
Book Section:
Dodds, C. (2007) Female Dismemberment and Decapitation: Gendered Understandings of Power in Aztec Ritual. In: Carroll, S., (ed.) Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective. Palgrave MacMillan , Basingstoke , pp. 47-63. ISBN 0230019455

Caroline Dodds, 'Female Dismemberment and Decapitation: Gendered Understandings of Power in Aztec Ritual Violence', in Stuart Carroll (ed.), Cultures of Violence: Interpersonal Violence in Historical Perspective (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

Between around 1350 and the 1520s, the Aztecs flourished in the basin of Central Mexico.[1] From their island city of Tenochtitlan, they dominated much of the surrounding region until, in 1519, their vibrant world was challenged by the destructive incursion of the Spanish conquistadors. At first sight, the Europeans were awed by the great city rising from the water; this 'enchanted vision' was a model of ordered architecture and activity.[2] On entering the city, however, a difficult anomaly to this sophisticated impression emerged. Human sacrifice was far more widely practiced by the Aztecs than by any of the other indigenous peoples of the New World, and their brutal religious zeal was apparent in the spectacular displays of violence that shaped the lives of the men and women of Tenochtitlan.

From the moment of the first encounter, understandings of Aztec culture have been haunted by apparitions of death and violence and, in recent years, the subject of human sacrifice has proved a notorious obstacle to the understanding of Aztec culture. The brilliance of the Aztec warriors and the spectacle of sacrificial death have held powerful possession over the minds and imagination of modern scholarship and society, just as such vivid dramas preoccupied the Spanish conquistadors and chroniclers who first encountered them. The vibrancy of Aztec ritual and practice and the 'otherness' of

their existence has provided tempting ground for colourful and often imaginative accounts of the fatal focus of their culture, as witnessed and interpreted by spectators and intellectuals. Reacting to this tendency, some academics have attempted, in recent years, to distance themselves from the controversial and potentially sensationalist field of sacrifice and, despite the discovery of compelling archaeological evidence, even to deny the existence of human sacrifice.[3] But to attempt to consider Aztec culture in isolation from this most famous of their practices is a fundamentally flawed endeavour. Although an objective view should not overemphasize the significance of ritual bloodshed, the fact remains that violent death formed a frequent and organized element of the life of the Aztecs and can provide a key to their perceptions and practices.

The male role is well established in the history of this spectacle of violence. As glorious warriors and pious executioners Aztec men have peopled the pages of history, myth and fiction. Women, however, have remained largely silent in this story of sacrifice. Ciphers standing by; mere witnesses and victims of the bloodshed which characterized their culture. In reality, however, ritualized violence formed a central focus of the life of every Aztec and women's roles in this field were diverse and significant. As victims particularly, women fulfil a range of functions and it is in a small group of ceremonies which involve the decapitation of women that their unique significance becomes particularly clear. The exceptional spectacle of female beheading can provide fascinating insights into the necessity of the elaborate performances of violence upon which Aztec religion centred. Although they were very rare amongst the frequent ceremonies of oblation, instances of female decapitation provide key moments of contact to the mythical and cyclical history which pervaded Aztec understandings of the world. This

cluster of rituals, therefore, illuminates the importance of human sacrifice for Aztec culture, and sheds light on the manner in which ritual violence served to link their physical, spiritual, and political worlds.

The obligation to provide blood was a duty rooted in the mythical and spiritual past of the Aztecs. Humanity was tied into a reciprocal relationship with the gods regarding mutual nourishment and creation. In stories of the creation of humanity, male gods let blood from their penises to give life to the dough from which humanity was formed. Thus, the reciprocal 'blood debt' was established, whereby the Aztecs were constrained to nourish and nurture their deities with blood in return for the blood which was let in order to bring about their own birth. Aztec conceptions of time were cyclical, believing that patterns of time and events were repeated and mirrored, and, in the unremitting duty of sacrifice, the Aztecs supplied the blood that sustained their gods and permitted the continuity of the world. For the Aztecs, deities embodied every aspect of their existence, and the necessity to glorify the benevolent and appease the malevolent was a fact of daily life. All were worthy of exaltation, even whilst they might also merit fear and foreboding. The earth was universally acknowledged as a place of suffering and affliction and the harsh realities of life were revealed to children from birth. Myth and fact, past and present, were inextricable in Aztec thought and, through a perpetual round of ceremonies the realities and imperatives of this religious order were brought home to the Aztecs; awareness of the necessity to appease and feed the gods was ever-present.

In the regular round of the Aztec religious calendar, human sacrifice was practised at frequent intervals, using a variety of different methods, victims and locations. One particular detail is evident and intriguing, however – in all instances involving the

decapitation of living victims, the victim is female. The extensive existence and archaeological survival of tzompantli skull racks and early accounts testify to the widespread practice of posthumous dismemberment, as an element of Aztec practice, but it is the instances in which decapitation is the cause of death, and occurs as a feature of visible sacrificial ritual, with which this study is concerned.[4]

In many of the principal sacrificial ceremonies, the focal victims were ixiptla or 'impersonators' of the gods – individuals who embodied the deity which the ceremony was intended to honour. There are two festivals in the Aztec calendar at which ixiptla of major goddesses were decapitated: the festival of Ochpaniztli ('the sweeping of the roads'), and the festival of Uey tecuilhuitl ('the great feast of the lords').[5] The summer festival of Uey tecuilhuitl saw the beheading of an ixiptlatl of Xilonen, the goddess of the young maize. Ochpaniztli was also associated with the crops, and took place at harvest time in September, and saw the beheading and flaying of an impersonator of Toçi (or 'Our Grandmother'), an extremely powerful founding deity, and perhaps the most inclusive of the personifications of the earth goddess.[6]

These two sacrifices are marked out as unique not only by the inclusion of decapitation in their process, but also by the broader manner of the sacrifice itself. In the majority of other sacrifices, the ritual took a standard form. The victim was stretched backwards over a stone or altar, each limb extended by a priest and the chest stretched high toward the heavens.[7] A fifth priest would strike open the chest with an obsidian knife, excise the heart with knife and hands and raise this fertile offering to the impassive gods. Unusually, in the rituals of Ochpaniztli and Uey tecuilhuitl, the woman was laid, not upon an offering stone, but upon the back of a priest, who bore her weight whilst her

head was severed. This extremely rare and even quite intimate form of sacrifice is even accorded a particular word - it is called tepotzoa, which means 'it has a back', according to Sahagún and his informants.[8] If this translation is correct, the term seems to suggest almost a unification of identity between the priest and the victim as if they are fused at the moment of death. This would be particularly fascinating if the priest who adopted the goddess's identity after her death, as I will discuss below, was the tepotzoa participant. If this is the case then there is a sense in which the energy, and perhaps even the being of the goddess, may have been embodied in the pair during the tepotzoa and transmitted at the point of decapitation. Unfortunately, the evidence to confirm or deny such a supposition is lacking. The unusual tepotzoa deaths of the ixiptla during Ochpaniztli and Uey tecuilhuitl form elements of wider festivals which possess diverse and complicated connotations, honouring the gods associated with harvest and nature. The sacrifices themselves also have numerous underlying implications, particularly allied to female associations with the earth forces.[9] However, it is the fact that decapitation itself is uniquely female-identified which is itself particularly revealing in the context of this study of gendered violence.

There is widespread evidence for a pattern of female dismemberment in sacrifice, sculpture, and story, and the great Coyolxauhqui Stone is one of a number of striking examples of female decapitation and dismemberment in Aztec art and archaeology.[10] This colossal image (fig. 1, see below) was discovered lying at the base of the Templo Mayor by electrical workers digging a Mexico City street in 1978. Carved in high relief, the disk is a dynamic image of the goddess Coyolxauhqui ('she with the bells on her cheeks'), ritually attired and clearly dismembered. This arresting monument carries very

specific associations, evoking an important incident in Aztec legend: the birth of Huitzilopochtli ('humming bird on the left').[11] The guide of the Aztecs in their migration to Tenochtitlan, Huitzilopochtli was their patron deity, and closely identified with the being of the state itself, as well as being associated with the sun, war, sovereignty and power.

According to the legend, Coatlicue ('snake skirt'), an important aspect of the earth goddess, was performing her religious offices one day, when a ball of feathers descended from the sky. Gathering them up, Coatlicue miraculously became pregnant with the being of Huizilopochtli. Unaware of the supernatural nature of the conception, Coatlicue's daughter Coyolxauhqui was outraged at what she saw as her mother's shameful pregnancy and, filled with rage, she incited her brothers the Centzonuitznaua, 'the four hundred' gods of the southern stars, to go to war against their mother.[12] Arrayed for battle, this formidable force approached Coatepetl ('snake mountain'), where Coatlicue waited in fear. But, just as they reached the mountain, Huitzilopochtli was born. Miraculously, he was born already matured and dressed for battle and, after a great struggle, he succeeded in vanquishing his siblings and defending his mother. It is here at Coatepetl that we see the earliest origins of female beheading, in Huitzilopochtli's great symbolic struggle with his sister.

> Then he pierced Coyolxauhqui, and then quickly struck off her head. It stopped there at the edge of Coatepetl. And her body came falling below; it fell breaking to pieces; in various places her arms, her legs, her body each fell.[13]

Dismembered and defeated, Coyolxauhqui and her brothers were vanquished, and the greatest god of the Aztecs triumphed over the first threat to his power and pre-eminence. As the mythical founder of Tenochtitlan, Huitzilopochtli was synonymous with the success of the Aztec state and, in many senses, its very existence, and his first action in asserting his supremacy was to decapitate a woman. The details and personalities of this shifting myth sometimes vary, but the dismemberment of a female figure is a consistent element, and it seems reasonable to associate the sacrificial practice of female beheading with this mythical original; the assertion of Aztec supremacy was demonstrated by the ceremonial execution of an enemy.[14]

The Coyolxauhqui Stone provides a dramatic reminder of the fate of those who defied the Aztecs. The Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan symbolized the mountain of Coatepetl, a looming reminder of the mythical past, which dominated the cityscape and, forming a focal point for religious life, reinforced awareness of the symbolic triumph of the state over challenge. At the summit, twin temples stood, the presence of Huitzilopochtli's shrine (alongside that of the god of water Tlaloc) reminding of the founder god's dramatic triumph. The Coyolxauhqui Stone lay at the base of the staircase leading to Huitzilopochtli's temple, as Coyolxauhqui's dismembered body had lain at the foot of Coatepetl. By the time of the Spanish conquest, almost every victim who mounted the temple steps had become implicated in this cycle of legend.[15] In the latter years of the Aztec empire, we see the fall from Coatepetl and ritual decapitation, albeit after death, established as a pervasive element of human sacrifice. Victims first had their hearts removed, then their bodies were cast down the steps of the temple. Finally, they were

decapitated, and their heads placed on the ubiquitous skull racks which so shocked the Spanish.[16]

By the sixteenth century, therefore, decapitation had become a pervasive element of Aztec myth and ritual, but recent work by Emily Umberger has demonstrated the more specific importance of the Coyolxauhqui tradition in the fifteenth century when the Aztec empire was at the height of its expansion.[17] In 1473, the Aztecs were engaged in a civil war, as the Tenocha attempted to suppress their junior partners from the twinned city of Tlatelolco. The roots of this conflict are debatable, but the eventual Tenocha triumph is well-established. The Tenocha tlatoani (or ruler) Axayacatl killed Moquihuix, the Tlatelolca ruler, and cast his body down the steps of the main temple at Tlatelolco. The parallels with Coyolxauhqui's fate are clear and it is certain that Axayacatl was aware of the figurative significance of his actions: in both cases, a threat to official authority was vanquished in a similar fashion. Extending this analogy still further, it is even possible to suggest that the mythical tradition was deliberately employed in 1473 in order to reinforce Tenocha influence, attempting to demonstrate a cyclical inevitability in their victory.

Although the exact dating of the Coyolxauhqui Stone is complex, the sculpture clearly dates to the approximate period of the Civil War. By means of a date plaque, the IVb platform on which it was mounted was dated to the year 3 House, 1469, and as the monument was installed after the building of the platform, this dates it to the reign of Axayacatl (1470-81). Umberger suggests that the sculpture was created before the war, as part of a series of inflammatory actions, but this is harder to verify.[18] Regardless of the exact year, the sculpture clearly dates to around the time of the Civil War, indicating an

increased focus on this particular legend at a key moment of political instability and reinforcing notions of state triumph over challenge. Umberger's recent work goes still further in this analysis, however, contending that the stone was intended to be interpreted literally as the figure of the defeated Moquihuix. To the north of the Coyolxauhqui Stone, two archaizing Toltec urns were discovered together and the archaeology suggests that they were buried at a later date than the installation of the monument.[19] Umberger makes a circumstantial case that the cremated human remains in these urns belong to Moquihuix and his lieutenant Teconal.[20] Thus it is possible that, in the symbolic placing of these funerary vessels, the sculpture of Coyolxauhqui was understood as a likeness of the defeated Moquihuix, unifying these enemies of the Aztecs in defeat.

This extremely literal interpretation of the stone's meaning is rather hard to verify and I might suggest a more metaphorical reading of some of the statue's implications, but the fact of its production in this period demonstrates the importance of mythical history and the cyclical perceptions of time which were central to understandings of human sacrifice. Although it contained complex and shifting metaphors, the Coyolxauhqui Stone served as a constant reminder to enemies of the legendary fate of those that opposed the Aztecs and it seems reasonable to associate the sacrificial practice of female decapitation with the mythical original. In the Aztec cycle of history, the increased focus on the legend of Coyolxauhqui's defeat and decapitation at a moment of threat to the state emphasizes the symbolic application of this mythical history. Certainly, the stone would have conveyed a poignant message to the victims who had to pass it on the way to their sacrifice at the summit, displaying the fate of those that challenged the Aztecs' authority.

In the Coyolxauhqui myth, we see the assertion of Aztec supremacy through the decapitation of a female enemy and, returning to the festivals of Ochpaniztli and Uey tecuilhuitl, we can confirm the association of community well-being and state security with female decapitation. As part of the intricate ceremonies surrounding these sacrifices, both festivals incorporated elements designed to emphasize state authority. Uey tecuilhuitl saw the distribution of food and drink to the masses, sharing prosperity and encouraging obedience. This was also the occasion for the execution and punishment of criminals who had infringed social boundaries of behaviour by such offences as drunkenness and concubinage.[21] Ochpaniztli was the occasion upon which young warriors were first arrayed in their arms and insignia, preparing them to act in the service of the state which Huitzilopochtli's victory had secured.[22]

Great care must naturally be employed in the analysis of legendary history and it is a distinct possibility that legends which support the decapitation of women were developed in the fifteenth century to justify an existing practice. Although it is possible that such legends were symptomatic of an underlying gender bias or even more sinister motives, however, they still endow the practice with an unaltered significance. Cecelia Klein, accepting the death of Coyolxauhqui as a symbolic triumph of the Aztec state over treachery, extends the analysis to incorporate the suggestion that Coyolxauhqui represented a danger to the state because she had 'stepped outside the bounds of ideal femininity to enter and to challenge the world of men.'[23] Umberger's interpretation of the Coyolxauhqui tradition also places the legend into a gendered framework, identifying the female personification of a defeated enemy as a manifestation of 'gender inversion'[24] that reveals negative ideas associated with femininity.

The feminist perspective would probably perceive female decapitation and dismemberment as indicative of an innate patriarchal and misogynistic aggression, masculine violence manifesting itself in the most visible and violent manner. June Nash identifies an innately patriarchal trend in the growth of the cult of oblation itself. She claims that, in the bloody saturation of the sacrificial stone, the Aztecs acted out a sacred mission of conquest which 'glorified a cult of male dominance'.[25] María Rodríguez-Shadow has also distinguished a fundamental misogyny in Aztec society, claiming that mythical violence against women was designed to condone the subordination of female power and importance to masculine authority following the settlement at Tenochtitlan. She claims a deliberate diminution of the importance of fertility and femininity in the fifteenth century in order to promote the warrior cult.[26] The physical decapitation of women possesses layered and intricate implications: mythological concepts concerning the defeat of enemies interacted with ideas of dismemberment and physical deformity which, in turn, reflected and were related to ideas of history and reciprocity. In highlighting the ominous overtones that were frequently associated with feminine influence, however, there is frequently a danger of evoking established ideas of good/evil dichotomies. Sometimes regrettably for the autonomy and individualism of Aztec women, the existence of such figures as Coyolxauhqui and their associations in Aztec consciousness evoke perceptible traces of the notion of the threatening nature of feminine sexuality which pervaded medieval and early modern Europe, affecting expectations of women's lives and behaviour.[27]

The ceremonial and allegorical dismemberment of women might certainly be perceived as symptomatic of an inherent patriarchal tendency but, in and of itself, this

trend does not necessarily seem to be indicative of the existence of a contemporaneous animosity towards or subordination of women. Although such ritual violence against women might be associated with negative assumptions, this does not appear to have been the case in Aztec culture. Far from being diminished, women in Aztec culture were highly valued, respected and influential. They held tangible authority within the community as figures of economic and administrative importance, and were valued both as workers and as mothers, possessing the same rights and recourse under the law as their male counterparts.[28] In recognizing female identification with threatening forces and figures, there is a danger of conferring upon women a sense that they were peripheral and inferior, but this does not appear to have been reflected in their everyday experience. The influence and value of women and the importance of their participation in household in communal activity in collective societies are well-established, a pattern to which Aztec culture was no exception, and the limited group of individuals who were subjected to beheading seems to indicate a more targeted intention than simple misogynistic aggression.[29] The women who were decapitated were representatives not of womankind, but of specific goddesses, who were all associated with the powerful, and female-identified, earth force.

This association with the earth originated in women's procreative role. During the act of childbirth, a woman was possessed by the being of the earth goddess, a deity possessing a variety of primal aspects, but perhaps best known in her guise of Cihuacoatl ('Woman Serpent'), a potent goddess whose power was considered so great that her mere presence was a perilous force. Female Aztecs were invested with an innate and ominous power by this association through childbirth with the potent earth force and its deities,

and this gave them access to energies which were at once powerfully creative and potentially destructive. The energy of this goddess infused a woman during the act of parturition and a woman who died giving birth became frozen in this state, her body dangerously imbued with the power and presence of Cihuacoatl.[30] This connection to nature and to the earth is a theme which pervades Aztec understandings of femininity and which conferred upon them sense of threat, but at the same time placed them in a position of considerable respect and reverence.

In some senses this appears to accord women a special significance, placing them in a uniquely identified role. If such a position is verifiable, then this accords to Aztec women a great 'natural' or innate influence, but such an exclusive attribute brings with it associated difficulties. In suggesting the association of women with nature and natural authority, we implicitly open the door to a set of assumptions and arguments which have characterized recent debates regarding the boundaries between nature and culture.[31] Feminist debate has often laboured to break the nature/culture model, fearing that women's association with nature inevitably produces a separation from the concept of 'culture' which causes women a sense of alienation and exclusion from the social advantages and structure which 'culture' offers. In suggesting that a distinctive relationship between women and nature existed in Aztec civilization, we are not necessarily acquiescent in these assumptions, and there is no indication that the Aztecs perceived an exclusive relationship between these two concepts. Throughout Aztec practice and ritual, natural allusions and imagery were explicit. Glorious warriors adorned themselves with feathers and stones, evoking the splendours of their environment and the people of the Valley of Mexico lacked the Judaeo-Christian

perspective of man as established ‘over’ nature. They were integrated with their entire world and did not set themselves above, or apart from, its values and realities. The connection between femininity and the earth is one of the fundamental expressions of this symbiotic society. In this context, it is not possible to explore fully this association, which forms a ubiquitous element of Aztec ideology and practice, but it is clear that female connections with the earth and nature carried far more positive attributes than in Judaeo-Christian civilizations.

Women possessed tangible esteem and practical authority and, returning to the ritual calendar, the festival of Ochpaniztli itself provides a powerful example of the strength and depth of the creative/destructive duality which typified women’s existence. This was a comprehensively female festival, encompassing women from all walks of life in ceremonies emphasizing femininity and fertility. Young and old women, maidens, midwives, physicians and courtesans, all played their part in the celebrations, and the young woman adorned in the likeness of Toçi stood amongst them. At dusk, a complete silence fell over the city, as she was swiftly borne to the temple. There, she was stretched on the back of a priest and decapitated. Her head and body were then flayed, and a leading priest donned her skin and proceeded to embody the goddess in various ceremonies throughout the night. At daybreak, Toçi, for so the priest was personified when he wore the flayed skin, sacrificed four captives.[32] As a principal identity of the earth goddess, Toçi was revealed during the festival of Ochpaniztli in her aspect as the potential devourer of humanity, disclosing to the Aztecs the potential power for harm which stood in conjunction with female generative energy. In the sacrifice itself, the bloodlust of Toçi was displayed and satisfied, but through the ceremonies which

surrounded it, female importance and influence were vigorously and visibly promoted. The earth was both the giver and receiver of life, and this dual power was perceived to be embodied in human women, just as it characterized female deities. Therefore, whilst one might argue that figures such as Coyolxauhqui, and the ideology which they perpetuated, were reflective of an ingrained cultural misogyny, the tepotzoa rituals possess more specific, even though at times ambiguous, significance, intended to satisfy the thirst of the devouring earth, mitigating the threat at the same time as reasserting state stability and security. In supplying the human hearts and blood necessary for the gods' survival, the Aztec ensured the continuing strength and support of their tutelary deities.[33] Certainly, if we were to stop our analysis of ritual violence against women with the Coyolxauhqui legend, then one might subscribe a the negative view of femininity as inherently associated with threat. Far from this however, what the decapitation ceremonies show is that, in this latter period of Aztec influence, the connection between femininity and the powerful earth forces was being visibly glorified in sacrifice. Women were certainly objects of awe, but not necessarily of fear.

At the most basic level, to attribute the practice of sacrifice to an expression of superiority or hostility is to misunderstand the nature of victimhood in Aztec culture. Sacrifice clearly possessed important social associations, providing for a system in which hierarchy and status were based in military privilege. It also carried significant religious implications – the terror of Aztecs at the solar eclipse substantiates their professed fear that the world would end if they failed to sufficiently sustain the sun with blood. But even in a deeply devout culture, such religious and functional imperatives hardly seem sufficient to allow for the development of a society which could accept without question

so many bloody deaths. It is not the intention of this article to question all of the many potential motivations and justifications for a culture of human sacrifice, but one aspect in particular requires clarification. Death on the stone was an honourable and even, in some ways, a desirable fate. For not only the Aztecs, but also their foes, sacrifice ensured perpetual glory and spiritual survival. Victims were honoured in life, particularly the ixiptla who were revered as the gods they 'impersonated', and at times lived a privileged and luxurious existence leading up to the time of their death.[34] The priests heralded warrior victims: 'You will die here but your fame will live forever'; and the tangible honour of facing death with fortitude was supported by the promise of a privileged and glorified afterlife for victims, a far cry from the dark miseries of Mictlan, the land of the dead into which the majority of humans passed.[35] Victims were powerfully implicated in a cultural framework that ensured their glorification in life and death as well as in the afterlife.

Therefore, whilst the treatment of women in sacrificial contexts sometimes seems to suggest essential apprehensions and negative preconceptions concerning women, evoking parallel notions of dangerous female sexuality and identity in western society, we should not necessarily subscribe to this tempting comparative model. Obviously it is impossible for us to draw an unequivocal conclusion regarding Aztec preconceptions and perceptions of women, but we can try to refrain from projecting a modern political or ideological agenda onto the Aztecs' far more practical concerns. It is fascinating that the Aztec construction of women's influence as evil or threatening concurs so closely with Judaeo-Christian ideas of the potentially malign female force, despite the lack of the cultural memory which projects the 'temptress' persona onto feminine figures. However,

similarity does not necessarily equal analogy. The sheer strength of female influence in Aztec metaphorical and metaphysical philosophy seems to carry necessarily negative connotations, but the overtones of practically all sources of power in Aztec thought were dangerous. Strength was found in perilous forces, including those deities identified as malevolent; providing and personifying power, such divinities preoccupied Aztec culture with the requirement for their constant sustenance through human blood. By and large alien, unapproachable, and far from benign, a far cry from the ostensibly benevolent father figure of Christian conception, Aztec gods were usually to be appeased, not appealed to. Thus women, as much as men, were inevitably sometimes associated with threat. The basic natural sources of power and authority were, if not evil, then certainly threatening and hence, in the possession of primal strength and generative force, women were necessarily tainted with the dark shade of their sacred patrons and counterparts. Decapitation and its associated themes might therefore be characterized as a gender-related, but not necessarily a gender-specific, tendency.

This is a far from comprehensive assessment of the notions associated by the Aztecs with female decapitation, but the importance and coherence of such rituals are clear. Unfortunately, however, it seems almost impossible to break the cycle of Aztec history and pinpoint the exact origin of the associations between women and dismemberment. The Ochpaniztli and Uey tecuilhuitl rituals concern issues of fertility and the harvest, and although clearly evoking questions of state security, these are not the principal features of these festivals, nor are these the only occasions on which female decapitation (if we accept that is linked to the assertion of Aztec authority) would have been either possible or appropriate. It is impossible to trace the specific roots of these

ceremonies, and it seems likely that multiple layers now overlie a ritual which may originally have carried very specific connotations. This is a question which may be doomed to remain unresolved. Certainly it is clear that decapitation was a female-identified ritual and that the Coyolxauhqui legend had become a pervasive element of Aztec perception and practice, ensuring that some of these overtones would have been visible to observers of tepotzoa, even if the ixiptla themselves died for more positive purposes and were promised more positive fates than the conquered Coyolxauhqui. Aztec women do not appear to have been diminished in status by their association with such ideas, and the practice of dismemberment may be explained in the fifteenth century by its association with prominent female figures in foundation myths and concepts of the pantheon. Such associations also appear comprehensible in terms of the powerful, but ominous, natural forces with which women were frequently associated, but it is impossible, and probably unhelpful, to try to trace the reason for the original association of women with such threatening influences. One might choose to see in such principles an innate patriarchal desire to subordinate women, but if this was the original motivation, it does not appear to have prevailed during the fifteenth century. The Judaeo-Christian and 'western' principles of negative femininity to which these ideologies bear such strong resemblance should be rejected as anachronistic interpretations displaying modern preconceptions. To make such associations is a false logic, as it confers upon the tradition allusions which it did not possess for contemporaries. It is clear that, by the time of the Spanish conquest, such ideologies of decapitation, authority and fertility were central and accepted aspects of Aztec religion, investing women with a powerful significance which sprang from their complex status. For the Aztecs, the decapitation of women marked key

moments of their spiritual experience at which enduring notions of power were perpetuated, as religious, mythical and political prerogatives combined to create the brutal reality of Aztec ritual violence.

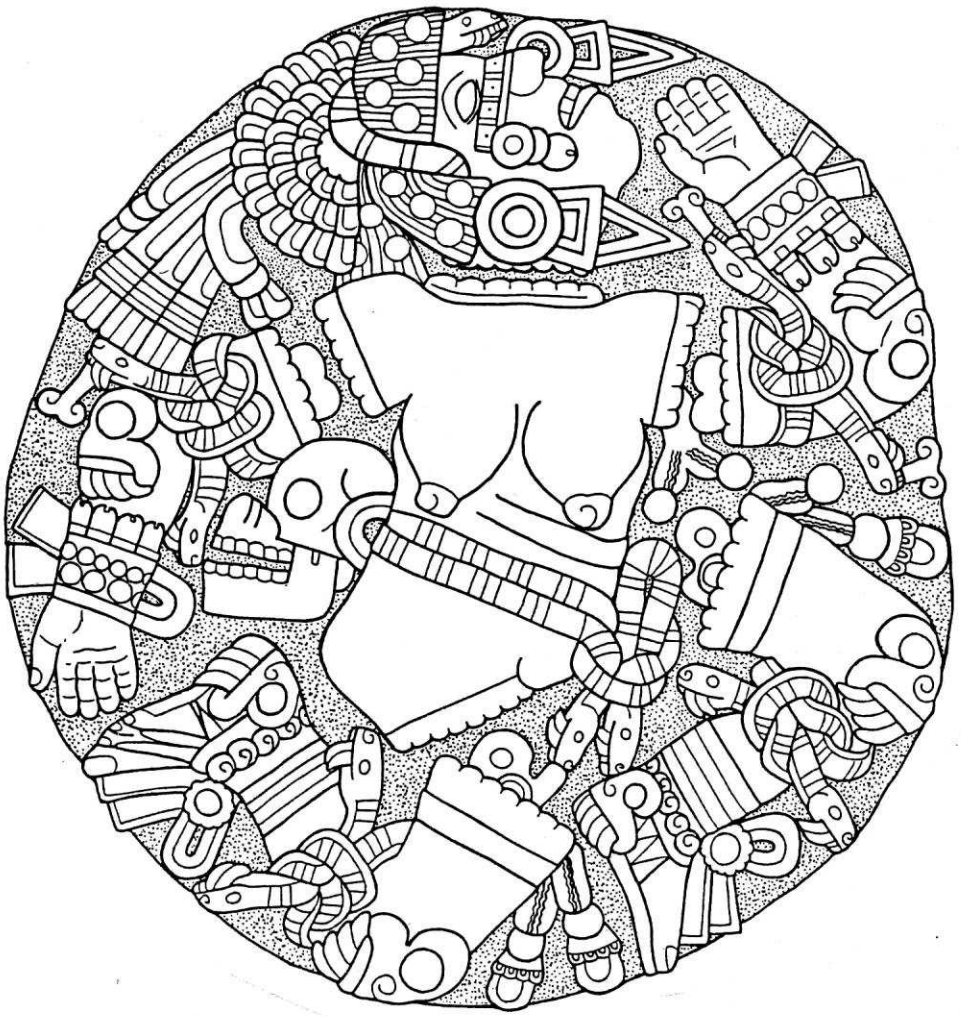

Figure 1. Drawing by Emily Umberger of the 3.25m diameter Coyolxauhqui Stone, now in the Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico. I am indebted to Emily Umberger for providing the image and for her permission to reproduce it.

[1] I would like to thank Nicholas Davidson for his support and guidance during the early stages of this research, and David Andress, Malcolm Gaskill and Emily Umberger for their careful and thoughtful advice on the drafts of this article. Throughout this article, the term 'Aztec' refers particularly to the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan, the only group to which the derivation from a mythic migration from Aztlan reasonably applies. I will also make occasional use of city-specific terms such as Tenocha and Tlatelolca where appropriate, in order to increase the exactitude of information and accuracy of conclusions.

[2] B. Díaz, The Conquest of New Spain, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 214.

[3] Some of the most persuasive of this archaeological evidence has only been uncovered in the last few years and has not yet been the subject of extensive academic publication. Some recent discoveries are surveyed in M. Stevenson, 'A Fresh Look at Tales of Human Sacrifice: Mexican Digs Confirm Grisly Spanish-Era Accounts', MSNBC (January 2005), http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6853177/ (21 March 2006). One notable challenge to the existence of human sacrifice is P. Hassler, Menschenopfer bei den Azteken? Eine quellen- und ideologiekritische Studie (Berne: Peter Lang, 1992).

[4] In surveying the rituals which structured the spiritual lives of the men and women of Tenochtitlan, this study takes as its starting point the second book The Ceremonies, of B. de Sahagún, Florentine Codex, General History of the Things of New Spain, trans. and eds. C. E. Dibble and A. J. O. Anderson, 12 books in 13 vols, 2nd edn (Santa Fe: University of Utah Press, 1950-82). Hereafter Florentine Codex. To prevent confusion

between different editions and enable cross-referencing to alternative versions, references are given in the form of book: chapter: page number. (Page references are to the revised edition where applicable.) Although there are also alternative sources for the sacrificial calendar, the use of this single source permits us to reduce the possibility of confusing duplications. The Ceremonies details the annual sequence of rituals which structured the spiritual lives of the men and women of Tenochtitlan. This comprehensive record is a practical point to commence any investigation of sacrificial practice; an extensive and well-structured document, the thorough investigation of the Franciscan friar and scholar Bernardino de Sahagún provides an unparalleled source. This is not the place to rehearse the arguments concerning the reliability of the Florentine Codex, which have been the subject of considerable study. For my own approach to Sahagún's work see: C. Dodds, 'Warriors and Workers: Duality and Complementarity in Aztec Gender Roles and Relations' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2004). For more general discussions see: M. S. Edmonson ed., Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974); L. N. d'Olwer, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590) (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987); and M. León-Portilla, Bernardino de Sahagún: First Anthropologist (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

[5] Florentine Codex, 2: 30: 118-124, particularly 120; and 2: 27: 96-107, particularly 105.

[6] The exact dates of the festivals, which were associated with the twelve veintenas (20-day months) vary by a day or so according to different interpretations, but they are broadly well-established. Ochpaniztli took place 1 – 20 September and Uey tecuilhuitl 3 – 22 July.

[7] In the absence of a suitable alternative, I will use the terms 'priest' to refer to the men who dedicated themselves to the temple and the service of the gods.

[8] Florentine Codex, 2: 27: 105. It is also possible to translate tepotzoa as 'the owner of a back', 'he/she/it makes use of his back', or perhaps even 'he/she/it is the possessor of a hunched back'. (I am indebted to Frances Karttunen, R. Joe Campbell, John Sullivan and John F. Schwaller for their suggestions and guidance in this interpretation.)

[9] B. A. Brown, 'Ochpaniztli in Historical Perspective', in E. H. Boone ed., Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 13th and 15th, 1979 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984), pp.195-207.

[10] The colossal statue of the decapitated Coatlicue is perhaps other most famous example of this tradition. See, for example, E. H. Boone, 'The "Coatlicues" at the Templo Mayor', Ancient Mesoamerica, X (1999) 189-206.

[11] Many alternative versions of this myth exist. Based on the generally most representative sources and the frequency of the occurrence of different versions, I have prioritized the popular mythical version of this history, in preference to more politicized versions in which followers of the deities Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui broke into two conflicting factions. Three prominent accounts of this myth may be found in: Florentine Codex, 3: 1: 1-5; D. Durán, The History of the Indies of New Spain, ed. D. Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), pp. 26-8; and Don D. de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, Codex Chimalpahin, Society and Politics in Mexico Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Texcoco, Culhuacan, and other Nahua Altepetl in Central Mexico: The Nahuatl and Spanish Annals and Accounts Collected and Recorded

by Don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, eds. A. J. O. Anderson and S. Schroeder, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), I, 83. Hereafter Codex Chimalpahin.

[12] The identity of Coyolxauhqui is one of the most unstable elements of this myth. Usually recorded as Huitzilopochtli's sister, in the Codex Chimalpahin she appears as his metaphorical mother.

[13] Florentine Codex, 3: 1: 4.

[14] This story is also frequently interpreted as a battle between the Sun (Huitzilopochtli) and the Moon (Coyolxauhqui), a dimension which I do not have space to explore fully here. In view of the close association of the Sun with the Aztec state, and the threat presented by eclipse and darkness, as well as antagonism between the two established in the creation myths, this reading is consistent with the assertion of state supremacy through the legend. See, for example, S. Milbrath, 'Decapitated Lunar Goddesses in Aztec Art, Myth, and Ritual', Ancient Mesoamerica, VIII (1997), 185-206.

[15] Eduardo Matos Moctezuma has claimed that all sacrifices performed at the Templo Mayor commemorated this 'primordial fratricidal act'. L. López Luján, The Offerings of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1994), p.95.

[16] Durán, The History of the Indies of New Spain, pp. 339-40; and A. de Tápia, 'The Chronicle of Andrés de Tápia' in P. de Fuentes ed., The Conquistadors: First Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), pp. 41-2.

[17] E. Umberger, 'Aztec Kings [sic] and the Codex Duran', paper delivered at the British Museum, Aztec Art and Culture: An International Symposium, March 23 2003, in

connection with the exhibition 'Aztecs' at the Royal Academy of Arts, London (unpublished paper, 2003); E. Umberger, 'Verbal Metaphors and Aztec Art: Human Images of Victory and Defeat' (unpublished draft, 2003); and E. Umberger, 'The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War' (unpublished paper, 2006). I am indebted to Emily Umberger, who was the first to identify the parallel between the denouement of the Tlatelolco war and the Coyolxauhqui myth, for providing me with drafts of these papers.

[18] E. Umberger, 'The Metaphorical Underpinnings of Aztec History: The Case of the 1473 Civil War' (unpublished paper, 2006), p. 20.

[19] Ibid., p. 21.

[20] Ibid., pp. 21-4.

[21] Florentine Codex, 2: 27: 102, 106.

[22] Ibid., 2: 30: 123-4.

[23] C. F. Klein, 'Fighting with Femininity: Gender and War in Aztec Mexico', in R. C. Trexler ed., Gender Rhetorics: Postures of Dominance and Submission in History (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), p. 120.

[24] E. Umberger, 'Verbal Metaphors and Aztec Art: Human Images of Victory and Defeat' (unpublished draft, 2003), p. 2.

[25] J. Nash, 'The Aztecs and the Ideology of Male Dominance', Signs, IV (1978), p. 359.

[26] M. J. Rodríguez-Shadow, La mujer azteca (Toluca: Universidad Autonomia del Estado de México, 1991), pp. 75-84.

[27] Huitzilopochtli's elder sister Malinalxoch, a malevolent sorceress, is another key female figure in Aztec history. She features in another episode in which Huitzilopochtli

was required to assert his authority and ensure the well-being of the tribe. For two, amongst many, accounts of this incident see: Codex Chimalpahin, pp. 77-85; and Durán, The History of the Indies of New Spain, pp. 20-33.

[28] See, for example: E. M. Brumfiel, 'Weaving and Cooking: Women's Production in Aztec Mexico', in J. M. Gero and M. W. Conkey, Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp.224-51; L. M. Burkhart, 'Mexica Women on the Home Front: Housework and Religion in Aztec Mexico', in S. Schroeder, S. Wood, and R. Haskett eds., Indian Women of Early Mexico (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), pp. 25-54; and S. Kellogg, 'The Woman's Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre-Hispanic Period', Ethnohistory, XLII (1995), 563-76.

[29] F. Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, ed. E. B. Leacock (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972 [1884]), p.137; and L. Paul, 'The Mastery of Work and the Mystery of Sex in a Guatemalan Village', in M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere eds., Woman, Culture, and Society (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 281-99.

[30] Florentine Codex, 5: 11: 186, 6: 29: 162.

[31] Although this debate has ranged across disciplines and decades, fundamental readings spanning the various aspects of dispute may be found in Rosaldo and Lamphere eds., Woman, Culture & Society. For a more recent analysis, see C. MacCormack and M. Strathern eds., Nature, Culture and Gender (Cambridge: Cambride University Press, 1998).

[32] Florentine Codex, 2: 30: 118-24.

[33] For further analysis of the ambiguous importance of the female earth deities, particularly Cihuacoatl, see C.F. Klein, 'Rethinking Cihuacoatl: Aztec Political Imagery of the Conquered Woman', in J.K. Josserand and K. Dakin eds., Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan, Part. I (Oxford: BAR International Series, 1988), pp. 237-77.

[34] See, for example, J. Soustelle, Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), pp. 99-100.

[35] Durán, The History of the Indies of New Spain, p.157; Florentine Codex, 3, appendix: 1: 41-6.