, or in a stone chest; perhaps it is filled with precious stones. This they claim there.

And thus do they know that this precious stone is there: [the herbs] always grow fresh; they grow green. They say this is the breath of the green stone, and its breath is very fresh; it is an announcer of its qualities. In this manner is seen, is taken the green stone.<sup>13</sup>

This passage describes precious stones as possessing qualities that were manifested even when their surfaces were unpolished, or when they were still buried within the earth. Even when it was hidden or invisible, greenstone had an inner vitality—exuded as its “breath”—that could be detected as the rising mists at sunrise and which caused the foliage in the surrounding earth to grow fresh and green (Figure 2). That is to say, the living stone was understood to interact with its environment and affect its surroundings. Once the stone was extracted and worked, the vivid coloration and hard, glistening surface of polished greenstone—as well as the floral forms into which it was often carved—visibly manifested qualities that the material had exuded even when it remained unworked and unseen.

As with other aspects of the natural world, the externally visible attributes of greenstone were therefore understood to arise directly from the internal character of the material. According to the categorization devised by the logician Charles Sanders Peirce, this type of relationship between a sign and its referent is indexical. In contrast to the icon, which signifies through a similarity or resemblance, and the symbol, which signifies through a purely arbitrary convention and usually denotes a general concept, the index is a concrete sign that “denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object [to which it refers].”<sup>14</sup> Beyond being mere qualities, the external features of precious materials such as greenstone resulted from—and served as indices of—the inner life and vitality of these substances. In the Mesoamerican mind, a dynamic,

13. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: The General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. and ed. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. 12 Books in 13 Volumes (Santa Fe: School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1953–1982): Book XI, Chapter 8 (1963: 221–22).

14. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, eds., *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume II: Elements of Logic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932): 143.

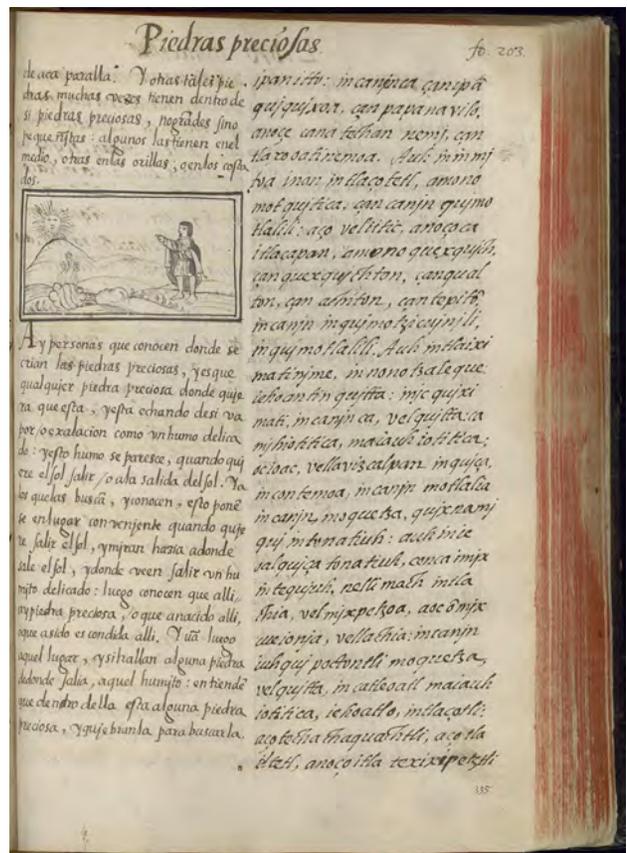


FIGURE 2. Unidentified Artist, *Locating Precious Stones at Sunrise*, illustration from Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, 1575–77. Ink on paper, page size approx. 12 1/5 × 8 1/3 in. (31 × 21.2 cm). Florence, Laurentian Library, Ms. Med. Palat. 220, f. 355r. By permission of MiBAC. Any further reproduction by any means is prohibited (artwork in the public domain; image provided by the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana).

indexical relationship existed between visible appearances as signs and the invisible attributes that they pointed to. Moreover, in their affective materiality, objects were understood to belong to an unfolding chain of indexical signification as they exerted influence upon—or were further influenced by—their surroundings.

Based on early colonial accounts and more recent ethnographies, we can be more precise about the ways the invisible, agentive life forces that imbued the material world were conceptualized in Aztec thought. For example, the fact that precious stones buried within the earth were looked for at sunrise draws a correspondence between the potency attributed to them and *tonalli*, a Nahuatl term referring to the heat given off by the sun, but also that which is present in

the blood of living creatures.<sup>15</sup> *Tonalli* was understood to be an animating force that bound together the fates of terrestrial beings and celestial bodies. Constantly in flux, it could be concentrated, as in highly charismatic individuals, or dissipated, as with the waning of vigor toward the end of life. It also infused inorganic materials, especially those whose surfaces shone brightly when touched by the light (and heat) of the sun. Gold—*teocuitlatl*, or “divine excrement”—was particularly associated with *tonalli*: thought to be deposited within the earth by the sun as it rose, it was a material condensation of vital solar energy.<sup>16</sup> Gold ornaments were often formed with numerous facets or moving parts to better accentuate their glittering surfaces, which were visual demonstrations of the *tonalli* they possessed. Just as the ways gold and precious stones were worked revealed qualities inherent within the material, a tautological equivalence was established between elites and the noble materials with which they were adorned: jewels served to identify the wearer as noble because they were understood to be indexically correlated to—or even manifestations of—the *tonalli* contained within the body of the individual.<sup>17</sup>

Although Sahagún’s informants tell us that this association between the precious materiality of jewels and the noble character of the adorned held true however they were worn—even if it was in a superficial manner, such as with necklaces or bracelets—the embedding of ornaments within the body undoubtedly made this conflation all the more explicit.<sup>18</sup> Piercing the flesh to open a hole for this purpose would inevitably result in the drawing of blood, the precious fluid that, in its warmth and movement through the body, was closely identified with the solar heat of *tonalli*. In Mesoamerica, the body was regularly perforated for the sole purpose of ritualized bloodletting, and piercing for adornment could not have failed to evoke this practice. Indeed, although these bodily treatments are usually discussed as being separate and distinct, there is good reason to believe that a significant conceptual overlap existed between the practice of

piercing the flesh in bloodletting rituals and the production of somatic holes intended to accommodate jewelry. Before this argument can be made, however, the roles of auto-sacrificial bloodletting in Mesoamerica need to be more fully addressed.

## BLOODLETTING RITUALS

The perforating of the body and offering of one’s own blood appears to have been one of the most widespread ritual acts in Mesoamerica, dating back at least to the Middle Formative period.<sup>19</sup> It is attested to by the presence of implements used for this purpose in the archaeological record, by imagery depicting auto-sacrificial activities, and by sixteenth-century accounts as well as more recent ethnographic records. A variety of materials—cactus spines, thorns, obsidian needles, stingray spines—were used to puncture the flesh at different points in the body, including the ears, tongue, elbow, penis, thighs, shins, and calves. The blood that was produced in this manner was understood to feed the gods as part of a consumptive cosmology. The gods had sacrificed themselves to create the world, and they in turn required continual nourishment to sustain it. Thus, auto-sacrifice was an obligation on both sides within the constant and reciprocal flow of life energies.<sup>20</sup> The Nahuatl word *nextlabualli* (“payment”) was used to describe sacrifice of all sorts, making explicit its status as a remittance of a debt.<sup>21</sup> Another Nahuatl term closely associated with bloodletting is *tlamaceualiztli*, which means “to merit or deserve something.” Art historian Cecelia Klein sees this as relating to the inherent reciprocity that underpinned this

19. Michel Graulich, “Autosacrifice in Ancient Mexico,” *Estudios de cultura nahuatl* 36 (2005): 301–29; Cecelia F. Klein, “Autosacrifice and Bloodletting,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 64–66; Zelia Nuttall, *A Penitential Rite of the Ancient Mexicans* (Archaeological and Ethnological Papers of the Peabody Museum 1.7, Cambridge, MA, The Museum, 1904).

20. Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 73–75; Kay Almere Read, *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1998): 123–55.

21. Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, Book 1, trans. T. Ortiz de Montellano and B. Ortiz de Montellano (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988 [1980]): 380–81; cf. Ulrich Köhler, “‘Debt-Payment’ to the Gods among the Aztecs: The Misrendering of a Spanish Expression and Its Effects,” *Estudios de cultura nahuatl* 32 (2001): 125–57. Köhler takes issue with the term “debt-payment” because of its one-sidedness (i.e., humans owed the gods), while nevertheless drawing the similar conclusion that sacrifice was owed to the gods as part of a reciprocal obligation.

15. Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, Vol. 1, trans. Thelma Ortiz de Montellano and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988 [1980]): 204–28; Jill Leslie McKeever Furst, *The Natural History of the Soul in Ancient Mexico* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995): 63–130.

16. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book XI, Chapter 9 (1963: 232–33).

17. Justyna Olko, *Insignia of Rank in the Nabua World: From the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014): 313–14; Caplan, “So It Blossoms,” 52.

18. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book XI, Chapter 8 (1963: 223).

act, both between the humans and the gods and between the lower classes and the elites.<sup>22</sup> This term was also translated as “penance” by the sixteenth-century Spanish friars, likely as the closest fit to convey Christian doctrine to the newly converted Indigenous population, and art historian Michel Graulich argued that for the Aztecs, sacrifice was at its core an expiatory cleansing of sins.<sup>23</sup>

The Maya word most closely associated with bloodletting is *ch’abb*, a complex term for which it has proven difficult to find an entirely adequate translation into English. *Ch’abb* roughly means penance or penitence, and is used specifically to refer to fasting in a number of Maya languages.<sup>24</sup> A literal link between fasting and bloodletting may be posited. Certainly, it must have been the case that the practice of drawing cords through tongues would have resulted in a reduced intake of food, just as the drawing of a cord through the penis would have created a wound necessitating a period of sexual abstinence. Stephen Houston, however, has recently argued that this term conveys a more general sense of “ritual abnegation leading to a desired outcome,” that is, a form of “spiritual preparation.”<sup>25</sup> Complicating things, the Yukatek cognate for this word, *ch’ab*, means both “to abstain” or “to do penance” and “to create” or “to make from nothing.”<sup>26</sup> Finally, *ch’abb* was used as part of parentage statements in some Classic-period inscriptions. This overlay of usages has led anthropologist Timothy Knowlton to propose “genesis” as the English word that best captures its nuances.<sup>27</sup> Through the interrelated meanings associated with this term, we can begin to get a



FIGURE 3. Late Classic Maya, *Yaxchilan Lintel 24*, 723–726. Limestone, 42 11/12 × 30 7/10 × 2 1/3 in. (109 × 78 × 6 cm). British Museum, AM1923, Maud.4 (artwork in the public domain; photograph © Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.).

sense of what *ch’abb* indicated in statements related to auto-sacrificial bloodletting.

According to archaeologist Jessica Munson and her colleagues, out of eighty-nine identified instances of this glyph in Classic Maya inscriptions, sixty-nine “appeared to be directly associated with bloodletting.”<sup>28</sup> There is thus a close but imprecise association with its usage and bloodletting rituals, with *ch’abb* being used to refer to non-bloodletting contexts slightly less than a quarter of the time. On Lintel 24 at Yaxchilán, we see it applied to both figures: the ruler Shield Jaguar III, who stands to the left holding a torch, and his wife Lady K’abal Xook, who kneels to the right as she draws a thorny cord through her tongue (Figure 3). The text related to the ruler states, in part, that “it is his image

22. Cecelia F. Klein, “The Ideology of Autosacrifice at the Templo Mayor,” in *The Aztec Templo Mayor: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 8th and 9th October 1983*, ed. E. H. Boone (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987): 293–370.

23. Michel Graulich, “Aztec Human Sacrifice as Expiation,” *History of Religions* 39, no. 4 (2000): 352–71.

24. Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube, *The Memory of Bones: Body, Being, and Experience among the Classic Maya* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006): 130–32.

25. Stephen Houston, *The Gifted Passage: Young Men in Classic Maya Art and Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018): 98.

26. Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, *Diccionario Maya Cordemex: Maya-Español, Español-Maya*, with editorial help by J. R. Bastarrachea Manzano and W. B. Sansores, and with contributions by R. Vermont Salas, D. Dzul Góngora, and D. Dzul Poot (Mérida, Mexico: Ediciones Cordemex, 1980): 120.

27. Timothy W. Knowlton, *Maya Creation Myths: Words and Worlds in the Chilam Balam* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2010): 24. Knowlton (2010: 32) also remarks that, while the compilers of Maya-Spanish dictionaries assigned *ch’ab* the meaning “to create from nothing,” Maya creation did not occur *ex nihilo* and that *ch’ab* rather relates to procreativity and engendering.

28. Jessica Munson, Viviana Amati, Mark Collard, and Martha J. Macri, “Classic Maya Bloodletting and the Cultural Evolution of Religious Rituals: Quantifying Patterns of Variation in Hieroglyphic Texts,” *PLOS One* 9, no. 9 (2014): 1–13.

in penance [*ch'abb*] with the fiery spear. It is the penance [*ch'abb*] of the four *k'atun* lord, Shield Jaguar III,” while the inscription related to Lady K'abal Xook simply states that “it is her image in penance [*ch'abb*]” before giving her name and titles.<sup>29</sup> Thus, while the depicted auto-sacrificial ritual of the noblewoman is referred to as *ch'abb*, Shield Jaguar III, who is not shown to be engaging in bloodletting, is twice associated with the same term, once explicitly in reference to the torch he holds. The deictic marking of the text—the claim that “it is his image in penance” (*u-baab ti-ch'abb*)—strongly implies that the inscription refers specifically to what is shown in the associated image.

*Ch'abb* was often paired with the term *ak'ab*, “darkness,” to form a diphastic couplet that further complicates an understanding of its meaning. Following Ralph Roys, Marc Zender sees *ch'abb ak'ab*—“genesis-darkness”—as conveying the potential to sire children.<sup>30</sup> It was something that captives were said to lack or be denied—“his image without creation, without darkness”—and the progenerative capacity to which it referred might be better understood as agency more broadly.<sup>31</sup> It appears to have designated the individual as a source of potency capable of bringing forth children, fire, or blood. Captives were placed into a state of abstinence, and their blood was often spilled in sacrifice, but these conditions did not reflect their *ch'abb* because they were inflicted upon them from outside rather than originating within.

First penance/creation (*yax ch'abb*) was a rite of passage undertaken by young Maya nobles during the Classic period, an event of enough importance to have been performed in front of dozens of witnesses and to be recorded on a number of stone monuments.<sup>32</sup> As Stephen Houston observes, children as young as five years old, both male and female, entered into a new social status and age of responsibility through this ritual.<sup>33</sup> Monumental records of these

ceremonies tend to relate to unusual or fraught claims to dynastic succession, such as an individual who would ascend to the throne following the death of his childless half-brother.<sup>34</sup> If such *yax ch'abb* events were therefore seen to bolster claims to legitimate authority, it cannot have been simply a matter of the bloodletting itself, which was almost certainly much more widely practiced by adults in Mesoamerica. Rather, it was likely the communion with deities and ancestors that was accomplished through this act, which would have provided young nobles with privileged access to powerful tutelary gods and forebearers, that served to legitimize authority.<sup>35</sup>

This is clearly seen on the so-called Hauberg Stela, on which a Maya noble is engaging in *yax ch'abb tu k'uhil*, the “first penance [or, genesis] for his god” (Figure 4).<sup>36</sup> The young lord is depicted with marks of divinity—a curl in his pupil, a curling element at the side of his mouth, and a central shark-tooth-like fang—and he is shown in communion with supernatural beings. These miniature anthropomorphic forms climb along the rope-like serpent that is held in his arms and which rises in front of him. In Maya art, serpents are frequently depicted as portals of communication with the spirit world, and this one is shown to be such by the face that emerges from within its wide-open maw. This head gazes down upon the lord below in a position often occupied by deities and deceased ancestors in Maya ruler portraits.<sup>37</sup> At the point where the body of the serpent rises upward, a crenelated stream of blood flows downward in front of and apparently emanating from the figure. Within this outpouring are the upper bodies of three small figures, scrolls of blood flowing from their severed torsos. In performing his “first penance / genesis,” this ruler has both become the *baab* (manifested image) of a deity and summoned or conjured (*tzak*) further divine manifestations through the shedding of his blood.

Auto-sacrificial bloodletting performed by Aztec nobles appears to have functioned in ways analogous to what has been proposed for *ch'abb* events among Maya nobility. At the time of their election to the office, Aztec rulers underwent a period of fasting and penance that included the piercing of their flesh to offer blood to their patron deity,

29. Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions Online: <https://www.peabody.harvard.edu/cmhi/detail.php?num=24&site=Yaxchilan&type=Lintel>.

30. Marc Zender, “Diacritical Marks and Underspelling in Classic Maya Script” (master’s thesis, University of Calgary, 1999): 125–27.

31. Christophe Helmke and James E. Brady, “Epigraphic and Archaeological Evidence for Cave Desecration in Ancient Maya Warfare,” in *A Celebration of the Life and Work of Pierre Robert Colas*, ed. Christophe Helmke and Frauke Sachse (Munich, Verlag Anton Saurwein, 2014): 195–227.

32. David Stuart, “A Childhood Ritual on the Hauberg Stela,” *Maya Decipherment: A Weblog on the Ancient Maya Script*, 27 March 2008, <https://decipherment.wordpress.com/2008/03/27/a-childhood-ritual-on-the-hauberg-stela/>.

33. Houston, *The Gifted Passage*, 100–105.

34. Houston, *The Gifted Passage*, 101.

35. David Stuart, “Royal Auto-Sacrifice among the Maya: A Study of Image and Meaning,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 7/8 (1984): 6–20; Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (New York, G. Braziller, 1986): 175–85.

36. Houston, *The Gifted Passage*, 101.

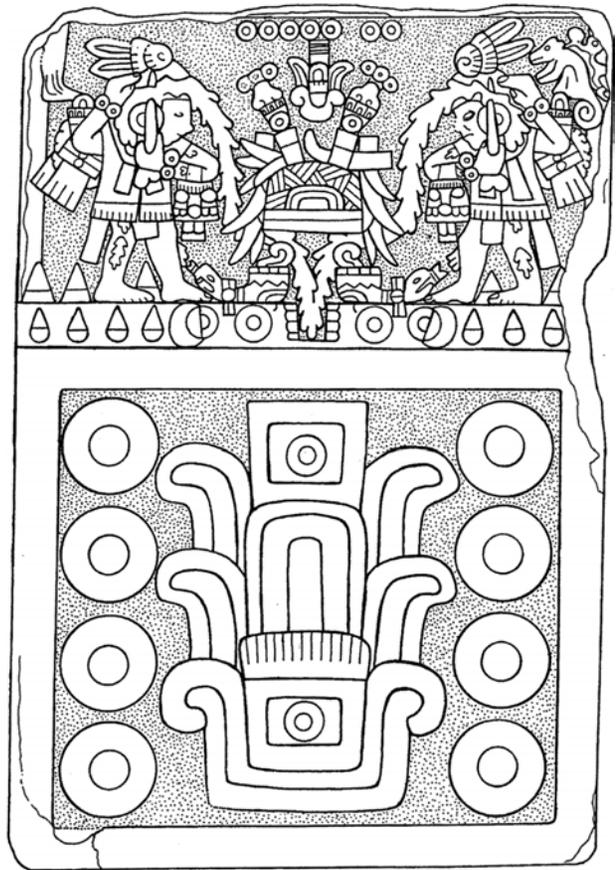
37. Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 84.



**FIGURE 4.** *Early Classic Maya Stela (The Hauberg Stela)*, c. 300–500. Limestone,  $33 \times 14 \frac{13}{16} \times 3 \frac{11}{16}$  in. ( $83.8 \times 37.7 \times 9.4$  cm). Princeton University Art Museum, 1999-232, Gift of John H. Hauberg, Class of 1939, in honor of Gillett G. Griffin (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Princeton University Art Museum).

Huitzilopochtli.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, several important monuments prominently depicted the rulers themselves engaging in this act in the presence of a deceased predecessor or deity. The Dedication Stone, a relief carved onto a large slab of greenstone, features a pair of profile figures perforating the upper portions of their ears with bone awls (Figure 5). Copious

38. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book VIII, Chapter 18 (1954: 62–64).



**FIGURE 5.** Aztec, *The Dedication Stone*, 1487–88. Greenstone,  $36 \frac{1}{4} \times 24 \frac{2}{5}$  in. ( $92 \times 62$  cm). Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (artwork in the public domain; drawing provided by Emily Umberger).

streams of blood flow down past the incense burners placed at their feet and into the open mouth of the earth monster on which they stand. Both figures are identified by the name glyphs behind their heads. To the right is Ahuizotl, the ruler at the time this monument, which likely commemorated ceremonies related to the rededication of the Templo Mayor, was made. On the left is Tizoc, his deceased brother and predecessor. A similar composition is found on the backrest of the monument variously referred to as the Temple Stone, the Teocalli of Sacred War, or the Throne of Moctezuma (Figure 6). Here, the figures flank a central solar disk containing the glyph 4 Movement, the date associated with the current sun. They hold perforators in front of themselves in preparation to offer their blood. The figure on the right is the current ruler, Moctezuma II, identified by a name glyph in front of his head. The figure across from him is not named, but he has the attributes of at least two Aztec deities closely associated with

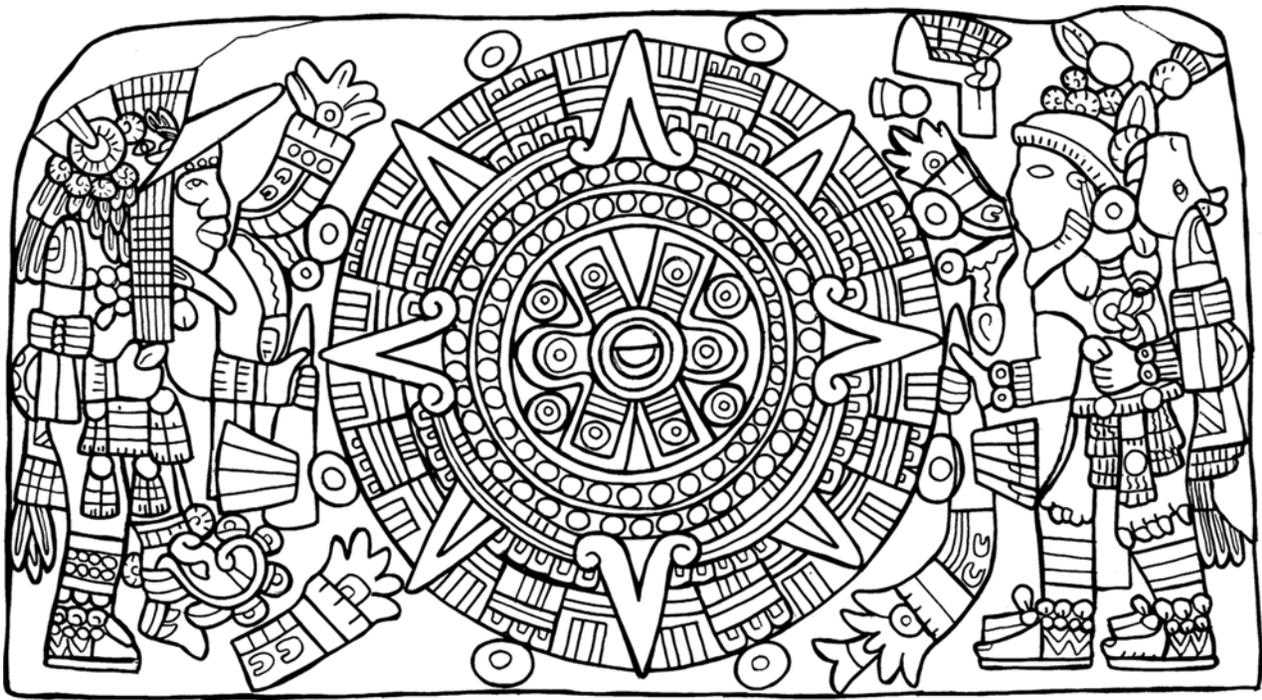


FIGURE 6. Aztec, *Backrest of the Temple Stone*, 1502–20. Basalt, 48 7/16 × 36 1/4 × 39 3/8 in. (123 × 92 × 100 cm). Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (artwork in the public domain; drawing provided by Emily Umberger).

rulership: the hummingbird headdress of Huitzilopochtli and the serpent foot of Tezcatlipoca. Thus, on both of these monuments, bloodletting is shown to be an important obligation of the ruler—nourishing the earth and feeding the sun—an obligation that served to connect him to his (deceased) predecessors and the gods themselves, who were made present through this act.

Further Aztec monuments prominently featured bloodletting as their subject in ways that extended beyond a direct connection with rulership and the legitimization of authority. This is usually conveyed through the representation of a ball of grass into which perforators have been placed—such as the one seen between the Tizoc and Ahuitzotl in Figure 5—and such imagery appears to have been especially associated with the military orders and warfare.<sup>39</sup> A similar thematic link is also found among the Classic Maya, for whom Munson and her colleagues “identified antagonistic statements about warfare and conflict to be the primary contexts in which bloodletting is mentioned” in monumental inscriptions.<sup>40</sup> Drawing on signaling theory, these authors have proposed that auto-sacrificial activities were “costly signals”—painful and demanding of great willpower,

as well as being potentially damaging to the body—and that permanent records of them on monuments served to advertise the personal commitments of the elites within a social milieu demanding significant sacrifices from lower status individuals in war. Certainly, many images depicting nobles appear to exaggerate the ordeal. On Yaxchilan Lintel 24, the rope that Lady K’abal Xook draws through her tongue is as thick as one of her fingers and has extremely large thorns projecting from it (see Figure 3). And the amount of blood gushing from the cartilaginous ear tissue of Ahuitzotl and Tizoc on the Aztec Dedication Stone begs credulity (see Figure 5). This is all to say that such records are propagandistic representations rather than objective accounts, and they must be analyzed as such.

Indeed, if the preceding discussion has focused primarily on the bloodletting activities of elites, that is because they are the best documented; monumental artworks and inscriptions tend to have rulers and nobles as their subjects. However, there is significant evidence that auto-sacrifice was practiced by most or all Mesoamericans, at least at the time of the conquest. Early Spanish accounts mention bloodletting as a universal aspect of Mesoamerican religious activity, occurring among the commoners as well as the nobility. For example, Sahagún records that on the feast day of

39. Klein, “The Ideology of Autosacrifice,” 298–317.

40. Munson et al., “Classic Maya Bloodletting,” 10.

the sun, Nahui Ollin (4 Movement), “all the people bloodied themselves, and no supplications were then made. But everyone drew blood; straws were passed through tongue or ear-lobe, and incense was offered. Everyone [did so]; none were negligent.”<sup>41</sup> In his *Relación* of 1612, Oidor Tomás López Medel stated:

It was very usual, as I have already said, among the Mexicans and Guatemalans (for all had certain sacrifices and rites) to sacrifice to the idols that they found on the roads, anointing the face of the idol with blood they drew right there, either from their ears, piercing them, or from their nostrils or tongue, and even from their private parts, according to what others say, so that anyone who passed by any idol and did not offer him any portion of blood drawn there from his own body was not considered devout or good, in the same way that we do reverence when we come upon any cross or image on any journey.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, we see individual bloodletting as a fundamental act of worship practiced by or expected of all members of contact-era Mesoamerican society, and not limited to the elites.

While we have only a limited number of records documenting some Classic Maya elites celebrating their *yax ch'abb*, first bloodletting was an important ceremony for all Aztec children no matter their social standing. As recounted by Friar Diego Durán, recently born infants were brought to the Templo Mayor during the month of Huey Tozoztli (“Great Perforation”), where the priest of Huitzilopochtli would lightly incise the ears and, if the child was male, the penis.<sup>43</sup> This aspect of Huey Tozoztli celebrations was not recorded by Sahagún, who instead situates the ritual first piercing of children in a quadrennial ceremony during the month of Izcalli, as part of

41. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book II, Appendix (1951: 202–3); also see Book IV, Chapter 2 (1957: 6–7).

42. Alfred M. Tozzer, *Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan: A Translation*, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. XVIII (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum, 1941): 222.

43. Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, trans. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971): 423–24; Durán (1971: 419) states that in the previous month (Tozoztontli), “all children under twelve were bled, even breast-fed babes. Their ears were pierced—their tongues, their shins.” But this is explicitly characterized as taking place “in honor of the coming feast,” Huey Tozoztli (the “Great Perforation”), so it is likely that recently weaned children were first pierced during the fourth month, and then were subsequently bled during the third month of each year until they were twelve.



FIGURE 7. Unidentified Artist, *First Bloodletting Ceremony during Izcalli*, illustration from Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, 1575–77. Ink and pigment on paper, page size approx. 12 1/5 × 8 1/3 in. (31 × 21.2 cm). Florence, Laurentian Library, Ms. Med. Palat. 218, f. 158v. By permission of MiBAC. Any further reproduction by any means is prohibited (artwork in the public domain; image provided by the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana).

the festival in honor of the fire god, Xiuhtecuhtli.<sup>44</sup> All Aztec children who were weaned since the last time the ritual was performed were taken to the temple, where their ears were perforated by the priest (Figure 7). This ceremony ushered these young children—who were notably of a similar age to many of those Maya nobles for whom *yax ch'abb* ceremonies are recorded—into a new

44. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book I, Chapter 13 (1950: 12), and Book II, Chapters 18–19 and 37–38 (1951: 34, 41, 152, and 156). Noting the quadrennial status of this ritual, Sahagún (Book II, Chapter 18 [1951: 35]) states that “there is conjecture that when they pierced the boys’ and girls’ ears, which was every four years, they set aside six days of Nemontemi [the normally five un-named days at the end of the solar calendar], and it is the same as the bissextile which we observe every four years.”

status of personhood, marking their transition toward maturation and socialization.<sup>45</sup>

In the early twentieth century, anthropologist Alfred Tozzer also observed bloodletting among the Lacandon Maya as part of an elaborate ceremony accompanying the dedication of a new “god pot” brazier.<sup>46</sup> Tozzer, however, speculated that this practice was dying out as it was only the old men who engaged in it. Anthropologist R. Jon McGee, who conducted fieldwork with the Lacandones during the 1980s, observed that god pots were painted with dots of a red dye that was explicitly identified as a substitute for human blood, and that “older men in the village all remember making ritual offerings of their own blood to their god pots.”<sup>47</sup> One of the only Indigenous groups to have remained unconquered and unconverted, the Lacandones live in relatively egalitarian villages in what is now Chiapas. Thus, self-bleeding, which likely represented a survival of pre-Hispanic religious practice, cannot be characterized solely in terms of elite strategies for legitimizing power.

The ubiquity of auto-sacrificial activities across classes suggests that the potential for infection or permanent damage was relatively low. Certainly, some bodily treatments had greater potential for risk than others, and some overzealous penitents appear to have intentionally engaged in self-mortifying acts that left their bodies in tatters.<sup>48</sup> Yet, for the majority of Mesoamerican people, this was not the case. Several herbs were known that could have been used to staunch bleeding, treat inflammations, and sterilize both instruments and wounds.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, exactly such a practice was witnessed by the Spaniard Egidio Gonzales in sixteenth-century Nicaragua:

When the priests give a signal, each man takes a razor, and cuts his tongue, turning his eyes towards the divinity; some pierce the tongue, others cut it in such wise as to cause a great flow of blood. Each man then rubs

45. Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation*, 189–92; Rosemary A. Joyce, *Gender and Power in Prehispanic Mesoamerica* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000): 151–53.

46. Alfred M. Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandones* (New York: Archaeological Institute of America, 1907): 136.

47. R. Jon McGee, *Life, Ritual, and Religion among the Lacandon Maya* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990): 88.

48. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*, ed. David Carrasco (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008): 81.

49. Martín de la Cruz, *An Aztec Herbal: The Classic Codex of 1552*, trans. and with commentary by William Gates, introduction by Bruce Byland (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000); Sven Gronemeyer, “Bloodletting and Vision Quest among the Classic Maya: A Medical and Iconographic Reevaluation,” *Human Mosaic* 34, nos. 1–2 (2003): 5–14.

the lips and beard of this odious idol, with his blood, as we have said in our first description of sacrifices, after which the powdered herbs are sprinkled on the fresh wounds. Such is the virtue of this powder, that the wounds close in a few hours so that no trace of them is ever again visible.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the best evidence that bodily perforations were commonly made without significant adverse health effects throughout all cultures of Mesoamerican civilization is the presence of body ornaments in the material record. Large holes made to accommodate the oversized earflares in evidence throughout all periods, as well as the nasal and lip piercings worn by a number of elites, would have required regular attention after they were made as they healed and were slowly stretched.

### VIVIFYING JEWELS

Following the ritual first bloodletting of young children by the Aztecs during quadrennial Izcalli ceremonies, cords of unspun cotton were placed through the holes that were produced.<sup>51</sup> This ensured that the openings in the flesh were kept open and began the slow process of widening them to later accommodate ear ornaments.<sup>52</sup> The spaces in which jewels were to be placed were thus closely associated with the holes from which sacrificial blood was offered. The adornments kept these artificially made orifices continually open and, being made from materials that were themselves infused with *tonalli*, served as permanent tokens of the potency flowing forth from the living body. This indexical, representational role played by ornaments is only part of the picture, however. There was a reciprocal relationship between flesh and jewelry, such that the beneficial emanations from the materials the ornaments were made from could also be absorbed by the body.<sup>53</sup> Corporeal holes were conceived not only as releasing *tonalli* through the blood, but also as allowing for its entrance. Discussing the persistence of “superstitions” among the recently converted Aztecs, Durán noted the following:

They have introduced magic beliefs even in the perforating and the placing of earrings in the ears of women and girls. Let the truth be told. One day I entered a home to visit and console some ailing people during the

50. Martyr d’Anghiera, *De Orbe Novo*, Vol. II: 232.

51. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book II, Chapter 38 (1951: 156).

52. Joyce, *Gender and Power*, 152.

53. Caplan, “So It Blossoms,” 53–54.

great plague which raged in this year. I found a sick old man seated, wearing some earrings which he had donned on the orders of a deceitful doctor, who had made him believe that if [he placed them in his ears] he would not die. And therefore you will see these [earrings] worn by old women who have almost turned into dust, who believe . . . that their life will be prolonged by wearing them.<sup>54</sup>

Looking past Durán's polemics, this passage points to an Indigenous understanding of ornaments as exerting a vivifying effect upon the bodies within which they were worn. Thus, the holes made to accommodate them allowed the ingress of animating forces into the body. This is also seen in Sahagún's description of the initial piercing ceremony. Immediately following the perforating of the ears of Aztec children during the Izcalli rites, which were dedicated to the fire god, Xiuhtecuhtli, they were passed over a fire:

And when they pierced the ears [of the children], thereupon they took the little ones to singe them; they laid and made a fire, and scattered much incense over the flames.

And hence it was said: "They are singed." The old men of the tribal temple seized all of them. They took the small children and dedicated them over the fire.<sup>55</sup>

This suggests that the holes were made, in part, to allow for the infusion of the vital heat of the fire into the children, much as newborn infants were placed next to the hearth for four days following their birth to saturate them with *tonalli* heat.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, holes in the body—the natural orifices that serve as the interface between inside and outside—were understood as a *sine qua non* for life, and the production of them was a metaphor for birth itself.

This is seen in birth almanacs from several Central Mexican codices, which include depictions of deities piercing infants with bone awls. In the Codex Borgia, the infants are depicted full bodied and the fates associated with each cell are indicated by the different deities doing the perforating (Figure 8). In all cases, the awl is held to the eyes of the children, suggesting their initial eye-opening at birth. The version in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, which shows only the heads of the infants held in the hands of the gods, includes one cell in which the awl is aimed at the mouth, from which a scroll ending in a maize cob emerges (Figure 9).

54. Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites*, 150.

55. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book II, Chapter 37 (1951: 152).

56. Furst, *Natural History of the Soul*, 96–102.

In this case, both breath and the intake of food are implicated. Anthropologist Markus Eberl sees the perforation imagery in the birth almanacs as potentially relating to actual treatments of children, including the healing of a clouding of the eyes sometimes experienced by infants.<sup>57</sup> Yet he also discusses these images in relation to the final forming of infants into fully human beings. Based on a passage from Sahagún's Florentine Codex, art historian Elizabeth Boone has also interpreted these scenes metaphorically, seeing them as reflecting the painful act of parturition as well as the initial boring and breathing of life into a newborn child by the creator deities.<sup>58</sup> Addressing the newly born infant she was bathing, the midwife would say: "Thy mother, thy father, Ome tecuhtli, Ome ciuatl have sent thee. Thou wert [breathed], thou wert bored in thy home, the place of duality."<sup>59</sup> That is to say, the body must first be perforated to allow animating forces—breath, life, the soul—to enter into it. Likewise, the insertion of precious jewels into holes made in the flesh was undoubtedly understood to have had a fructifying effect on people.

A similar vivifying effect appears to have also been present in relation to the insertion of greenstone or other precious materials into some anthropomorphic sculpture. This is most frequently seen among the Aztecs, but it is also present in some Postclassic-era Huastec figures as well as a number of Classic-period examples from Teotihuacán, where this practice possibly originated. In an inverse situation to the piercing of the human body, which is attested through the survival of durable ornaments, this practice is best known through the cavities excavated in the centers of the chests or abdomens of statues that were typically made from basalt or a similar volcanic stone. It is presumed that these openings were produced to accommodate the placement of inserts made from greenstone or other precious materials, but only in rare cases have these been recovered. Several standard-bearer figures that were placed along the staircase of Stage III of the Templo Mayor at the time of its encasement within the next expansion of this structure have holes in their chests within which pieces of greenstone

57. Marcus Eberl, "Nourishing Gods: Birth and Personhood in Highland Mexican Codices," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 23, no. 3 (2013): 453–76.

58. Elizabeth H. Boone, *Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007): 140.

59. This quotation is Boone's modified translation of a passage from Sahagún (Book VI, Chapter 37 [1969: 202]), which Anderson and Dibble have as "thou wert cast, thou wert bored."



FIGURE 8. Mixteca-Puebla, *Birth Almanac*, Codex Borgia, page 15, c. 1250–1520. pigment on deerskin, 10 5/8 × 10 5/8 in. (27 × 27 cm). Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. Borg. Messicano 1 (artwork in the public domain; image © 2019 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, used by permission with all rights reserved).

were placed.<sup>60</sup> While most similar cavities in sculptures of standing or seated human figures were found empty, their consistent siting in the center of the body has led to their being commonly discussed as spaces to accommodate

60. Elsa C. Hernández Pons, “Sobre un conjunto de esculturas asociadas a las escalintas del Templo Mayor,” in *El Templo Mayor: excavaciones y estudios*, ed. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1982): 221–32.

“hearts” made of greenstone.<sup>61</sup> This use of small precious stones to animate anthropomorphic sculptural representations parallels the treatment of human remains as recounted

61. Colin McEwan and Leonardo López Luján, *Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler* (London: British Museum Press, 2009): 48; also see p. 43 of the same catalog for a relatively large Aztec sculpture of a heart carved from greenstone, an object that directly equates this living, breathing material with the beating center of animal life.



**FIGURE 9.** Mixteca-Puebla, *Birth Almanac*, Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, page 23, c. 1250–1520. Pigment on deerskin, 6 7/8 × 6 7/8 in. (17.5 × 17.5 cm). National Museums Liverpool, M12014 (artwork in the public domain; image Courtesy National Museums Liverpool, World Museum).

in the Florentine Codex: “And when the chiefs and princes died, they laid in their mouths green stones. And those who were only peasants [they provided] only a [common] greenish stone or [a piece of] obsidian. It was said that these became their hearts.”<sup>62</sup> Centuries earlier, greenstone beads were also placed in the mouths of the dead by the Classic Maya, and this practice appears to date back at least to the Late Formative period.<sup>63</sup>

The visual qualities of shell, obsidian, and turquoise—particularly their coloration and the way they glinted in the light—resulted in their being inlaid into shallow recesses in the volcanic stone of Aztec figural sculptures to more naturalistically depict physical features such as eyes, teeth, and jewelry (Figure 10). These elements served to enliven the statues through their representational qualities, but their materiality was likely of equal importance in this regard. As with the discussion of Central Mexican birth almanacs and the boring and breathing of infants, the creation of cavities in these sculptures into which precious materials that were closely associated with life energies were inserted would have vivified them. That this was typically done at precisely

62. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book III, Appendix (1952: 43).

63. Andrew Scherer, *Mortuary Landscapes of the Classic Maya: Rituals of Body and Soul* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015): 73–76.

the places associated with the metaphorical or literal boring of the infant—the eyes, which were opened in this manner; the mouth and nose, opening a space for breath; the ears, which were perforated as an initiation into bloodletting—as well as the “heart,” strongly suggests that the treatment of some statues was analogous to that of human subjects.

The assumption that the holes in the chests or abdomens of figural sculptures were intended to contain inserts made from precious and efficacious materials that enlivened these representations is somewhat complicated by the presence of similar cavities in some figures made of greenstone. A notable example of this is the Aztec carving known as the Stuttgart Figurine (Figure 11). As with several of the standard-bearer figures recovered from the Templo Mayor, this skeletal figure has a pair of holes in the center of its body, one just beneath the breastbone and the other directly below it on the lower stomach. The placement of these holes is suggestive of the heart and the navel.<sup>64</sup> The former was the pulsing, animate center of life, while the latter was akin to the *axis mundi*. As described by historian Alfredo López Austin, “the central point in the body, the area of the navel, is one of the most important in magical thought. It is linked to the idea of the central point on the earth’s surface, the house of the fire god, a place through which the cosmic axis permitted communication with the celestial world and the underworld.”<sup>65</sup> Anthropologist Eduard Seler suggested that the holes in the Stuttgart Figurine were made with the intention of incorporating additional pieces of stone into the sculpture, and indeed we see red spondylus shell inserted into the mouth and cheeks and yellow shell in the nasal cavity.<sup>66</sup> These areas of contrasting color set off and draw attention to the places of breath and life, and this would also have been the case for the heart and navel. Yet the entire object is already made from the precious, breathing, *teotl*-saturated material of greenstone, a substance that was itself used to vivify sculptures made of volcanic stone.

Thus, in addition to having been created as a means to accommodate vitalizing inserts, it is likely that the drilling of the holes themselves contributed to the enlivening of these figures as much as the insertion of the presumed supplementary material. Anthropologist Karl Taube has argued

64. Jeremy D. Coltman, “The Aztec Stuttgart Statuette: An Iconographic Analysis,” *Mexicon* 29 (2007): 70–77.

65. López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology*, 173.

66. Eduard Seler, “Das Grünsteinidol des Stuttgarter Museums,” in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach- und Alterthumskunde*, Vol. 3 (Berlin: Behrend & Co., 1908 [1904]): 392–409.



**FIGURE 10.** (a) *Skeletal Aztec Goddess (Cihuacoatl)* from *Coxcatlan, Puebla*, c. 1400–1520. Basalt with pigment and inlaid turquoise and shell,  $45 \frac{1}{4} \times 15 \frac{3}{4} \times 13 \frac{3}{4}$  in. (115 × 40 × 35 cm). Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Archivo Digitalizado de las Colecciones Arqueológicas del Museo Nacional de Antropología Secretaría de Cultura.-INAH.-MNA.-CANON.-MEX.; reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia). (b) *Aztec Deity Figure (Xiuhtecuhltli or Xelhua)* from *Coxcatlan, Puebla*, c. 1400–1520. Basalt with pigment and inlaid shell and obsidian,  $43 \frac{7}{10} \times 14 \frac{3}{16} \times 11 \frac{4}{5}$  in. (111 × 36 × 30 cm). Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Archivo Digitalizado de las Colecciones Arqueológicas del Museo Nacional de Antropología Secretaría de Cultura.-INAH.-MNA.-CANON.-MEX.; reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

that the difficult drilling of holes through the nasal septa of Olmec greenstone figurines “may have constituted a ritual bestowal of breath or life to the carving[s].”<sup>67</sup> The vitality of the carved image would have been further indicated by any ornaments suspended through such an aperture, but it was the drilling itself that instantiated it. Taube has since extended this argument to all drilling of greenstone, including the nonrepresentational holes made in beads and other

adornments.<sup>68</sup> The production of these functional holes, which allowed the worked objects to be suspended and worn, was analogous to giving life to these jewels. Just as the initial boring of the ears of Aztec youths was an important part of their formation into socialized, fully human beings, the drilling of holes into beads and pendants established the

67. Karl A. Taube, *Olmec Art at Dumbarton Oaks* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2004): 23–24.

68. Karl A. Taube and Reiko Ishihara-Brito, “From Stone to Jewel: Jade in Ancient Maya Religion and Rulership,” in *Ancient Maya Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, ed. Joanne Pillsbury, Miriam Doutriaux, Reiko Ishihara-Brito, and Alexandre Tokovinine (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2012): 135–53.



**FIGURE 11.** *Skeletal Aztec Deity (The Stuttgart Figurine)*, c. 1400–1520. Greenstone inlaid with shell,  $11 \frac{7}{10} \times 4 \frac{17}{20} \times 3 \frac{1}{4}$  in. (29.7 × 12.3 × 8.3 cm). Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart, E1403 (artwork in the public domain; photograph obtained from Wikimedia Commons).

worked material as social objects, establishing a metonymical exchange between the noble humans and the noble stones that adorned them.

### SLIPPERY SIGNS

The wearing of ornaments by Mesoamerican elites was done in part to conflate the adorned individuals with the qualities attributed to the precious materials from which the jewels were made, thereby naturalizing their societal claims of authority. However, these objects were recognized to be signs that, like language, could be manipulated and

potentially used to misrepresent reality. That is, while jewels were commonly worn as tokens proclaiming the status and power held by an individual, they were not themselves understood to be agents of legitimacy. This is made explicit in the story of Vuqub Caquix (Seven Macaw) as it was recorded in the *Popol Vuh*, the sixteenth-century book-length creation myth of the K'iche' Maya. Prior to the current age of man, Vuqub Caquix was a false god who claimed the role of sun and moon. To substantiate this assertion of divine status, he points to his glittering, adorned features:

“I am great. My place is now higher than that of the human work, the human design. I am their sun and I am their light, and I am also their months.

“So be it: my light is great. I am the walkway and I am the foothold of the people, because my eyes are of metal. My teeth just glitter with jewels, and turquoise as well; they stand out blue with stones like the face of the sky.”<sup>69</sup>

But these ornaments are false signs that do not reflect any actual transcendence. The *Popol Vuh* tells us:

It is not true that he is the sun, this Seven Macaw, yet he magnifies himself, his wings, his metal. But the scope of his face lies right around his own perch; his face does not reach everywhere beneath the sky. The faces of the sun, moon, and stars are not yet visible, it has not yet dawned.<sup>70</sup>

As a pretender to celestial greatness, Vuqub Caquix must be defeated to set the stage for the first true dawn, a deed that is accomplished through the extraction of his adornments following a crippling blowgun wound delivered by the Hero Twins.

Although this myth as we know it was recorded in the sixteenth century, images carved on Late Formative stelae at the site of Izapa and painted on Classic Maya ceramics appear to depict similar stories many centuries earlier. On a dish now known as the Blom Plate, for example, a pair of blowgun-wielding figures flank a central avian creature perched atop a World Tree in the form of a sprouting monstrous skull draped with a bicephalic serpent (Figure 12). From atop a long-nosed head, this supernatural bird has a second head that rises on a sinuous neck formed by linked jewels. A variety of additional jewels are vomited from the long beak of this upper head, signifying the downfall of

69. Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life, Revised Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996): 73.

70. Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*, 74.



**FIGURE 12.** *Late Classic Maya Polychrome Dish (The Blom Plate)*, c. 600–750. Slipped ceramic, dia. 17 1/2 in. (44.5 cm). Museo Maya de Cancún (artwork in the public domain; photograph by Ximena Arellano Núñez; reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

this creature at the hands of the blowgunners. Although this and similar scenes cannot be taken as directly illustrating the myth of Vuqub Caquix as it is recounted in the *Popol Vuh*, the parallels are striking. Particularly notable is the central importance of jewels to the identity of this celestial bird and the removal of these as the cause of its downfall.

In the *Popol Vuh*, the distinction made between Vuqub Caquix's illegitimate claims to superior status and actual lack of spiritual potency is mirrored by the differentiation between the soulless wooden people that existed in the pre-dawn world and the current creation of men with vital flesh modeled from ground maize. Lacking true divinity, Vuqub Caquix was an appropriate celestial being to rule over the wooden people, who lacked any spiritual understanding, a deficiency further reflected in their physical dryness. As the *Popol Vuh* tells us, “they had no blood, no lymph. They had no sweat, no fat.”<sup>71</sup> Without these fluids closely associated with bodily heat and vitality, the people made of wood also lacked an awareness of the debt they owed to their creators, to whom they therefore did not offer sacrifices. This displeased the gods, who eventually destroyed the world with a great flood; the wooden people became the chattering

71. Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*, 71.

monkeys of the forest, a downfall that parallels that of Vuqub Caquix.

Thus, although it was expected that bodily ornaments announced their wearer as noble—in the sense of possessing or channeling a concentration of vital energies, as well as in a hierarchical sense related to the political authority associated with such personal potency and charisma—this correspondence was not fixed or absolute. In the case of Vuqub Caquix, the wearing of jewels did not correlate to actual divine power, and the result was his being stripped of his undeserved and misrepresenting finery. This mythological tale can be understood to prefigure the actual removal of jewelry from captives taken in war, who in their defeat no longer possessed either spiritual or political agency. Ornaments were recognized to be symbols used to point to ineffable qualities that resided within the flesh of the adorned, and there was an abiding desire to bring the outward appearance into accordance with the inner condition. The ornaments placed in bodily perforations could therefore be read as indexical signs—attesting to the legitimized sanctity and authority of their wearers—only as long as they were understood as perpetuating the initial (sacrificial) act of piercing, the opening of the flesh of the individual to provide egress for the flow of blood and its associated vitality—the very substance and quality that the wooden people lacked in the pre-dawn era presided over by Vuqub Caquix. That is to say, in the adorning of the Mesoamerican body, the hole was as important as the ornament, whose role was to keep this somatic passage open while providing a material form to the immaterial forces emerging from it.

This relationship between a body ornament and the hole it occupies is unambiguously demonstrated in the use of piercing as a legitimizing ritual. The *Relación de Cholula* tells how the priests of this important pilgrimage city in Central Mexico granted the right to rule to lords from distant places by piercing their noses, lips, or ears, as was the custom where each was from.<sup>72</sup> A similar bestowal of authority occurs in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, when the Toltec rulers of Cholula travel to Chicomoztoc—Place of the Seven Caves—to bring forth Chichimec warriors to aid them in defeating their enemies (Figure 13). Following their emergence from Chicomoztoc, several Chichimecs are granted status as lineage heads, acknowledged as possessing

72. Gabriel de Rojas, “Descripción de Cholula,” *Revista mexicana de estudios históricos* 1, no. 6 (1927): 158–70.



**FIGURE 13.** Unidentified Artist, page 21r of the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, 1545–65. Ink and pigment on paper, page dimensions 10 3/5 × 7 3/10 in. (27 × 18.5 cm). Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Mexicain ms. 46–50 (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France). The nose-piercing ceremony is seen at the lower right of the page.

legitimate authority, by having their nasal septa pierced by the Toltecs at Cholula.<sup>73</sup>

These sixteenth-century accounts help us understand images depicting similar legitimizing rituals that occurred several centuries earlier. Several Mixtec historical codices recount the life of the twelfth-century ruler of Tilantongo, Eight Deer Jaguar Claw, including how he was granted the right to establish his own ruling lineage by priests from Tollan, the Place of the Reeds (Figure 14).<sup>74</sup> This toponym is associated with a number of ritually important centers in

73. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, ed. Paul Kirchhoff, Lina Odena Güemes, and Luis Reyes García (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1976): 171–172 (F. 20v–21v).

74. Manuel Hermann Lejarazu, “Rituals of Power in the Mixtec Codices,” *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 24, no. 2 (2008): 125–50.

the ancient Mesoamerican political landscape, and multiple possibilities have been proposed for its identity in this instance, including Tulancingo and Cholula, the latter of which was explicitly identified as a Tollan in a number of sources.<sup>75</sup> Polities carrying the designation Tollan were widely recognized as having a special religio-political status associated with the Feathered Serpent that attracted pilgrims from long distances and of many ethnic groups.<sup>76</sup> A similar nose-piercing ceremony is shown on a relief in the North Temple of the Great Ball Court at Chichén Itzá, likely another Tollan serving the elites in eastern Mesoamerica.<sup>77</sup> The nose jewel that Eight Deer received was emblematic of his legitimacy, but only insofar as it indexed the sanctioning of his right to rule by a recognized authority—that is, the piercing ceremony itself marked the transference of status, and it is precisely this moment that was depicted in the pre-Hispanic codices.

At around the same period in Europe, religious leaders also played a role in recognizing the legitimate authority of rulers (Figure 15). Yet, whereas the crowning of the Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope reflects a superficial and entirely symbolic placement of jewels on the head of a king, the ceremony performed by Mesoamerican priests involves a transformation of status that is brought about through a material intervention into the flesh of the newly recognized ruler. Not simply a matter of the aesthetic sensibilities of the cultures in question, these different approaches toward the ritualized and meaning-laden adornment of the kingly body should be understood in relation to the contrasting worldviews held by these two civilizations.

In this essay, I have argued that, for ancient Mesoamericans, the holes that were produced in the flesh were as materially important as the jewels that were worn in them.

75. Bruce E. Byland and John M. D. Pohl, *In the Realm of 8 Deer: The Archaeology of the Mixtec Codices* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 138–50; Maarten Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, *Encounter with the Plumed Serpent: Drama and Power in the Heart of Mesoamerica* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2007): 222.

76. Cynthia Kristan-Graham and Jeff Karl Kowalski, “Chichén Itzá, Tula, and Tollan: Changing Perspectives on a Recurring Problem in Mesoamerican Archaeology and Art History,” in *Twin Tollans: Chichén Itzá, Tula, and the Epiclassic to Early Postclassic Mesoamerican World*, ed. Jeff Karl Kowalski and Cynthia Kristan-Graham (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2007): 13–83.

77. Khristaan D. Vilella and Rex Koontz, “A Nose Piercing Ceremony in the North Temple of the Great Ballcourt at Chichén Itzá,” *Texas Notes on Pre-Columbian Art, Writing, and Culture* 41 (1993): 1–9; William M. Ringle, “On the Political Organization of Chichén Itzá,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 15 (2004): 167–218.



**FIGURE 14.** Mixtec, page 52 of the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, c. 1250–1520. Pigment on deerskin, page dimensions 7 1/2 × 9 1/4 in. (19 × 23.5 cm). British Museum, Am1902,0308.1 (artwork in the public domain; photograph © Trustees of the British Museum and used with permission; all rights reserved). The nose-piercing ceremony is shown at the lower left of the page.



**FIGURE 15.** Unidentified Artist (attributed to Mahiet), *Charlemagne Crowned as Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III*, detail from *Les Grandes Chroniques de France*, 1332–50. Pigment on parchment, page dimensions 15 7/20 × 11 in. (39 × 28 cm). © British Library Board, Royal MS 16 G VI, f. 141v (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the British Library). The miniature extends across both columns of text, and the image as reproduced here is slightly less than the width of the page.

Bodily piercings made to accommodate adornments should be understood as ontologically related to other perforations, namely, those made during auto-sacrificial bloodletting rituals. All of these somatic interventions created passages for the emergence and ingress of vital forces, thereby manifesting the potency of the individuals upon whom they were enacted. Jewelry made from materials closely identified with these forces made these claims tangible and visible, and therefore served not only as tokens of wealth and status but also as markers of personal agency and charisma. All of this depended on an indexical understanding of material signs, in which they not only represent ideas but also are directly produced or affected through contiguity. When this situation was no longer deemed to hold, efforts were made to bring signs back into a proper relation with meaning.

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