The PARI Journal

A quarterly publication of the Ancient Cultures Institute
Volume XXVI, No.2, 2025

In This Issue:

The Skin of Gold: Xipe Totec and the Spring Rites of Tlacaxipehualiztli

by
Karl Taube

PAGES 1–28

Marc Zender
Editor
marc@ancientcultures.org

Joel Skidmore
Associate Editor
joel@ancientcultures.org

The PARI Journal
202 Edgewood Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94117
415-664-8889
journal@ancientcultures.org

Electronic version
available at:
www.precolumbia.org/
pari/journal/2602

ISSN 1531-5398

The Skin of Gold: Xipe Totec and the Spring Rites of Tlacaxipehualiztli

KARL TAUBE
University of California, Riverside

Among the most striking—if macabre—of ancient Aztec deities is Xipe Totec, Our Lord the Flayed One, who appears wearing a flayed human skin, both as a tightly bound facial mask and separately as an entire suit of body skin including the arms and legs. In Aztec sculpture, the body portion is often portrayed in graphic detail, with stitching to roughly close the open chest wound from heart excision, with the open back pulled together by broad sewing as well (see Pasztory 1983:Pl. 199; Gónzalez Gónzalez 2016:Nos. 2-3). However, perhaps the most diagnostic trait of this god is his face, with slack, shut eyes and a widely open mouth caused by stretching the victim's skin over the living wearer's face. As will be noted, this convention is of some antiquity in Mesoamerica, and can be readily traced to the Classic period, well before the Late Postclassic Aztec.

During the Aztec annual festival cycle, the twenty day *veintena* "month" of the 365-day solar year dedicated to this god was Tlacaxipehualiztli, meaning "the flaying of men." According to Christopher Corson (1985:41), in terms of Mesoamerican studies, "Tlacaxipehualiztli was the most widely distributed and described of the veintena festivals," with variants of this complex found over much of the region (see also Nicholson 1972:213). Despite the wide variety of sources pertaining to Tlacaxipehualiztli, they are notably consistent, including the pivotal importance of the sun, wearing of flayed human skin, and gladiatorial combat. Since the month of Tlacaxipehualiztli fell solidly in the spring, specifically the 5th to the 24th of March in Alfonso Caso's (1971:Table 2) correlation of the Aztec months to the Christian calendar, it is widely thought that the Xipe Totec rites of sacrifice and flaying concerned the new verdant growth of the coming agricultural season. In other words, the newly donned skin symbolized the fresh, springtime "skin of the earth." However, as H.B. Nicholson (1972:216) notes:

> The interpretation of the contact period Central Mexican Xipe cult has been almost completely dominated by Seler's influential hypothesis … the gist of which is that the flaying and wearing of the victim's skin symbolized the annual spring renewal of the earth's vegetation…

According to Eduard Seler (1963:1:129), Xipe Totec was a god of the springtime related to the verdant regeneration of the earth, and Alfonso Caso (1958:51) followed this interpretation of the skin signifying the new spring mantle of the earth: "when spring arrives, the earth must cover itself with a new coat of vegetation and exchange the dead skin for a new one." However, this interpretation does not account for the major themes of warfare and solar worship that were of great importance during the *veintena* month of Tlacaxipehualiztli. Seler's original interpretation of the *veintena* rites of this month is seductively simple and elegant, but as Nicholson (1972:216) rightly states, "[i]t is supported by no informant's testimony." Similarly, Scott (1993:42) opines that "there is not a single reference in the documented sources to support Seler's interpretation of Xipe as the god of spring, rejuvenation and fertility." In an exhaustive study of Tlacaxipehualiztli, Broda (1970:261-262) notes that "no old

Figure 1. Large Epiclassic ceramic effigy portraying flayed figure with three vertical cuts through face, El Baúl, Guatemala (photos: Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos).

source tells that the dressing of the skins represented the covering of the earth by the vegetation in spring."

To be sure, there was an agricultural component to Tlacaxipehualiztli, and in the *Codex Aubin* this month is referred to as Xilopehualiztli, "the green corncob begins" (Caso 1971:340). Gónzalez Gónzalez (2011) notes that along with solar symbolism, militarism, and warfare, as a spring rite this *veintena* month concerned planting and regeneration of the maize seed. In contrast, Graulich (1982) sees it as a harvest festival based on tracing this month to the seventh century AD when it occurred later in the solar year. Much like the agrarian significance suggested by Seler for Xipe Totec, the Mayanist J. Eric Thompson (1933:145) suggested that the flaying symbolized the de-husking of maize, but once again with no corroborative support from contact period texts or imagery. However, the detailed accounts of the Tlacaxipehualiztli ceremonies provided by Sahagún, Durán, and many other early colonial sources do not reflect and refer to agricultural abundance primarily but rather warfare, human sacrifice, and nurturing the sun god Tonatiuh through the offering of hearts and blood. It is no coincidence that the vernal equinox occurs on March 20, near the very end and climax of Tlacaxipehualiztli, marking the steady increase of the diurnal sun over the night and darkness.

This study addresses directly what the early colonial texts and related prehispanic imagery convey about Xipe Totec and the Aztec *veintena* month of Tlacaxipehualiztli. Rather than primarily agrarian, the major focus of this month concerned the sun, warfare, and human sacrifice, a far cry from interpretations concerning the new verdant mantle of the earth or the quotidian dehusking of maize. Not a gentle time of nurturing spring growth and abundance, the month of

Tlacaxipehualiztli concerned mayhem, conflict, and war, embodied by the fearsome god Xipe Totec. Rather than simply being the new growth of the earth, the sacrificial raiment of this god for the Aztec was a skin of gold, the brilliant and precious essence of the sun deity, Tonatiuh. According to Caso (1971:343), most early colonial sources state that the major *veintena* festivities occurred at the end of the 20-day months, which for Tlacaxipehualiztli would be March 24, very close to the spring equinox. In his detailed discussions of Xipe Totec and Tlacaxipehualiztli, Durán (1971:172) states that the celebrations actually were on March 20, the equinox, and "cost so many lives that nothing rivaled it." According to Sahagún (1950-1982:Book 2:47), "it was the time when all captives died, all those taken…" It is noteworthy that these are captives obtained in conquest and battle, and the Tlacaxipehualiztli rites have a major militaristic component strongly consistent with the bellicose sun god Tonatiuh, in contrast to most agrarian rites of the Aztec solar calendar.

The flaying and wearing of human skin was by no means limited to only Late Postclassic Mesoamerica, but began at least by the Classic period (AD 250–900), if not well before. In an excellent and thorough study of Xipe Totec in Mesoamerica, Gónzalez Gónzalez (2011:26-27) notes that a pair of vertical curving lines across the brow and cheeks is an important defining trait of this being. He also mentions that according to Hermann Beyer (1965:348-349), this concerns stitching the face from three flaps of skin. Indeed, Eduard Seler (1965:1:134) also considered the two facial lines as a consequence of cutting and flaying the skin. Roughly 40 cm tall, an Epiclassic ceramic effigy from the Cotzumalhuapa site of El Baúl in the southern piedmont of Guatemala portrays Xipe with three deep gouges running down the face, thereby creating four flaps of skin with the central brow, nose, and chin bifurcated (Figure 1**)**. A remarkable life-sized ceramic Xipe mask in the Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala City, has two areas of white paint on the sides, thus breaking the face into three vertical zones (Figure 2). Late Classic in style, it is attributed to highland or south coastal Guatemala and may well be also Cotzumalhuapan in origin. Portrayed with slit eyes and a widely open mouth, it also has a series of pierced holes now lashed by modern binding, indicating that it was actually meant to be worn by a Xipe impersonator.

Beyer (1965) based his flaying interpretation on a Late Postclassic silver mask attributed to the Tarascans (Purépecha) of Michoacan that provides graphic corroboration of this flaying process, with a pair of vertical stitched lines plainly evident (see Roskamp 2017:67). Sue Scott (1993:50), however, found this unconvincing, as one likely Classic Zapotec Xipe had a distinct stepped form of facial banding. Nonetheless, a gold masquette of Xipe Totec at the Metropolitan Museum of Art provides another visage of this god with

Figure 2. Ceramic Xipe mask in the Museo Popol Vuh, Guatemala City (photo: Karl Taube).

Figure 3. Late Postclassic metal mask portrayal of Xipe with facial stitching, Metropolitan Museum of Art (photograph courtesy of Travis Stanton).

pairs of stitches passing vertically through both cheeks (Figure 3). In addition, a Late Postclassic gold ring in the Museum of the American Indian also depicts Xipe Totec with facial stitching, here as two slightly curving, vertical lines of rounded bumps (Figure 4). Gónzalez Gónzalez (2011:27) notes that Xipe Totec is probably portrayed with facial suture markings in prehispanic and early colonial codices. They appear with a portrayal of the Red Tezcatlipoca—an aspect of Xipe Totec—in the *Codex Vaticanus B*, with a series of red dots flanking the facial line (Figure 5a). In highland Mexico, portrayals of facial stitching with Xipe Totec continue in early colonial period pictorial manuscripts. For the Aztec month of Tlacaxipehualiztli on page 24 of the *Codex Borbonicus*, Xipe Totec has vertical stitching across the eye region of the face (Figure 5b). In portrayals of Xipe Totec in the Sahaguntine corpus—namely the *Primeros memoriales* and the *Florentine Codex*—he also displays the facial stitching which as in the *Borbonicus* is white and contrasts strongly with the yellow facial skin. More than likely, the white stitching denotes cotton thread (Figure 5c–d).

Although vertical facial lines are common with Xipe Totec, explicit stitching is rare and in many cases the lines are completely absent, although of course with applications of paint on stone sculpture or post-fire ceramics, any lines probably would not have survived. While not identifying it as Xipe Totec, Gónzalez Gónzalez (2011:27) calls attention to the facial striping on one of the four incised masks of the Middle Formative Olmec Las Limas Statuette. I (Taube 2004, 2025) consider this being as one aspect of the Olmec maize god, in this case green, growing corn (see also Hammond and Taube 2019). Oddly enough, green maize is also an attribute with the complex nature of the contact period Xipe Totec. However, I am not aware of explicit portrayals of flayed human skin or Xipe figures before the Classic period (AD 250–900). Since I include various prehispanic Mesoamerican cultures in this discussion, portrayals of flayed male examples will be referred to as Xipe, although with the understanding that the full Nahuatl name of the Late Postclassic being is Xipe Totec.

Despite the great cultural and cosmogonic significance of Teotihuacan to the Aztec, strong evidence of Xipe figures or the flaying of victims is rare at this Early Classic city. In his recent discussion of Xipe Totec, González González (2011:34-39, 2016:31-32) calls attention to Teotihuacan ceramic figurines wearing prominent masks with circular holes for the eyes and mouth but notes that this remains a topic of some debate, and I find it very unlikely that they portray Xipe. Although masked, the head bears no resemblance to a flayed face, nor is there evidence of cutting or flaying on the limbs or torso. Instead, the figures appear to be heavily padded, with thick belts, leggings, and a broad item often worn across the shoulder, and it is more than likely that they are athletes wearing protective gear and probably boxers, which are well documented for both ancient Oaxaca and the Classic Maya (see Orr 2003; Taube and Zender 2009; Taube 2019). In a markedly different medium and appearance, a mural from the Zacuala Compound may portray the face of Xipe, as it has shut eyes and a pair of curving vertical bands passing over the cheeks (Séjourné 1959:Fig. 6). I (Taube 1992:Fig. 54) compared this to an Early Classic Teotihuacan style figure appearing on a vessel from Burial 10 at Tikal, which also has similar facial banding and an open toothy mouth. However, neither are the Tikal figure's eyes closed nor is cutting visible around the eyes or mouth. Aside from the possible Xipe mural, there is a large, white marble statue found in the Xalla Compound at Teotihuacan. The sculpture has a pair of vertical black lines that extend from the eyes down to the lower edges of the jaw, which as the excavators note, strongly indicates Xipe (López Luján et al. 2006:26). In addition, the figure has two darts carved in his legs, strongly suggestive of a sacrificial rite associated with the Postclassic Xipe Totec, which will be subsequently discussed (Figure 18).

It is important to note that the flaying of sacrificial victims was not limited to males, but was widespread with women as well in ancient Mesoamerica, with the best known contact period example being the impersonators of the earth goddess Toci-Tlazolteotl and the maize deity Chicomecoatl (Seven Serpent) during the Aztec summer first harvest ceremony in the month of Ochpaniztli (see Corson 1985:70). This tradition of female flaying was present during the Classic period in the Remojadas region of southern Veracruz. Here at the site of El Zapotal, close to Cerro de las Mesas, a remarkable cache of Late Classic fragmentary, life-size terra cotta figures were discovered (Gutierrez Solana and Hamilton 1977). More than likely, they portray goddesses, with most wearing what appear to be live serpent belts. Moreover,

Figure 4. Gold ring of Xipe Totec with facial stitching, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (20/6218) (drawing by author, after Emmerich 1965:Fig. 165).

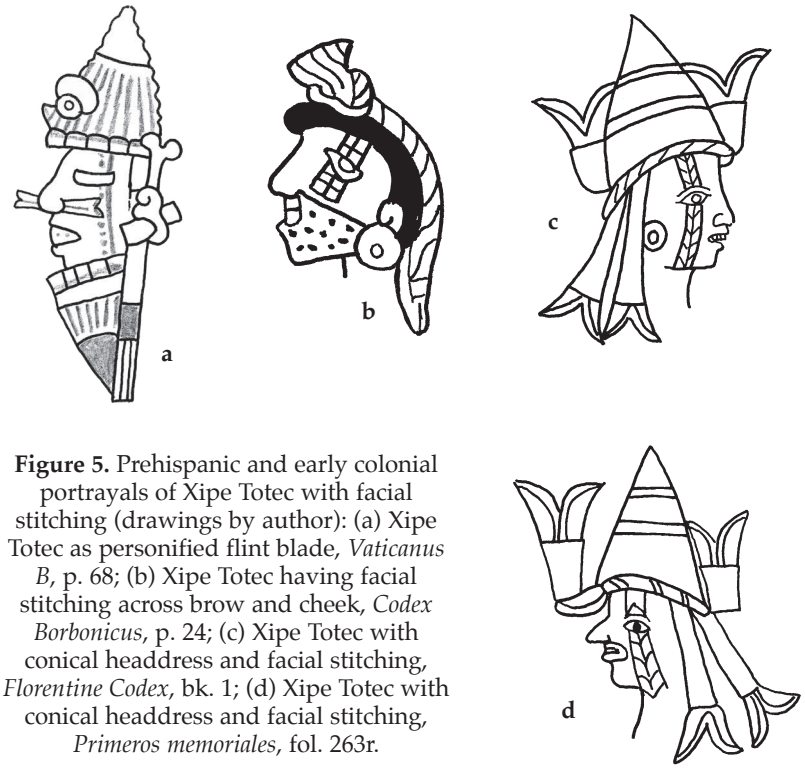


Figure 5. Prehispanic and early colonial portrayals of Xipe Totec with facial stitching (drawings by author): (a) Xipe Totec as personified flint blade, *Vaticanus B*, p. 68; (b) Xipe Totec having facial stitching across brow and cheek, *Codex Borbonicus*, p. 24; (c) Xipe Totec with conical headdress and facial stitching, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 1; (d) Xipe Totec with conical headdress and facial stitching, *Primeros memoriales*, fol. 263r.

a number are flayed, with shut eyes and widely open mouths. Being hollow, these terracotta women are semi-portable, and thus could have been readily carried in litters during ceremonial processions. In fact, Classic period Remojadas art is known for figurines of women carried in litters (see Hammer 1971:Fig. 117; Casco Franco 1973:91). In this perspective, their public appearance may not have been terribly different from the solemn but also celebratory processions of saints in Mesoamerican communities to the present. At El Zapotal, two of the goddesses have the shut eyes and open mouths strongly indicative of flaying, but this cannot be discerned by the wrists, as both wear large bracelets (see Guiterrez Solana and Hamilton 1977:Figs. 2, 6). However, although missing their heads, two other snake-skirted goddesses at El Zapotal clearly have "cuffs" on the wrists, strongly indicative of flayed skin (ibid.:Fig. 9, 47). At a later date following the placing of the large terracotta figures at Zapotal, disarticulated human remains were placed in a deep pit ossuary, with many exhibiting cut marks indicating that at least half were probably flayed (see Tiesler et al. 2013).

Aside from El Zapotal, at the nearby Remojadas site of El Cocuite, also on the Río Blanco drainage, two other large goddesses were found, and although not wearing the serpent belt, they also bear flayed visages (Gutierrez Solana and Hamilton 1977:60-62). For all of the cited goddess sculptures, long skirts cover the lower legs to over part of the feet, making it impossible to determine whether there is cut skin at the ankles. It is possible that the long skirts were a convention to provide them with a more lifelike appearance. Aside from documented archaeological finds, there are other Remojadas-style sculptures that indicate the wearing of flayed skin. Roughly a half meter tall, a hollow Remojadas female figure wearing a short skirt and with face displaying shut eyes and open mouth has "cuffs" at the wrists and upper ankles, strongly suggesting that she is wearing a human skin as well (see Goldstein 1987:Fig. 43).

In Classic Veracruz, the flaying of human bodies was not limited to women, and included males as well. Aside from the large female figures, a box-like brazier was also uncovered at El Zapotal, portraying a three-dimensional male with loosely shut eyes and a slack open mouth, a being that Gutierrez Solana and Hamilton (1977:74, Fig. 38) identify as the "flayed god," in other words, Xipe. It is widely acknowledged that decapitation and trophy heads are closely related to the ancient Mesoamerican ballgame, and a Late Classic Veracruz *hacha* in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, features a human head with widely open mouth strongly suggestive of flaying, and remarkably there is a ceramic effigy vessel in the same collection featuring a *yugo* ballgame belt bearing a very similar example (see Couch 1988:Nos. 26, 27). Both are supplied with rings through the nose for ready handling. In Mesoamerica, decapitation was widely identified with the ballgame, and these flayed heads may well denote trophies related to ballgame ritual and celebrations. Aside from the stone hacha in the American Museum of Natural History,

there is a miniature example also with the shut eyes and ring through the nose, in this case evidently fashioned of modeled clay (see Goldstein 1987:Fig. 159). As with Veracruz, stone ballgame equipment, that is the hacha, palma, and yugo, are known for Terminal Classic, south coastal Guatemala. In an extensive catalogue of these objects, Shook and Ekholm (1996:190-196) identify no fewer than 23 hachas portraying Xipe, largely based on the shut eyes and widely open mouth. As has been noted, a Xipe figurine was also discovered at the Cotzumalhuapa site of El Baúl from the same region (Figure 1). In addition, there is a monumental tenoned Xipe head documented from Finca El Portal in Antigua, quite possibly from a ballcourt (see Chinchilla Mazariegos 2014:Fig. 6).

As noted by Gónzalez Gónzalez (2016:32), perhaps the most direct antecedent of the Postclassic Xipe Totec derives from the Classic-period Zapotec of Oaxaca. According to the *Florentine Codex*, "He was the god of the seashore people, the proper god of the Zapotecs (*tzapoteca*)," suggesting an origin in coastal Oaxaca (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 1:39**)**. Alfonso Caso (1938:74) identified an urn from Tomb 103 at Monte Alban—dating to roughly AD 600—as Xipe Totec holding a trophy head. The figure wears an obvious mask covered in yellow paint, which is the common flayed skin pigment of the Postclassic Xipe Totec, and in addition has a knotted bow element in his septum, also widely found with later Xipe Totec portrayals, along with other of his accoutrements. In this regard, they frequently appear as a repetitive series, strongly resembling the "stacked bow tie" identified with sacrifice and bloodletting among the Classic Maya (Figure 30d; see Joralemon 1974). In their classic work *Urnas de Oaxaca*, Caso and Bernal (1952:254-257) call attention to other Classic-period Zapotec urns with probable portrayals of Xipe, including two examples from tombs at Ciénega de Zimatlán with flayed faces. In this case they have broad skirts, as do other examples illustrated by Caso and Bernal, including one from Zaachila (Caso and Bernal 1952:Figs. 402, 403, 405-407). For the elaborately decorated Late Classic Tomb 5 at Cerro de la Campana, there are four skirted deities with flayed faces having shut eyes and open mouths (see Miller 1995:Pls. 36, 37). In contrast to the skirted Xipes on urns, these figures are wearing *quechquemitl* blouses, clearly designating them as women.

Among the Late Classic Maya, there is abundant evidence of the flaying of human skin, but in large part only the face. In addition, rather than representing a particular god such as Xipe Totec, this practice seems to have been primarily based on war trophies. In fact, Nicholson (1972:216) suggested that the taking of war trophies was the origin of the Xipe Totec complex rather than the spring renewal of the earth:

> A more economical, historically oriented hypothesis, perhaps, would view the cult as originally more connected with trophies involving stuffed skins of slain enemies…

According to the *Florentine Codex*, the captors of the victims in the Tlacaxipehualiztli ceremonies took trophies from their bodies: "the owners themselves tore off the hair of the crowns of their heads and kept it as a relic" (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:3). Of course, this closely resembles the practice of taking of scalps known over much of North America and was perhaps historically related to practices performed in colonial New Spain, with origins still earlier in the Precolumbian past. As an important conclusion of the Tlacaxipehualiztli rites of the Aztec, the warrior captors would also retain a thigh bone of their sacrificed victim (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:60). In the *Florentine Codex* illustration of this trophy, a severed human head also appears above the femur. This source also mentions that during the sacrificial events of Tlacaxipehualiztli, the warriors danced

Figure 6. Late Classic Maya ceramic cup in form of trophy head (drawing by author after Robiscek and Hales 1981:Fig. 4g).

with the heads of the slain victims (ibid.:54). It is quite possible that in ritual practice, the captor kept the topknot, with the skull destined for the great Tzompantli skull rack close to the Templo Mayor. Although the keeping of heads is not mentioned in the Book 2 account, the Tlacaxipehualiztli scene may be depicting a trophy femur and a head before it was scalped. Of course, many illustrations in the *Florentine Codex* include themes and items not mentioned in the often taciturn text.

For the contact-period Yukatek Maya, Landa (Tozzer 1941:165) mentions that during the *veintena* ceremonies of Pax there was a celebratory dance known as the Holcan Ok'ot, or "dance of the warriors," which had a "long martial step," possibly to demonstrate strength and vigor. In addition, he states that in certain dances—perhaps the same one—warriors danced with trophies of sacrificed captives: "If the victims were slaves captured in war, their master took their bones, to use them in their dances as tokens of victory" (Tozzer 1941:120). In the highland Maya Rabinal Achi performance, the captive Cawek proclaims that a cup will be made of his skull and from his carved limb bones other trophies, these being a

drumstick and a rattle handle (Tedlock 2003:105-106, see also 126-156). Painted in the conventional colors of codex-style ceramics, black and red on creamy buff, a Late Classic Maya cup is in the explicit form of a lifeless trophy head with shut eyes and a slack open mouth (Figure 6). In an obscure passage in the *Histoyre du Mexique*, the vassals of Quetzalcoatl fashioned drinking cups from the hollowed skulls of his slain brothers (Garibay Kintana 1979:114). The use of trophy heads as drinking cups is well documented in the Central Andes among both the Moche and contact-period Inka (see Verano et al. 1999).

At Late Classic Bonampak, Room 3 of Structure 1 portrays an elaborate scene of a celebratory war and bloodletting dance in honor of the bellicose sun god, who appears in the vault above. A number of the warriors have human war trophies, including one individual wearing two severed heads, one on his brow and the other at the nape of his neck. More specifically, they are "shrunken heads" of human skin flayed from skulls, hence their much smaller appearance in contrast to that of the wearer (Figure 7b; Taube and Houston 2015). Broda (1970:162) notes that the practice was present in contact-period highland Mexico:

> In Mexico there also existed the custom of flaying the skin of the head of brave warriors and preparing small shrunken heads similar to the famous "tsantsa" of the Jivaros in South America.

Motolonía mentions that the skinning and preparation of shrunken heads was a common practice at contact period highland Mexico:

> The heads of those they sacrificed, especially of those taken in war, they skinned, and if the war captives were lords or leading persons they skinned the head with the hair and dried them in order to preserve them. Of these there were many in the beginning; and, were it not for the fact that they had beards, one would judge them to be the faces of children five or six years old, because they were dried and cured. (Steck 1951:127)

A shrunken trophy head is prominently worn by Itzamnaaj Bahlam III on Yaxchilan Lintel 24, which in terms of its fine carving and composition, is one of the most celebrated Late Classic Maya monuments (Figure 7a). The material protruding from the open mouths is probably cotton or paper stuffing to give the heads

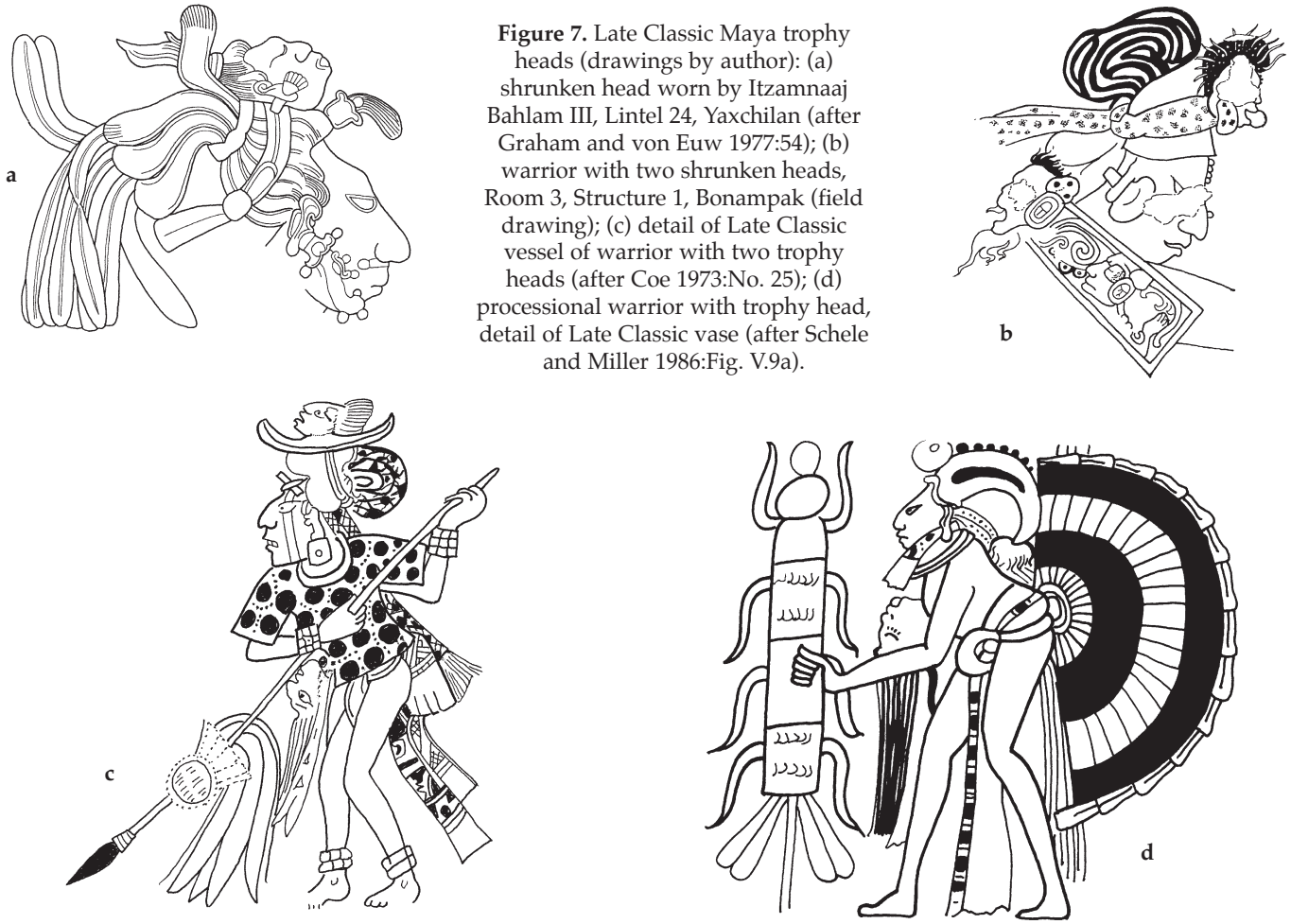


Figure 7. Late Classic Maya trophy heads (drawings by author): (a) shrunken head worn by Itzamnaaj Bahlam III, Lintel 24, Yaxchilan (after Graham and von Euw 1977:54); (b) warrior with two shrunken heads, Room 3, Structure 1, Bonampak (field drawing); (c) detail of Late Classic vessel of warrior with two trophy heads (after Coe 1973:No. 25); (d) processional warrior with trophy head, detail of Late Classic vase (after Schele and Miller 1986:Fig. V.9a).

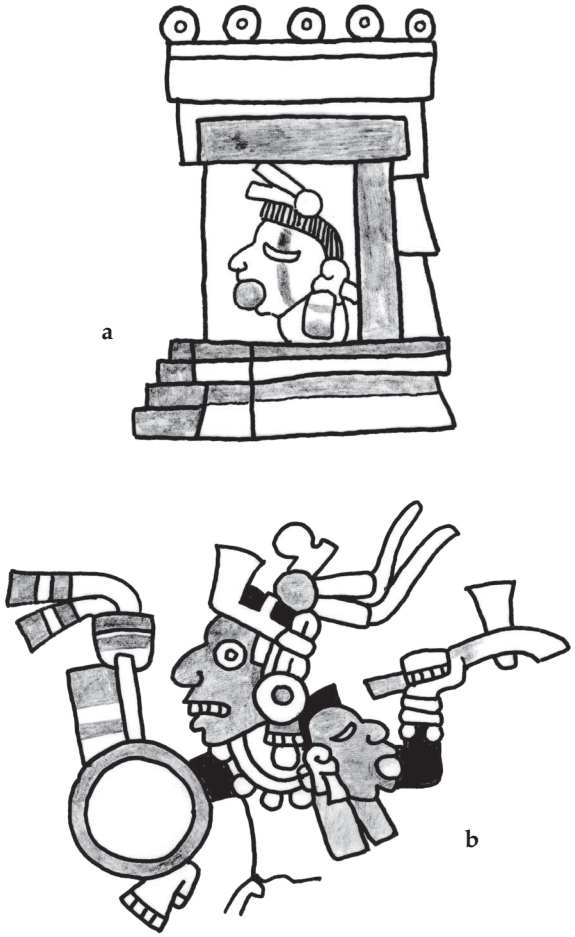


Figure 8. Mixtec portrayals of severed heads (drawings by author): (a) head of Mixtec Xipe in shrine, *Codex Vindobonensis*, p. 41; (b) warrior figure with trophy head, *Codex Becker 1*, p. 7.

a more rounded, realistic appearance. Such trophy heads are common in Late Classic Maya art, including in scenes of warfare as well as processions and victory war dances, with one Late Classic vessel depicting a warrior wearing two, one in his headdress and another hanging from his vest (Figure 7c). On Late Classic Maya vases, shrunken token trophy heads commonly appear in portrayals of warfare, celebratory military dances and human sacrifice (Figure 7c–d). A large vessel at Dumbarton Oaks portrays an elaborate scene of scaffold sacrifice—a theme to be further discussed below—with armed warriors wearing them along with other war trophies (see Pillsbury et al. 2012:Fig. 195). Two Late Classic vessels depict armed warriors wearing trophy heads on their chests while they engage in long strides, recalling the Holcan Ok'ot dance mentioned by Landa (see Schele and Miller 1986:Fig. V.9a-b). Aside from the Classic Maya, shrunken trophy heads are also known for the Late Postclassic Mixtec, and as with the Maya examples, white material protrudes from the mouths, probably cotton stuffing to pad and fill the face (Figure 8).

Among the ancient Maya, the tradition of prepared trophy heads can be traced to at least as early as the Late Preclassic period (ca. 100 BC–AD 250). Located close to the piedmont site of Izapa, El Jobo Stela 1 portrays a figure holding a pointed club with a femur in his right hand and a trophy head in the other (see Miles 1965:Fig. 15b). The head is clearly prepared, with a carrying strap strung through the cheeks, and in view of the scale, it could well be a skinned and shrunken trophy head. The head is inverted, with long strands of hair hanging down from the brow, recalling shrunken heads worn by rulers at Chinkultik, Yaxchilan, Copan, and other Late Classic Maya sites. However, excavations at Ceibal uncovered a still earlier rendering of a trophy head fashioned from cut spondylus shell dating to the Real 3 phase (700–800 BC):

> The shell depicts a human face with hollow eyes and exposed teeth, which probably represents a desiccated decapitated head. Perforations on the sides indicate that the piece was worn upside down as a pectoral, and the radiating lines of the shell's natural texture seem to represent dangling hair. This pendant resembles Late Classic depictions of trophy heads worn upside down by elite warriors… (Inomata and Triadan 2015:83)

However, the authors note that the shell probably does not represent the "flayed shrunken heads" known in Classic Maya art, as the form of the skull and teeth are still present.

Among the Late Classic Maya, the flaying of heads overlaps with the wearing of human skin, as can be seen in a vessel scene apparently representing a dramatic event concerning the capture of a young warrior, recalling the Rabinal Achi (see Kerr 1990:204 [K2025]). Accompanied by musicians, a masked figure menaces the youth with a spear with three attendant figures wearing flayed faces with shut eyes and enlarged mouths. One as a contortionist has his head inverted with long locks of hanging hair, much as if he was an animated trophy head, and in fact this scene has been referred to as the "dance of decapitated heads" (Houston et al. 2006:71).

In the *Codex Borgia* passage concerning the patron gods of the twenty day names, page 13 depicts the god of the day Malinalli, or Grass (Figure 9a). It is the pulque deity Patecatl portrayed ethnically as a Huastec Maya, a people widely identified with drunkenness in the *Florentine Codex* (see Sahagún 1950-1972:Book 10:193-194). He wears Huastec shell ornaments, including the lunar nosepiece widely worn by the pulque gods but also the large spoon-shaped gorget, which constitutes the most elaborately carved form of Huastec shell art (see Beyer 1933). However, in the Borgia Group only the *Borgia* uses this device as a marker—both male and female—of Huastec ethnicity. On his brow, Patecatl also wears a shrunken head, strikingly similar to the aforementioned head worn by Itzamnaaj Bahlam III on Yaxchilan Lintel 24 (Figure 7a). For the cognate scene of the day Malinalli and Patecatl on *Vaticanus B* page 31, the god also wears a shrunken trophy head, although here with the vertical facial line of Xipe Totec (Figure 9b). His

knife-like pectoral could well be another Huastec shell gorget. These two scenes demonstrate that shrunken trophy heads significantly overlapped with the flayed god in Late Postclassic highland Mexico, as is true for the Mixtec as well. Moreover, the *Vaticanus B* head as Xipe strongly indicates that the trophy heads were flayed as part of the process of preparing them. The *Borgia* portrayal of Patecatl indicates that the Huastec Maya were clearly known as a people who collected and donned shrunken human heads. In fact, Huastec cut shell wrist pieces are adorned with carved images of trophy heads (Figure 9c; see Goldstein and Suárez Diez 1997:Nos. 23-25). A mural from the Huastec site of Tamuín in San Luis Potosí portrays an individual grasping a severed head by the hair, a fairly rare motif in ancient Mesoamerican art (see Marquina 1951:415).

In Classic Maya art, rulers are at times portrayed wearing multiple trophy heads, including at the Late Classic site of Chinkultik, located in highland Chiapas. At the site, Monuments 8, 17, 18, and 27 depict rulers with trophy-head collars (Figure 10). The heads are inverted with long hanging hair, and as Earley (2023:87) notes, they appear to be shrunken. In the case of Monument 8, the ruler wears no less than six heads as well as a human femur in his headdress (Figure 10a). Chinkultik Monument 27 is especially striking, as along with a collar with five heads, the ruler holds a spear or staff with two severed human legs (Figure 10d). Clearly, such garb and accoutrements were intended to intimidate if not terrify.

In some instances, Maya kings are explicitly engaged in a war dance, much like the sixteenth-century account provided by Landa. An example is the northwest jamb of Temple 18 at Copan, which depicts Yax Pasaj Chan Yopat dancing with no fewer than five shrunken heads (see Baudez 1994:Fig. 95a). Dating to AD 768, Yaxchilan Lintel 9 constitutes the last monument of Bird Jaguar IV, and features the ruler wearing an elaborate bib and necklace of trophy heads (Figure 11). Hanging from a central jade bar pectoral, the woven bib features an inverted head with pendant strands of beads, and although this might well be a carved mask, four of the five inverted shrunken heads hanging from the large surrounding necklace are probably actual trophy heads with long strands of hair. However, the central, lowest one is also supplied with crossed arms and probably is a sculpture, as a shrunken head with a partly intact body would be highly unlikely. On the massive necklace, two spondylus shells of roughly the same size alternate with the heads, and a virtually identical necklace and costume assemblage is found on Yaxchilan Stela 16, which even includes a headdress with a sacrificial knife and a frontal diminutive figure (see Fash et al. 2022:257). Despite the striking similarities, this monument was probably commissioned by Bird Jaguar IV's predecessor, Shield Jaguar III (see Martin and Grube 2008:123). Of course, whether this continuity is from the careful preservation of elaborate costumes as heirlooms or simply a subsequent ruler copying the garb found on a predecessor's monument or in a manuscript remains unknown. At any rate, there are differences between the two trophy-head necklaces on Lintel 9 and Stela 16. Thus the Stela 16 necklace bears not five trophy heads and two spondylus but four shells and only three heads. On both

Figure 9. Late Postclassic shrunken heads in the *Borgia* and *Vaticanus B* codices and in Huastec art (drawings by author): (a) pulque god Patecatl wearing trophy head on brow, *Codex Borgia*, p. 13); (b) Patecatl wearing Xipe trophy head on brow, *Vaticanus B*, p. 31); (c) Huastec shell wrist plaque with trophy heads (after Goldstein and Suárez Diez 1997:No. 25).

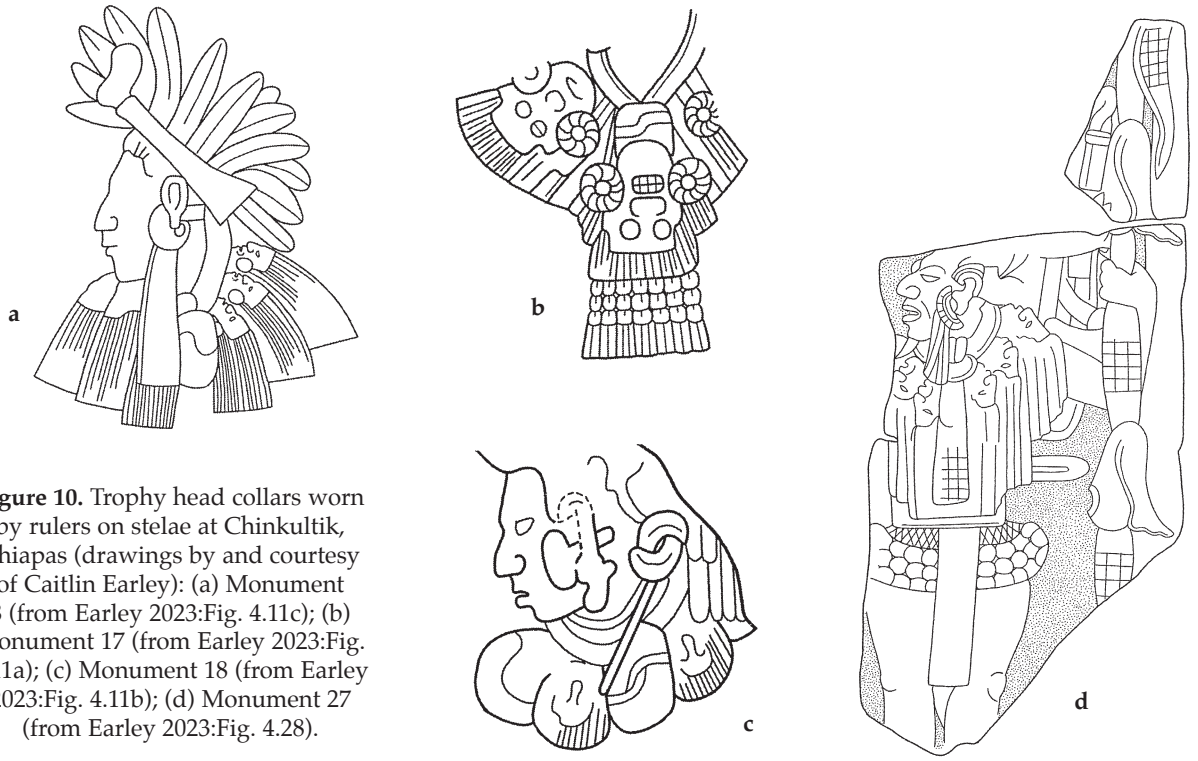


Figure 10. Trophy head collars worn by rulers on stelae at Chinkultik, Chiapas (drawings by and courtesy of Caitlin Earley): (a) Monument 8 (from Earley 2023:Fig. 4.11c); (b) Monument 17 (from Earley 2023:Fig. 4.11a); (c) Monument 18 (from Earley 2023:Fig. 4.11b); (d) Monument 27 (from Earley 2023:Fig. 4.28).

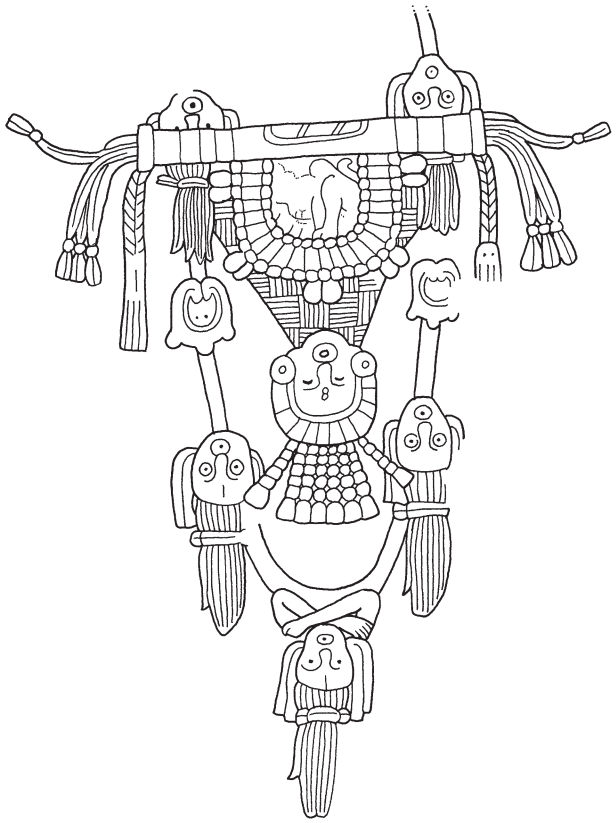


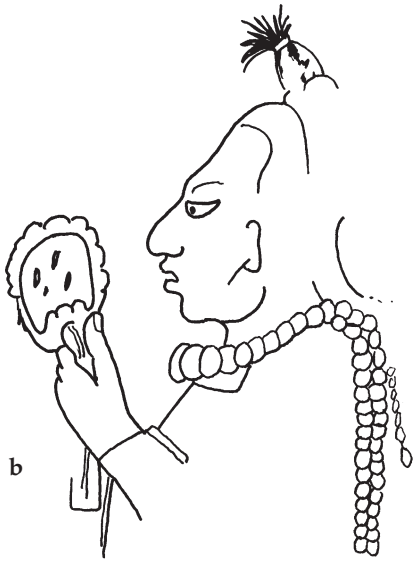
Figure 11. Trophy necklace formed of human heads and spondylus shells, Yaxchilan Lintel 9 (drawing by author after Graham and von Euw 1977:29).

monuments the lowest head hangs with crossed arms.

Among the Late Classic Maya, there was a close relationship between trophy heads and spondylus shell, which is also evident with the Middle Formative spondylus trophy head from Ceibal. On Dos Pilas Stela 16, Ruler 3 is dressed in a rich assemblage of Teotihuacan-style military garb with a thick necklace rimmed again with alternating spondylus and trophy heads (see Graham 1967:Figs. 6-7). However, with the almost identical program on Aguateca Stela 2, Ruler 3 wears only a spondylus collar (Graham 1967:Figs. 4-5). It is conceivable that among the Classic Maya, a spondylus shell may have held the value of a captive slave, and individuals wearing such collars demonstrate both military and economic power. Not that trophies were entirely symbolic: a Jaina figurine graphically shows a screaming scalped victim, with his limbs grotesquely contorted (see Schele and Miller 1986:Pl. 94). For the massive burial offering from the Feathered Serpent Pyramid at Teotihuacan, many of the sacrificed warriors wore thick shell collars of cut spondylus shells depicting human molars and pendant maxillae, while several collars have actual maxillae cut from skulls (see Sugiyama 2005:171-179). These collars may well denote trophies or "coup" of however many captives these individuals took or retained as war captives, whether as slaves or sacrificial offerings.

A finely carved lintel attributed to Laxtunich depicts Shield Jaguar III of Yaxchilan presiding in a palace with the presentation of three hapless captives on a stairway (Figure 12a). In the scene, a secondary lord presents a bound spondylus shell to the Yaxchilan king, and it may well concern the purchase of the captive slaves. A notably similar scene

a



b

Figure 12. Presentation of spondylus shells at the arraignment of captives: (a) palace scene with captives and individual holding spondylus shell, lintel in the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth (Justin Kerr photograph collection, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, D.C.); (b) noblewoman with spondylus shell, detail of mural from Room 2 of Structure 1, Bonampak (drawing by author).

appears in the mural program of Room 2 of Bonampak Structure 1, where a group of war captives are also arraigned on a stairway, some being tortured and others already sacrificed. Standing atop the stairway, a group of nobles dominate the scene, including two women who hold bound spondylus shells in their hands (Figure 12b). Rather than tribute, these shells are held by members of the presiding court, perhaps as a form of money. As with the Laxtunich scene, this may concern the purchase of presented captives from the huddled group below. During the Classic period, such shells may have served as highly valued currency, perhaps even worth their value in terms of a captive slave (for a discussion of slavery and markets in ancient Mesoamerica, see Houston 2020).

Aside from trophy heads, another aspect of flaying human skin was the creation of war shields—or *pakal* in Mayan—from facial skin (for a recent discussion of flayed facial skin shields, see Scherer 2025:130). As noted by Stone and Zender (2011:87), "the flayed face shield, with stretched facial features, reflects a widespread practice in Mesoamerican warfare comparable to taking scalps." It should be noted that the authors are referring to human war trophies, while the use of flayed face shields is generally only known for the Late Classic Maya. The illustrious king of Palenque, K'inich Janaab Pakal commonly has such a shield as part of his name phrase (Figure 13a). In addition, it also appears in the couplet, *utook' upakal*, meaning "his flint his shield," referring to the garb of warfare often used in phrases referring to war including capture events (Figure 13b). One of the more famous epigraphic examples concerns the defeat of a king of Calakmul, Yich'aak K'ahk', recorded on Lintel 3 of Temple I at Tikal (Martin and Grube 2008:45). The use of the flayed-face shield as a logograph and conquest expression at various Maya sites demonstrates the broad distribution of this grisly concept in the Late Classic period. An architectural element at Palenque features a large stucco modeled shield with the flayed face, including even the eyebrows, and may have been on a structure thematically devoted to war (Figure 13e). As with most of the flayed face shields, a handprint or hand covers the mouth area, a convention clearly related to the personified form of the number zero, or "completion," who is a deity with the same mouth marking along with specific death attributes, such as

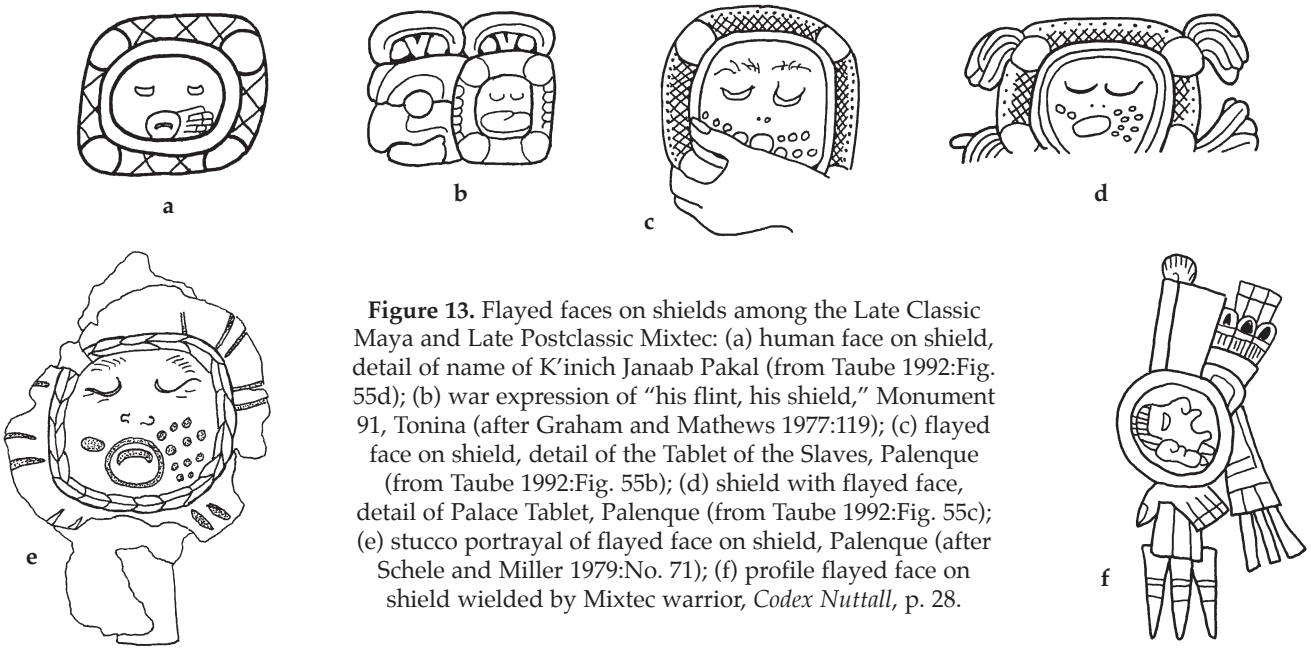


Figure 13. Flayed faces on shields among the Late Classic Maya and Late Postclassic Mixtec: (a) human face on shield, detail of name of K'inich Janaab Pakal (from Taube 1992:Fig. 55d); (b) war expression of "his flint, his shield," Monument 91, Tonina (after Graham and Mathews 1977:119); (c) flayed face on shield, detail of the Tablet of the Slaves, Palenque (from Taube 1992:Fig. 55b); (d) shield with flayed face, detail of Palace Tablet, Palenque (from Taube 1992:Fig. 55c); (e) stucco portrayal of flayed face on shield, Palenque (after Schele and Miller 1979:No. 71); (f) profile flayed face on shield wielded by Mixtec warrior, *Codex Nuttall*, p. 28.

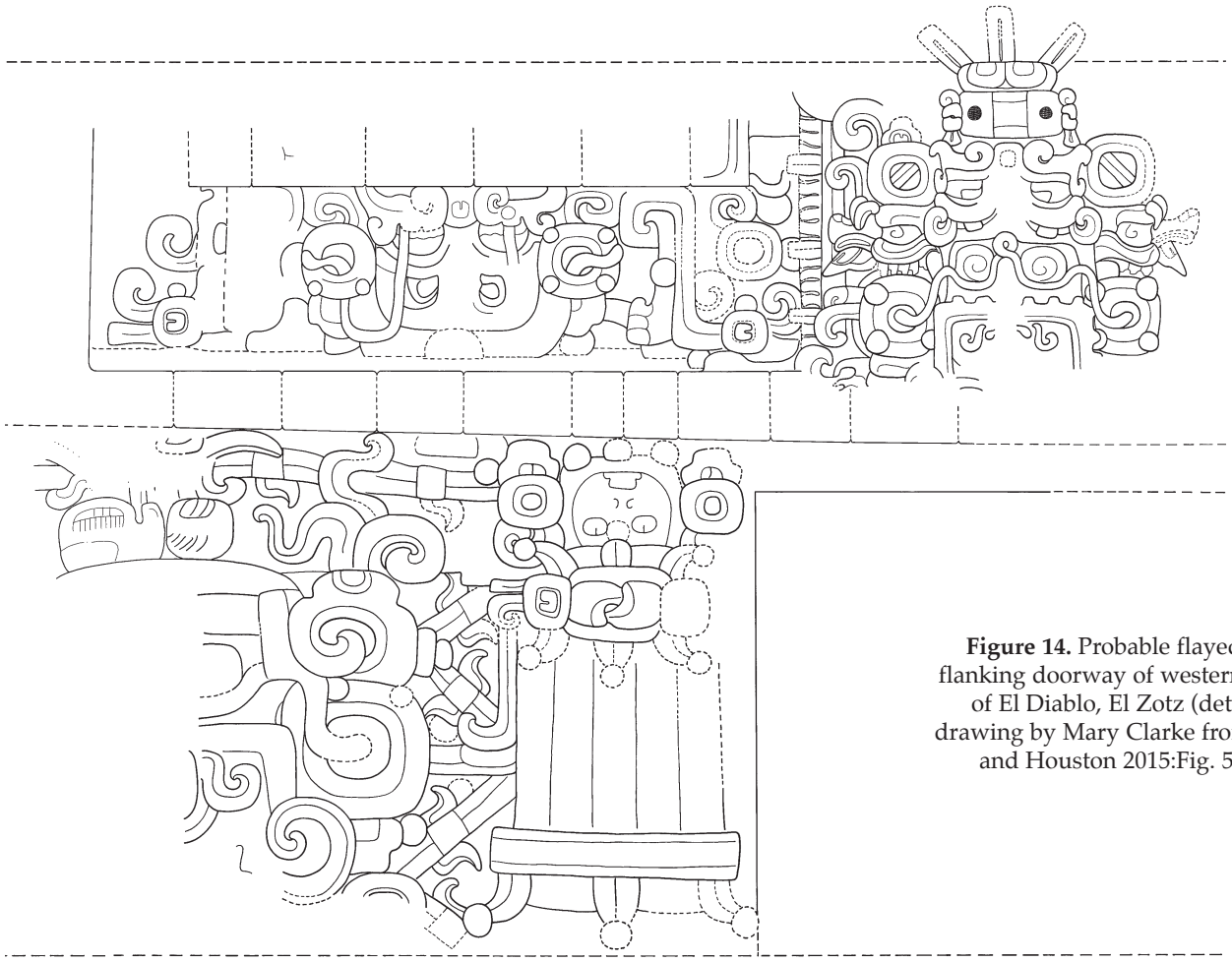


Figure 14. Probable flayed face flanking doorway of western façade of El Diablo, El Zotz (detail of drawing by Mary Clarke from Taube and Houston 2015:Fig. 5.10).

a "death collar" with eyeballs and division signs also signifying death, as originally noted by Eduard Seler (1902-1923:1:804-807). The Late Classic Maya shields with flayed faces obviously denote militarism, death, and sacrifice. A shield with a flayed face is also wielded by a Mixtec warrior figure in the Late Postclassic *Codex Nuttall*, although in this case rendered in profile with a slit eye and widely open mouth (Figure 13f). Rather than being an accurate portrayal of a real shield, the flayed face may be labeling it as fashioned of human facial skin, perhaps with the actual one facing frontally as in the Late Classic Maya examples. In the Mixtec codices, frontally facing individuals are essentially nonexistent.

It is quite likely that for the Classic Maya, the flaying of human faces can be traced back well into the Early Classic in the stucco facades of the El Diablo Temple at El Zotz, located close to Tikal in the northern Peten (Figure 14). Here on the north and west façades there are large stylized and inverted human faces with widely open mouths that apparently were on the armature of a scaffold, perhaps fashioned of bamboo:

> [P]arts of the lower portion of the temple may have been "wrapped" with the motif of heads atop scaffolding. (Taube and Houston 2015:Figs. 5.9-5.10)

Tellingly, the facade face is notably flat with only lines for the nostrils and no projecting nose. Both the inverted position and the flattened face suggests that this is in fact a hanging trophy in the form of a flayed human face, similar to the inverted human head in the stucco façade of a *tzompantli* frame at Late Classic Tonina (see Taube and Houston 2015:Fig. 5.11a).

Mention has been made of the Veracruz hacha displaying a flayed trophy head, and among the Classic Maya, flayed faces also pertained to the ballgame, in this case as knee pads worn by ballplayers. An excellent example occurs on a finely carved circular ballcourt marker from La Esperanza, located close to the site of Chinkultik in highland Chiapas. Guised in the garb of the death god, the ballplayer wears a flayed face on his right knee, which would receive the crushing weight when landed on by the ballplayer (see Kowalski 1989).

In the current discussion of human flaying among the Classic Maya, none of the examples have secondary attributes of Xipe Totec, nor even the appearance of figures wearing suits of human skin. In an epigraphic analysis of a glyph for wounding among the Classic Maya, Beliaev and Houston (2020) observe that the sign may allude to the flaying of a human face and note an observation by David Stuart that one Late Classic palace scene may depict a flayed human skin (see K6674 at www.mayavase.com). An unusual stela from Lagartero, Chiapas, depicting a human figure standing on a scaffold may well portray a Xipe impersonator or the god himself (Figure 15a). Unlike most Classic Maya monuments, it is devoid of any text, with no identifiable historic figure,

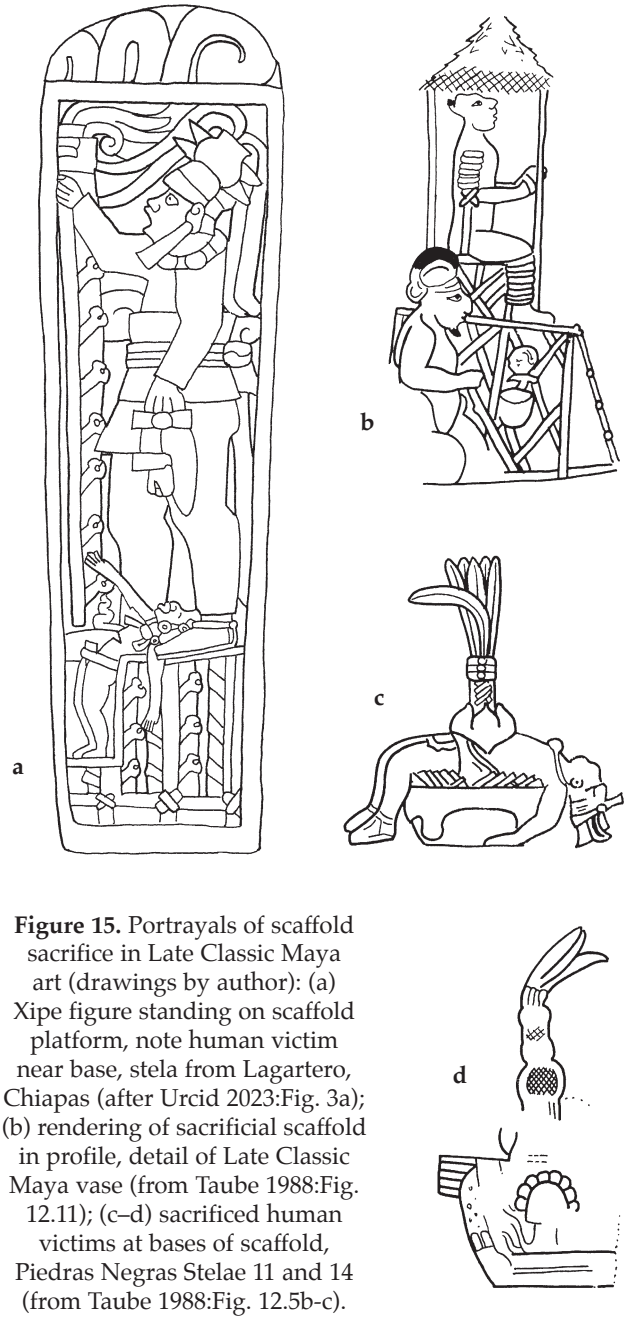


Figure 15. Portrayals of scaffold sacrifice in Late Classic Maya art (drawings by author): (a) Xipe figure standing on scaffold platform, note human victim near base, stela from Lagartero, Chiapas (after Urcid 2023:Fig. 3a); (b) rendering of sacrificial scaffold in profile, detail of Late Classic Maya vase (from Taube 1988:Fig. 12.11); (c–d) sacrificed human victims at bases of scaffold, Piedras Negras Stelae 11 and 14 (from Taube 1988:Fig. 12.5b-c).

and is probably a very late Epiclassic monument, possibly late ninth or early tenth century AD. The figure's most striking attribute is his widely open mouth that is strongly evocative of Xipe. However, on close inspection he is wearing a suit as well, with cuffs clearly depicted at the wrist and ankle. Given the Xipe visage, this vestment is almost surely a suit of human skin. The figure wears a very thick belt reminiscent of ballplayers, although no knee pad is present. His hand grasps a form of standard resembling the "flap-staffs" known for Late Classic Yaxchilan, but here with protruding elements resembling bone condyles. The top of the staff

may perhaps be burning, possibly making it an elaborate torch, and the scrolls at the top of the monument may also indicate flames or smoke. This same standard motif with bone elements also appears twice on the bound scaffold supporting him, along with a diminutive sacrificial victim with his heart excised and a scroll of blood or viscera emerging from the open chest wound.

The Lagartero stela probably portrays a scene of scaffold sacrifice in relation to an early Epiclassic form of Xipe Totec, who during the Late Postclassic in Oaxaca and the Valley of Mexico was closely related to this ritual event, the victim being bound to a wooden frame or post and then shot with darts and arrows. As I (Taube 1988) have mentioned, a form of the rite was present among the Classic Maya, at times with the victim impersonating a deer in a symbolic hunt (see also Pillsbury et al. 2012:Fig. 195). At Piedras Negras, the so-called "niche stelae" are sacrificial scaffolds, as can be seen in profile on a vessel in the Art Institute of Chicago, where the wooden support and pole ladder are readily seen (Figure 15b; see Taube 1988:341-343). For the Late Classic Maya, there are two graphic scenes of such sacrifice, including two graffiti from Tikal, one with a captive bound to a scaffold, and the other, a captive disemboweled on a post (Figure 16a–b). A scaffold scene also appears on a Late Classic vase depicting a grotesque figure probing the viscera of a sacrificed captive bound atop a scaffold (Figure 16c). Landa explicitly describes the binding of captives to be shot by arrows in addition to heart sacrifice and the wearing of the flayed skins (Tozzer 1941:118-120). For two of the "niche stelae" scaffolds at Piedras Negras, there are small victims with sacrificial blades in their chests, quite like the scaffold scene on the Lagartero stela (Figure 15c–d). As in the case of the Lagartero stela, the difference in scale between the victims and the principal figures is so great that it brings up the possibility that these are children, perhaps offered in a related rite of heart excision for the dedication of the structures used in these rites of torture and sacrifice at Piedras Negras.

An Early Classic mural at the La Sufricaya group on the outskirts of Holmul, Guatemala, features a scene of a sacrificial victim bound to a scaffold (Figure 17a; see Estrada-Belli 2002:14, Fig. 34). Flanking

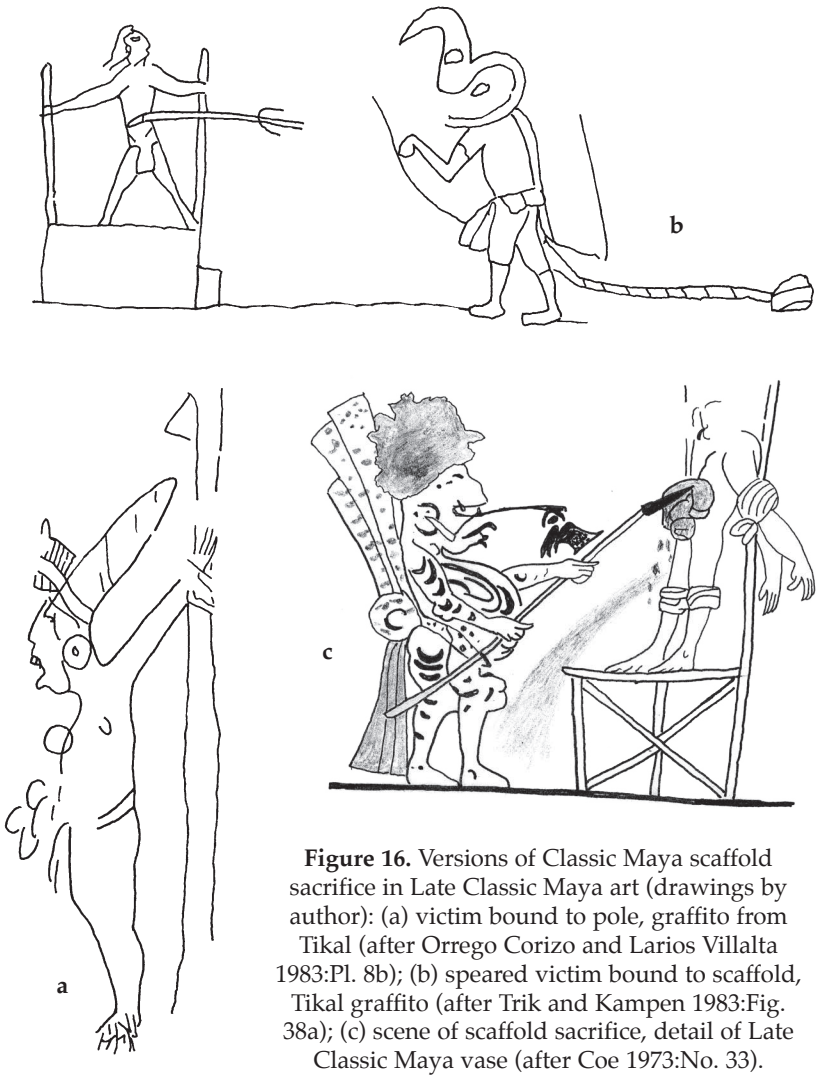


Figure 16. Versions of Classic Maya scaffold sacrifice in Late Classic Maya art (drawings by author): (a) victim bound to pole, graffito from Tikal (after Orrego Corizo and Larios Villalta 1983:Pl. 8b); (b) speared victim bound to scaffold, Tikal graffito (after Trik and Kampen 1983:Fig. 38a); (c) scene of scaffold sacrifice, detail of Late Classic Maya vase (after Coe 1973:No. 33).

volutes of smoke or flames near his legs suggest that the figure is being burned, which also occurs on the Dumbarton Oaks vessel of scaffold sacrifice (see Pillsbury et al. 2012:Fig. 195). The boldly rendered figures in the scene strongly suggest Teotihuacan influence, and at La Sufricaya another mural depicts seated Teotihuacan warriors, with another bearing a text marking the one-year anniversary of the earlier arrival of Teotihuacanos to Tikal in AD 378 (Estrada-Belli et al. 2009). For the scaffold sacrifice scene, there appears to be the head of a Teotihuacan plumed serpent to viewer's right, apparently dripping blood or water (Figure 17b). This recalls a scene from a stucco-painted Teotihuacan vase depicting the plumed serpent facing a bleeding heart, perhaps as if to devour it (Figure 17c).

A white marble statue from the Xalla Compound at Teotihuacan portrays a human figure with vertical lines through its face, a common feature of the Late Postclassic Xipe Totec, and according to the excavators the sculpture is probably this god (López Luján et al. 2016). Aside from the facial striping, he has a widely open mouth, recalling many examples of Xipe in the Classic and Postclassic periods (Figure 18). An unusual feature of the statue are the deeply cut horizontal grooves crossing his arms and legs which may have

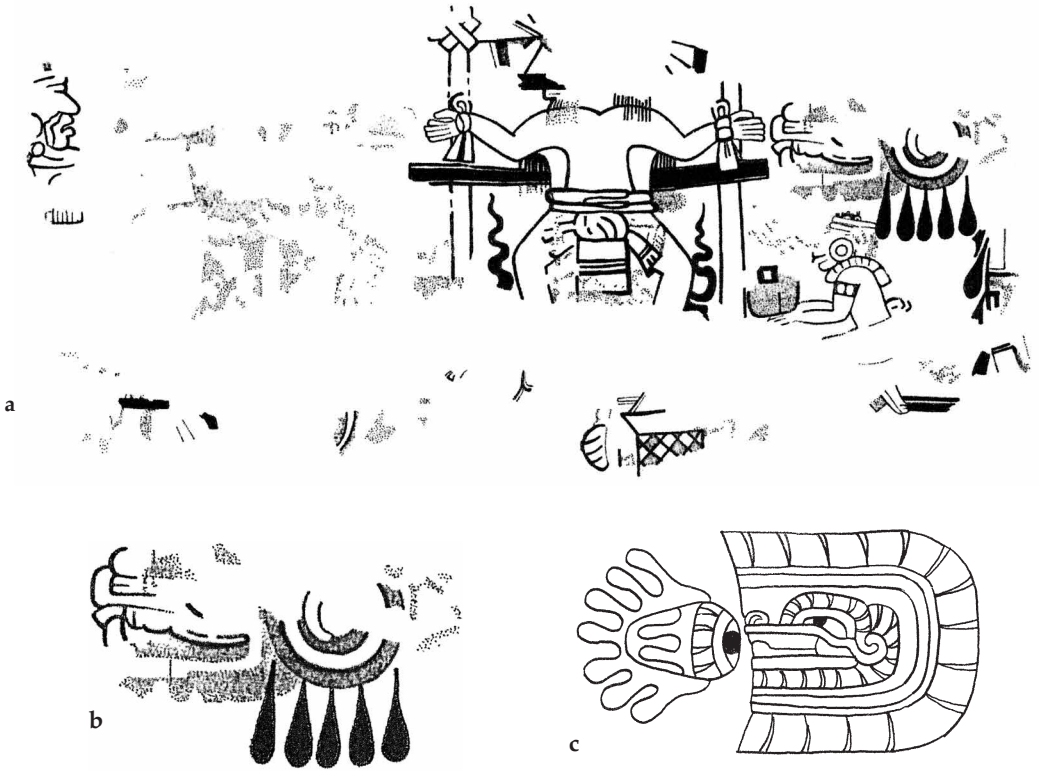


Figure 17. Early Classic Maya scene of scaffold sacrifice, La Sufricaya, Guatemala (drawing by Heather Hurst courtesy of Holmul Archaeological Project): (a) mural portraying scaffold sacrifice, note smoke or flames flanking victim; (b) detail of probable plumed serpent head from mural; (c) plumed serpent devouring heart, detail of Early Classic Tikal stuccoed vessel (after Séjourné 1959:Fig. 132).

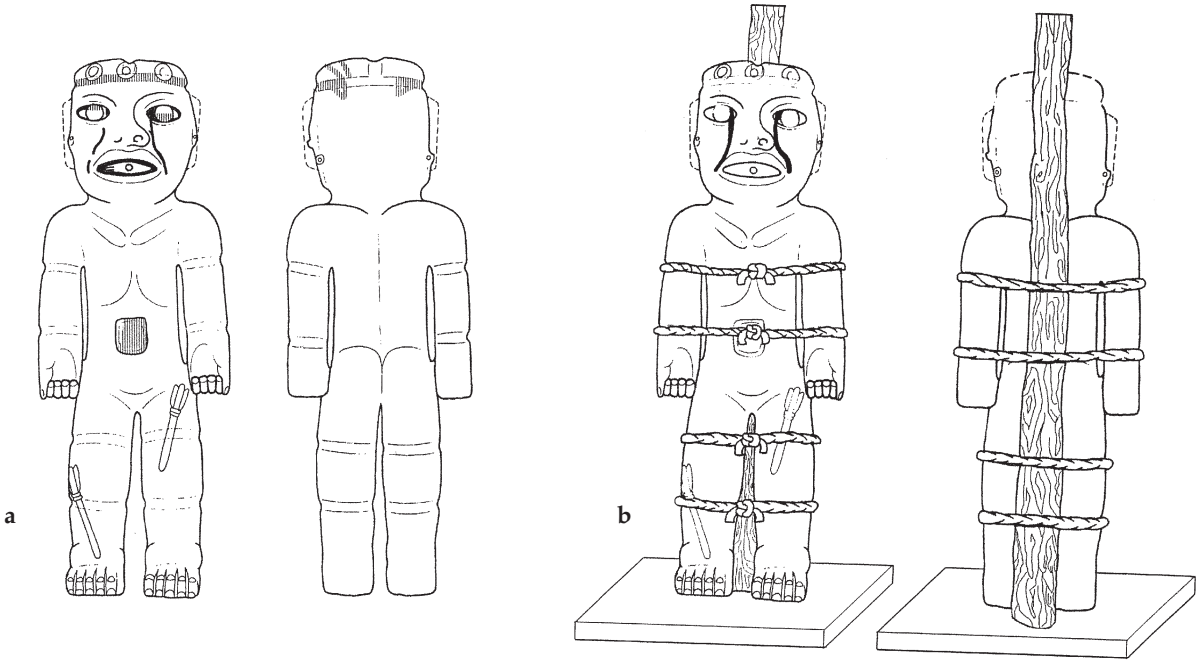


Figure 18. Probable Xipe figures from Xalla Compound, Teotihuacan, Early Classic period: (a) Xipe sculpture, note vertical lines on face and widely open mouth (from López Luján et al. 2006:Fig. 5); (b) Xipe figure with reconstructed wooden armature as possible portrayal of scaffold sacrifice (after López Luján et al. 2006:Fig 8).

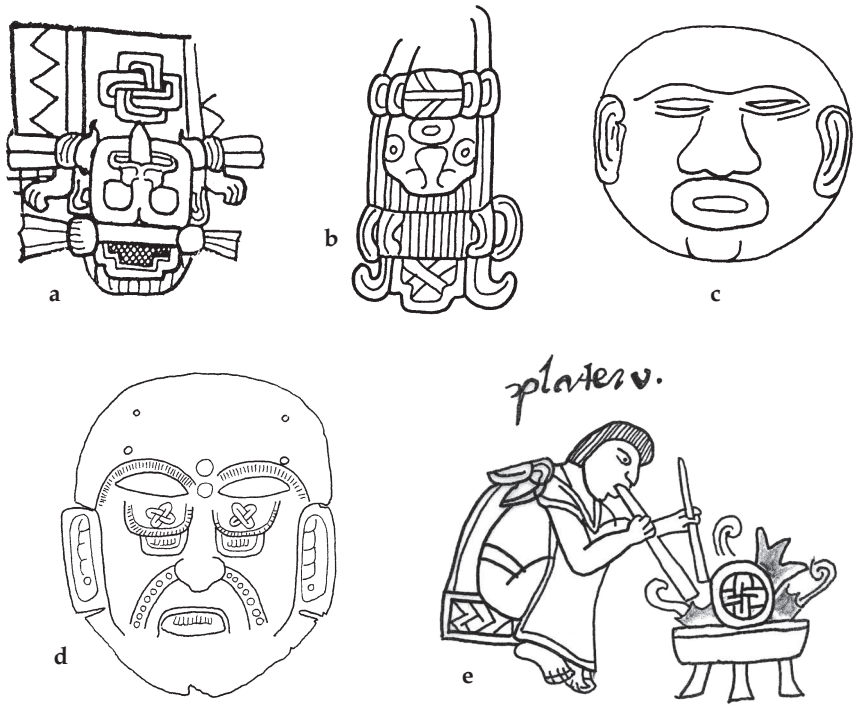


Figure 19. Pouch incense bags and gold masks in Maya art (drawings by author): (a) pouch from Piedras Negras Stela 7 with inverted face and interlocking rings sign (from Taube 1992:Fig. 64g); (b) pouch with inverted mask held by Lord Chahk of Uxmal (from Taube 1992:Fig. 64f); (c) gold masquette from Sacred Cenote, Chichen Itza (after Lothrop 1952:Fig. 48); (d) gold masquette with interlocking rings sign on eyes, Sacred Cenote (after Lothrop 1952:Fig. 46a); (e) Aztec metalworker with interlocking rings sign for gold, *Codex Mendoza*.

been to accommodate binding, and it has been suggested that the figure was bound to a post as a form of scaffold sacrifice, which is also indicated by the portrayal of two darts piercing his legs (López Luján et al. 2016). This interpretation finds direct support from a large, Early Postclassic Xipe Totec figure formerly in the collection of Jay C. Leff (Easby 1966:No. 405). Wearing a suit much like the Lagartero example and Postclassic Xipe Totecs, the legs of the figure are pierced multiple times, probably to accommodate actual darts piercing his body. The hands of the outstretched arms are open and at right angles as if grasping something, and this could well have been a scaffold frame which could both refer to the sacrificial rite and to possibly allow the statue to be carried in processions.

At Piedras Negras, a good number of the stelae portray rulers holding pouches, as can be seen as well with the Lagartero stela. One example from Piedras Negras Stela 7 has a pendant human head with hands, quite like those discussed for nearby Yaxchilan (Figure 19a). According to Stone (1989:160), "This 'trophy head' style pouch is always adorned with interlocking "rings" that closely resemble the later Aztec sign for gold. Although Stone does not explicitly state that the Late Classic Maya examples may have been gold, she describes and illustrates a hammered *repoussé* gold mask from the Sacred Cenote of Chichen Itza that has the same Late Postclassic gold sign on the eyes (Figure 19d): "That the Chichen head represents a captive, perhaps his severed head, is suggested by the rows of dots surrounding the mouth…, drooping eyelids and painful grimace." A good many other *repoussé* gold masks were found in the Sacred Cenote, five others of approximately the same size, roughly 8–10 cm. across, and eight smaller examples approximately 3 cm. Many have the appearance of being flayed and lifeless, with shut eyes and slack open mouths (see Figure 19c). This is also the case for a pouch carried by Lord Chahk on Stela 16 at Uxmal (Figure 19b). In terms of the gold mask discussed by Stone, Lothrop (1952:64) also notes the similarity of its interlaced cross motif to the Aztec gold sign as well as Xipe Totec:

> Why the gold symbol should be placed on a human face is not clear. The titular deity of Mexican goldsmiths was Xipe Totec but the face… definitely does not suggest this god.

In this regard, none of the cited Classic Maya examples aside from the Lagartero stela portray individuals wearing human skin but rather only flayed heads of slain victims, probably representing war trophies. However, a new component of Xipe Totec appears at the advent of the Early Postclassic, this being the use of gold and other metals, and with this new medium Xipe Totec acquired new meaning.

During the Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic period, large, hollow terracotta ceramic figures of Xipe Totec were fashioned, recalling the Remojadas flayed goddesses from the Classic site of El Zapotal, Veracruz (see Beyer 1965:Pl. 1; Easby 1966:No. 405; Scott 1993; Gónzalez Gónzalez 2016; Fleitman 2022:89). As I have suggested for El Zapotal, these male figures may have been carried in processions, perhaps in litters. It is well documented that for the Aztec month of Tlacaxipehualiztli, Xipe Totec impersonators would scatter throughout Tenochtitlan roaming the streets and visiting households (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:54; Durán 1971:182-183). Along with the flayed face, they wear full body suits with a surface resembling feathers, recalling the later warrior body suits found in the *Codex Mendoza* and the *Matrícula de Tributos*. This might have been an intentional allusion to Xipe Totec being a god of war, but more directly

it probably refers to the rough surface of the flayed skin, as in codical depictions the skin is corrugated, or "bumpy" in outline (see Figure 30e; Beyer 1965:Figs. 9-11).

One of the best known of the large Xipe Totec terracotta sculptures was excavated by Sigvald Linné (1934:83-86) in the Xolalpan compound at Teotihuacan. Although primarily an Early Classic city largely destroyed by AD 600, this sculpture was found in a later Mazapan or Epiclassic context (Linné 1934:84). It is noteworthy that in terms of the breakage and fall pattern, the sculpture may have been freestanding and perhaps even smashed in the chest at the time of its deposition, and "must have been standing in the open" (Linné 1934:83). This would again be consistent with a semi-portable sculpture carried in processions. Atop his head, he wears the "stacked bow tie" motif of knotted paper known for the Classic Maya in relation to bloodletting and human sacrifice, and wields a shield on his left forearm, indicating his warrior status typical of the Late Postclassic Xipe Totec. In addition, this may be related to the gladiatorial sacrifice during Tlacaxipehualiztli, where the victim was given a shield along with the bladeless club. His right hand grasps a striking object, a bat-clawed goblet, which is specifically known for Epiclassic Oaxaca (ca. 750–900 AD), with Caso and Bernal (1952:72, Fig. 119) discussing and illustrating examples from Monte Alban. As noted by the excavator Linné (1934:36),"[T]his circumstance points to the god Xipe and the cult connected with him having been imported from Oaxaca…." A similar large Xipe Totec sculpture was more recently discovered at Tula, oddly in a domestic context, perhaps its final resting place after a public procession (see Gamboa Cabezas 2012:54-57; Gónzalez Gónzalez 2016:44-55, Cat. 5).

Although Xipe Totec remains unknown for the murals and monuments of Early Postclassic Chichen Itza, an explicit polychrome portrayal of this god appears in the rock art mural from Ixtapantango, relatively close to Tula (Hernández Ibar and Olivier 2023:505, Figs. 23.9, 23.20a). The figure's mouth is wide open and the flayed facial and body skin is yellow, in strong contrast to the underlying red skin of the wearer, much as would be found with the sun god, Tonatiuh. Aside from the aforementioned ceramic statue, a Xipe Totec standard-bearer sculpture is also known for Tula (Turner and Kristan-Graham 2023:458). An excellent example of Xipe Totec is portrayed on a Tohil Plumbate vase published by Seler (Figure 20a). Although Tohil Plumbate is widely identified with the great Early Postclassic sites of Chichen Itza and Tula, it derives squarely from the Río Cahuacan drainage in the Soconusco region of south coastal Chiapas (Neff et al. 2023:698, 707). Obviously the creators of this vase had an intimate knowledge of the attributes of Xipe at this time, including the flayed skin, with a hand loosely hanging from his right wrist, a wide open mouth, horizontal nose piece, and warrior attributes, these being back banners along with a weapon upraised in his right hand and a shield and another banner in the other. He wears a pectoral in the form of a head, and although at first sight it might seem to be that of a crested bird, it might be a human trophy head. Attributed to the Late Postclassic Mixtec, a later gold pendant in the collection of the British Museum is notably similar to the plumbate Xipe Totec, and holds up a weapon in his right hand and a shield and banner with the other arm (Figure 20b). As a pectoral, he wears a shrunken trophy head ornamented with bells, recalling the head worn by the earlier plumbate figure. The figure appears in a rectangular frame, an unusual feature which may refer to the wooden scaffold where the Xipe Totec figures were sacrificed.

Figure 20. Comparison of Early Postclassic Xipe figure with Late Postclassic pendant (a) Early Postclassic Tohil plumbate vessel of armed Xipe Totec (from Seler 1902-1923:5:579); (b) gold pendant of armed Xipe Totec, Late Postclassic, note trophy head pectoral on chest and possible scaffold frame, Trustees of the British Museum (Ethno. +7834).

Figure 21. Depictions of Xipe Totec in Postclassic West Mexico: (a) hollow Xipe Totec from probable censer lid, Amapa, Nayarit, Fowler Museum, Archaeological Research Facility, UCLA, Cat. no. 2945 (courtesy of Instituto Nacional de Antropología de Historia and Fowler Museum Archaeological Research Facility, UCLA); (b) Aztatlan effigy vessel portraying Xipe Totec, Fowler Museum, UCLA, Cat. no. X73.273 (photo courtesy of the Nicholson Archive, California State University, Los Angeles); (c) Colima Xipe Totec wielding sphere and shield (photo by Avshalom Avital, © the Israel Museum, B78.0939).

During the Postclassic, the cult of Xipe Totec was also present in coastal West Mexico, including the Aztatlan culture centered in Sinaloa and Nayarit. A hollow ceramic Xipe Totec figure from Amapa, Nayarit, displays the shut eyes, widely open mouth and pointed cap, or *yopitzontli*, with "swallow tail" pennants known for this Postclassic being among the Aztec and Mixtec (Figure 21a). Moreover, there is at least one solid figurine from Amapa that probably portrays the same god also wearing a pointed cap (Meighan 1976:Pl. 30e). The cap is supplied with two roundels, which is also found with an elaborately decorated Aztatlan effigy vessel of Xipe Totec in the collections of the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles (Figure 21b). In his hands the figure holds a round shield and a staff. Although an effigy vessel, the figure is a atop a hollow platform that strongly suggests open wooden lattice work, much as if he were seated atop a scaffold. Another West Mexico example, here attributed to the area of El Chanal, Colima, in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem also depicts Xipe Totec with the cap but also wielding a round shield as well as a sphere in his right hand (Figure 21c). These accoutrements probably relate directly to the *tlahuanahualiztli* gladiatorial combat performed during the month of Tlacaxipehualiztli where the captive bound to the *temalacatl* stone is given a round shield, a bladeless club, and wooden spheres to protect himself (Durán 1971:172; Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:54). This striking correspondence suggests that the Aztec province corresponding to Colima may have participated in the spring *veintena* ceremonies of Tlacaxipehualiztli.

For the contact period Aztec, the rites of the month of Tlacaxipehualiztli are among the best documented for the annual ceremonial calendar, including accounts by Diego Durán (1971:172-185, 415-417) and Book 2 of the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:3-4, 47-60), although there are a good many others, including the *Tovar Calendar* (e.g., Kubler and Gibson 1951). As has been noted, this was a spring ritual performed in March close to the vernal equinox, and although much has been said of the agricultural significance of the month in terms of the spring and preparation of the fields, the ceremonies were closely identified with warfare and combat, sacrifice, and the worship and nourishment of the sun, with Xipe Totec being the pivotal figure. One of the most striking aspects of the twenty-day celebrations was the *tlahuanahualiztli* gladiatorial combat atop the

circular *temalacatl* stone, at times emblazoned on its upper surface with the image of the sun, including the Tizoc Stone (see Gónzalez Gónzalez 2016:Pls. 38-39). In a decidedly lopsided battle, bound captives—soon to be victims—fought fully armed and seasoned warriors atop the stone, and clearly enough the ensuing blood would fall atop the solar image, thereby providing nourishment to the sanguinary sun god, Tonatiuh. In addition, it will be subsequently noted that the sacrificial hearts of the defeated warriors were offered directly to the sun.

Although virtually nothing is known of Mixtec *veintena* ceremonies, or if they were even present, there are explicit scenes of the *temalacatl* gladiatorial battle in the *Nuttall* and *Becker 1* codices, here with named historical figures dressed as Xipe Totec. However, these scenes are paired with another rite pertaining directly to Xipe Totec, this being scaffold sacrifice known in Nahuatl as *tlacacaliliztli*, as has been mentioned for Teotihuacan and the Classic Maya. As with the *temalacatl* combat scenes, the scaffold victims are dressed as Xipe Totec, demonstrating a close link between the two ceremonies centered on this god (Figure 22a–b). In both the *Becker 1* and *Nuttall* codices, the victims' blood falls on a petalled blue disk which is clearly the Toltec style *tezcacuitlapilli* back mirror composed of a central pyrite disk with a turquoise mosaic rim, a device having strongly solar significance (see Taube 2012:127-128). With this solar mirror below the victim, the falling blood probably concerns the nourishing of the sun. The early colonial Topiltepec Cross from Tepozcolula, Oaxaca, is a Mixtec monument bearing the sun and moon deities on one side and a graphic scene of scaffold sacrifice on the other (Figure 22c). In the scaffold scene, blood streams upwards into the sky from a speared and lifeless Xipe impersonator with a descending god above. Although he bears no diagnostic attributes, it is likely the sun god, as is also seen on the other side of the monument. In both Late Postclassic Mixtec and Aztec art, sun gods appear in streams of blood, including page 23 of the Mixtec *Codex Vindobonensis*, where he kneels with a dart and spearthrower in a solar disk with a column of blood below (Figure 23).

A Late Postclassic gilded spearthrower, presumedly Aztec, portrays the armed sun god Tonatiuh descending down to a Xipe Totec scaffold victim while wielding a shield, darts, and a spearthrower (Figure 24). The deity holds the spearthrower to his mouth, much like a straw, which concerns a striking Postclassic trope of darts and spearthrowers being a symbolic means to drink sacrificial blood by supernaturals: "the weapons used to drink the blood allude to the beaks and proboscises of birds and butterflies, creatures that to the Aztec symbolized the souls of warriors who

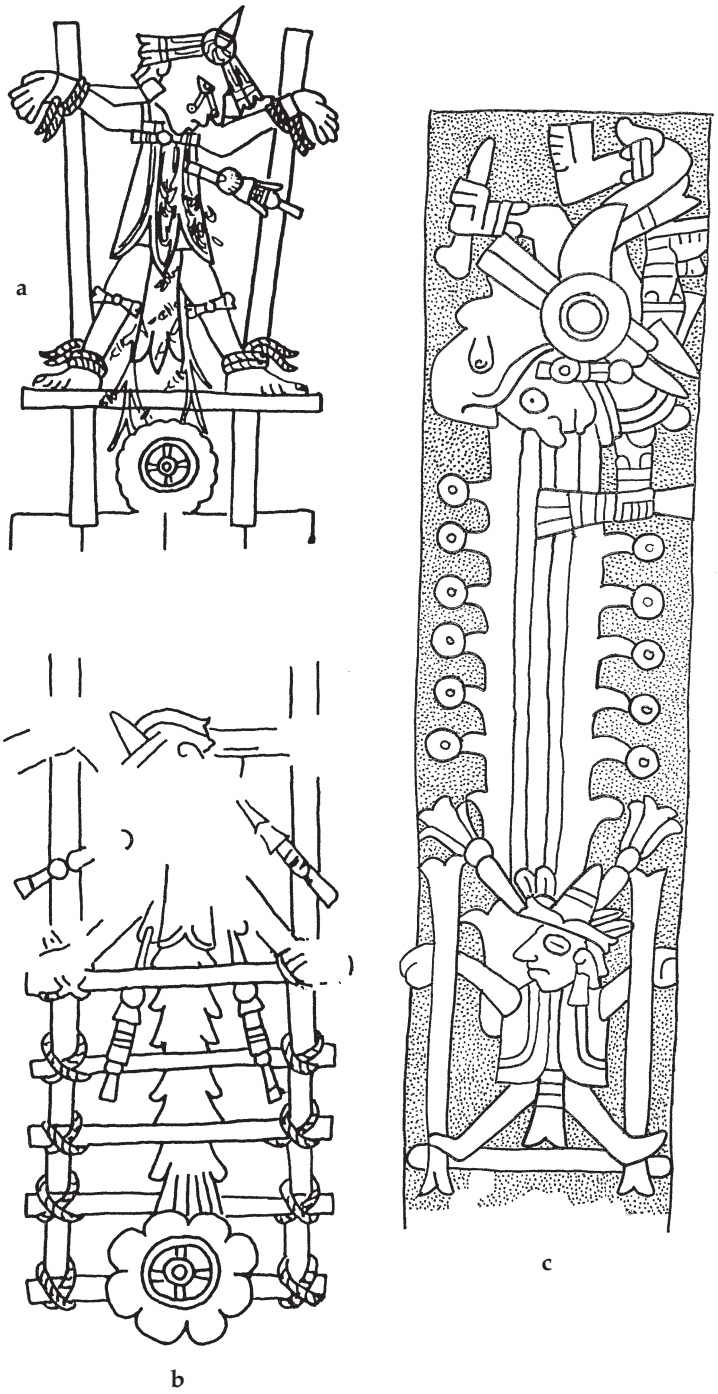


Figure 22. Portrayals of scaffold sacrifice in Mixtec art (drawings by author): (a) Xipe victim shot by dart, *Codex Nuttall*, p. 84 (from Taube 1988:Fig. 12.1a); (b) Xipe victim pierced by darts, *Codex Becker 1*, p. 10 (from Taube 1988:Fig. 12.1; (c) blood stream connecting Xipe victim to probable descending sun god, detail of Topiltepec Cross, Tepozcolula, Oaxaca (after Caso 1956:175).

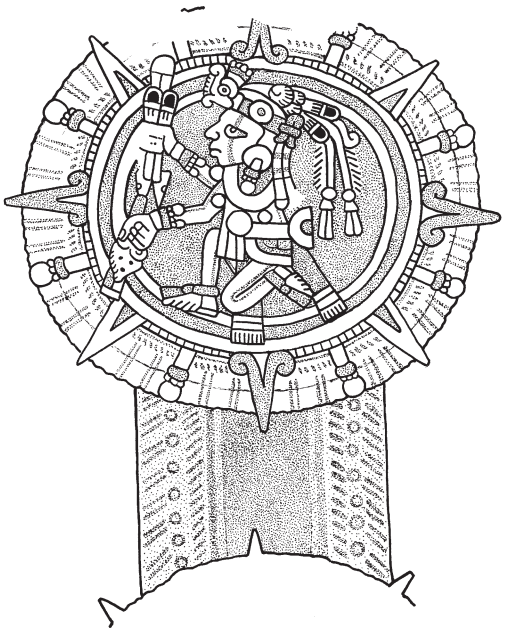


Figure 23. Mixtec sun god in stream of blood, *Codex Vindobonensis* p. 23 (from Taube 2015:Fig. 5.8c).

Figure 24. Detail of carved and gilded spearthrower with descending sun god above speared Xipe Totec victim (from Taube 2015:Fig. 5.20a).

reside in the eastern paradise of the sun" (Taube 2009:103). It is likely that by ingesting the victim's blood, the sun god creates a path, or "road of blood," for the sacrificed warrior to ascend to the solar paradise. During the rites of Tlacaxipehualiztli, the victims' hearts and blood were presented upwards to the sun (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:48, 53). According to Durán (1971:176), the hearts were presented to the east, that is, the direction of the rising sun. In addition, the Aztec warriors who defeated the victims in the gladiatorial battle on the *temalacatl* stone were of the Eagle and Jaguar orders, the "knights of the sun." In terms of the sacrificed warrior,

> [H]ere it was said, "the eagle man is taken upwards," because those who died in war went, went looking, sat resting in the place of the sun. That is, he did not go to the place of the dead. (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:49)

As for the gilded spearthrower, the darts of this weapon probably symbolized the rays of the sun that pierced the victims, allowing the newly nourished sun to follow his daily path into the sky.

Along with the spearthrower, there are two finely carved Aztec bone rasps, or *omechicahuaztli* that portray Tonatiuh as a celestial blood drinker. Both deities are in the uppermost parts of the scenes surrounded by the starry night sky, suggesting that the ingestion of the sacrificial blood is related to the nourishing of the sun at dawn. For one example, found during the Metro excavations in Mexico City, the sun deity holds a dart at his mouth in order to drink the penitential blood of the Aztec king Ahuitzotl, much like a straw (Figure 25b). The intact other bone, probably a human femur, portrays a more complex scene, again with the sun god looking down from the starry sky above, here wearing a prominent gold pectoral (Figure 25a). In a recent study, Mathiowetz (2023) has systematically documented the widespread presence of solar gold pectorals in Postclassic Mesoamerica. Although the sun god's face is missing from one of the rasp notches, he drinks gouts of blood from a speared Xipe Totec below who spurts blood upwards to him. The gold pectoral worn by Tonatiuh with the flayed god is probably no coincidence and as will be noted below, Xipe Totec was the god of goldsmiths. With his arms upraised in the typical pose of the speared scaffold victim, Xipe Totec stands above the Aztec earth deity, Tlaltecuhtli, who grasps a pair of bleeding hearts in its talons. The presence of Tlaltecuhtli confirms that this rasp is Aztec, since this deity is wholly an Aztec being and in contrast to the *Codex Borbonicus* and the *Aubin Tonalamatl* never appears in the Borgia Group nor in Mixtec prehispanic codices. The bone rasp format of a basal Tlaltecuhtli and a solar disk above is replicated with the three known greenstone *cuauhxicalli*, or "eagle gourd" vessels known for the Aztec (see Taube 2009:Fig. 5). Thus the base of the bowl features Tlaltecuhtli and above in the interior is the sun, on which the sacrificial hearts and blood would be placed. The *cuauhxicalli* is mentioned prominently in the *Florentine Codex* rites of Tlacaxipehualiztli, here referred to as *cuauhxicalco*, along with "gourd bowls" in another passage, *xicalli* being the Nahuatl term for gourd (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:3, 48). The *cuauhxicalli* bowl is also mentioned by Durán (1994:172) for the month of Tlacaxipehualiztli.

The shooting of the Xipe Totec victim with darts and the drinking of his blood by the sun demonstrates that the *tlacacaliliztli* scaffold sacrifice of Xipe Totec was present among the Aztec. Oddly however, this not mentioned or illustrated in the Aztec colonial accounts and pictorial manuscripts pertaining to the month of Tlacaxipehualiztli.

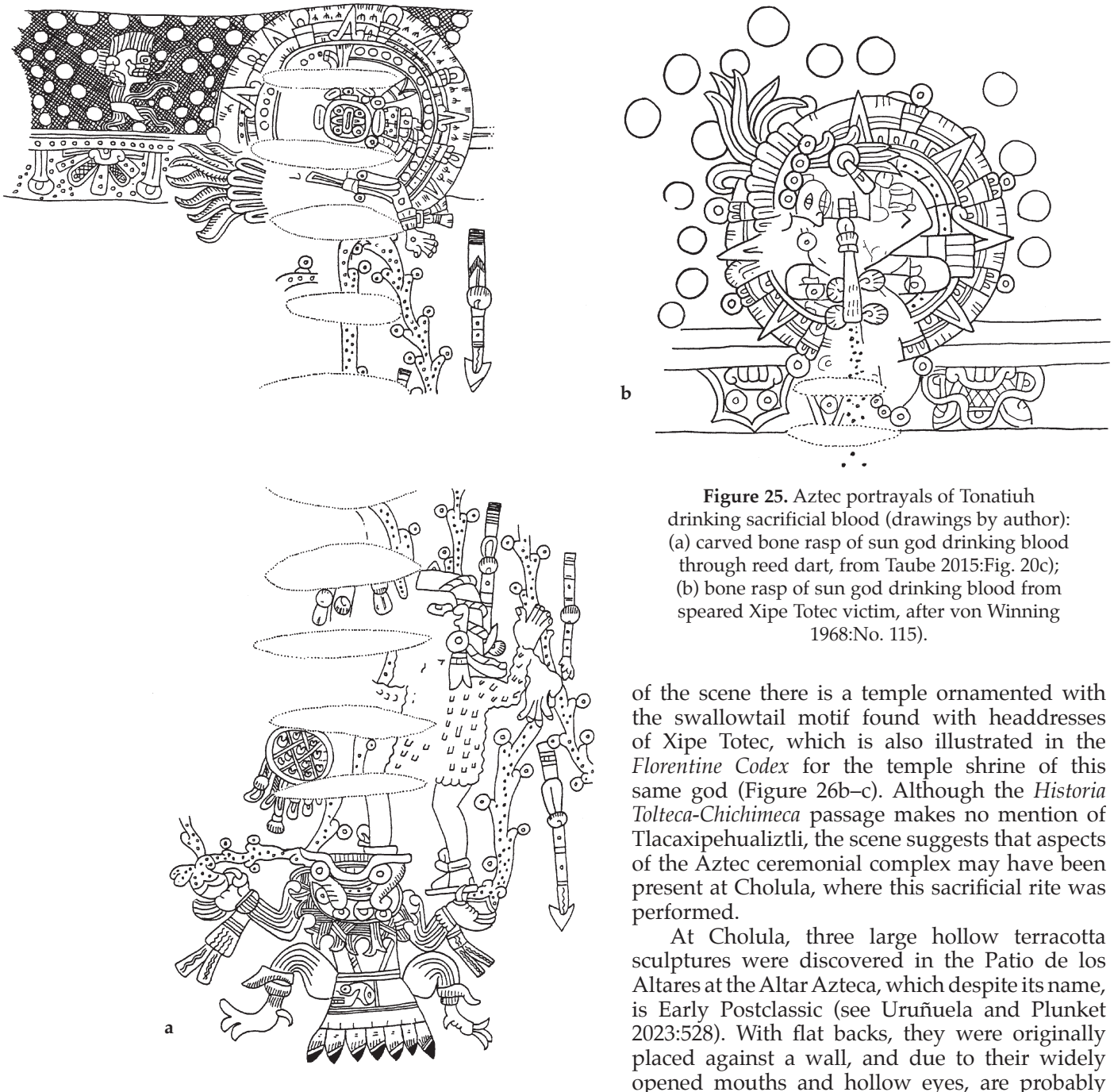


Figure 25. Aztec portrayals of Tonatiuh drinking sacrificial blood (drawings by author): (a) carved bone rasp of sun god drinking blood through reed dart, from Taube 2015:Fig. 20c); (b) bone rasp of sun god drinking blood from speared Xipe Totec victim, after von Winning 1968:No. 115).

It is conceivable that unlike the *temalacatl* sacrificial ritual of gladiatorial battle, it was not performed every year but at particular times, perhaps as a petition for rain. The Aztec *Telleriano-Remensis* illustrates the scaffold sacrifice of a warrior in the year 1 Rabbit, and the victim wears the diagnostic "swallow tail" earpiece of Xipe Totec (Figure 26a). The text mentions that this was a time of extreme famine, and perhaps with scaffold sacrifice the falling blood was considered a rainmaking act (see Taube 1988). The *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* features a prominent scene of scaffold sacrifice with archers at the four corners piercing the victim with arrows. At the top of the scene there is a temple ornamented with the swallowtail motif found with headdresses of Xipe Totec, which is also illustrated in the *Florentine Codex* for the temple shrine of this same god (Figure 26b–c). Although the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* passage makes no mention of Tlacaxipehualiztli, the scene suggests that aspects of the Aztec ceremonial complex may have been present at Cholula, where this sacrificial rite was performed.

At Cholula, three large hollow terracotta sculptures were discovered in the Patio de los Altares at the Altar Azteca, which despite its name, is Early Postclassic (see Uruñuela and Plunket 2023:528). With flat backs, they were originally placed against a wall, and due to their widely opened mouths and hollow eyes, are probably Xipe Totec images (Figure 27a), as was first noted by Florencia Müller (1978:152-154). In addition, their arms are upraised, recalling the stance of Xipe Totec in scenes of scaffold sacrifice, including an Aztec figurine published by Seler (Figure 27b). The figure stands against a pole backed by a large rayed disk, an element also appearing with the Xipe Totec victim in the gilded spearthrower scene (see Figure 24). Given the rayed edges, these disks almost certainly portray the sun, which is very closely linked to Xipe Totec and the Aztec rites of

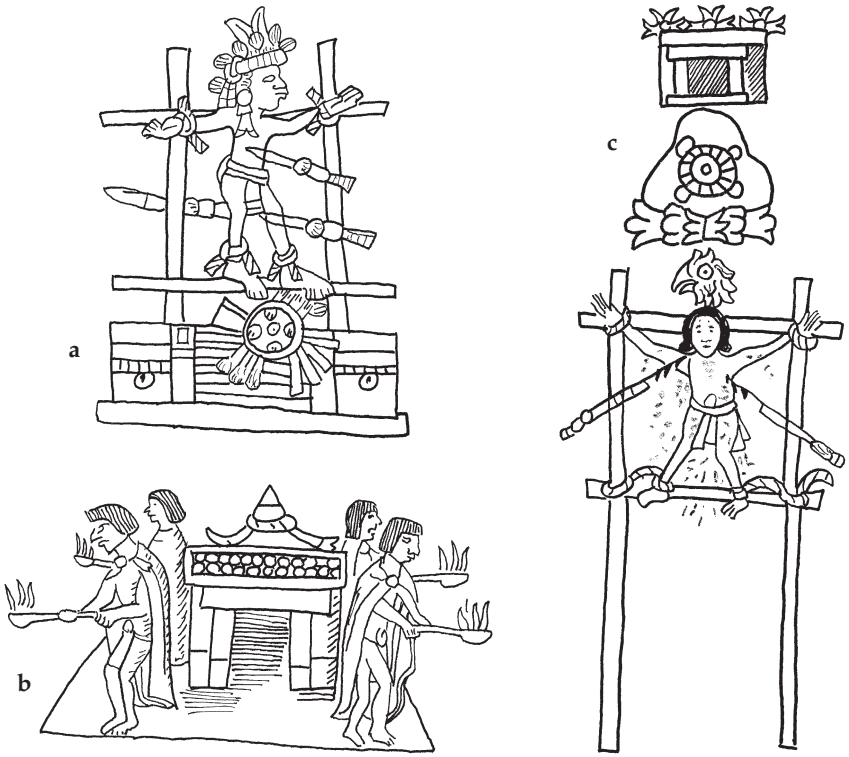


Figure 26. Early colonial portrayals of scaffold sacrifice (drawings by author): (a) scaffold victim wearing earpiece of Xipe Totec, *Codex Teleriano-Remensis*, fol. 41v; (b) Xipe Totec temple shrine with conical headdress of Xipe Totec, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 2; (c) scene of scaffold sacrifice with probable Xipe shrine, *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, fol. 28r.

Figure 27. Comparison of Xipe Totec figure from Cholula with Aztec figurine of Xipe Totec against post: (a) hollow ceramic Xipe Totec sculpture from the Patio de los Altares, Cholula (from Uruñuela and Plunket 2023:Fig. 24:12a, drawing by and courtesy of Gabriela Uruñuela); (b) Aztec figurine of Xipe Totec with solar disk in front of probable pole (from Seler 1902-1923:4:114).

Tlacaxipehualiztli.

It is abundantly clear that there was a strongly martial and combative aspect of Tlacaxipehualiztli, which correlated closely with the sacred cult of solar warfare, and the sacrificed captives would ascend to the eastern paradise of the sun (see Graulich 1982:217). In addition, in the gladiatorial *temalacatl* rites, the Aztec combatants were the eagle and jaguar warriors, the "knights" par excellence of the sun. It will be recalled that the eagle and jaguar threw themselves into the sacrificial pyre when the sun god was born at Teotihuacan. As has been mentioned, a central focus of Tlacaxipehualiztli was nourishment of the sun, but also through combat, not only in terms of the *temalacatl* rites but also with the combative nature of the Xipe impersonators, who vigorously fought one another as well as warrior youths. For the Tlacaxipehualiztli illustrations in Book 2 of the *Florentine Codex*, the hovering sun is a striking theme, including not only with warriors, but with Xipe Totec himself (Figure 28). In some regards, Xipe Totec stands for an avatar or aspect of the sun deity. For the illustration of the *trecena* week of 1 Dog on page 14 of the *Codex Borbonicus*, one of Xipe Totec's calendrical epithets is 4 Motion, the explicit calendrical name of the sun god Tonatiuh, and this is also the case for the corresponding scene in the *Aubin Tonalamatl*. In addition, the fourth bird or *volatile* of the thirteen Lords of the Day is a quail pertaining to the sun god, Tonatiuh. In the *Aubin Tonalamatl*, this quail emerges from the sun while carrying the head of Xipe Totec in its beak for all *trecena* pages (Figure 29a). In a passage on page 71 of the *Codex Borgia* portraying the thirteen *volatiles* and Lords of the Day, Tonatiuh is specifically named as the fifth sun Nahui Ollin, or 4 Motion, as is the case for the Calendar Stone as well. Jeremy Coltman (personal communication 2005) has pointed out to me a very relevant scene in the Mixtec *Codex Yanhuitlan*, which explicitly portrays two examples the head of Xipe Totec in a solar disk (Figure 29b–c). For

one example, a round element extrudes from his widely distended mouth, which more than likely is the same as the stuffing found with the aforementioned shrunken heads and Xipe Totec in the prehispanic Mixtec codices (Figure 8). In addition, his "swallow tail" headdress recalls the roof ornaments appearing in the *Historia Tolteca Chichimeca* scene of scaffold sacrifice (Figure 26c). For the second example, the only trait of Xipe is his headdress in the form of a knot with the swallow tail elements (Figure 29c). If it were not for that detail, he would readily be identified as the sun god.

Among the most striking traits shared between Xipe Totec and the sun deity Tonatiuh is their close relation to gold. In Nahuatl, the term for gold was excrement of the sun, or *teocuitlatl* (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 11:233-234). Moreover, the *Florentine Codex* (ibid.) goes so far as to state gold "is the sun," and is a material that can "give off rays." As noted by Caplan (2021:216):

> . . . shining gold adornments carried special significance as items made from a metal understood to be a physical excretion of the sun and were said to shine in the same manner as the solar body, gushing rays of sunlight (*tōnamēyotia*) and illuminating their surroundings (*tlanēxtia*).

In this regard, it is important to note that Xipe Totec was the god of goldsmiths, who were honored during the month of Tlacaxipehualiztli (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 9:69). According to Clavijero (cited in Robelo 1980:780), thieves who stole gold and silver were among those who were sacrificed during this month. It is therefore not surprising that among the more common images in Late Postclassic goldworking was Xipe Totec, with perhaps the most renowned being the Mixtec cast mask pendant of this god from Tomb 7 at Monte Alban (see Caso 1969:97-99). Caso (1969:97) notes that along with symbolizing verdant new growth over the springtime earth, the skin was also related to gilding with thin sheets of gold, much like a skin:

> . . . accustomed to cover objects of wood and even stone with very thin sheets of gold, Xipe was the god of goldworkers. Among the jewels that were sent to Spain there are various of these "skins" of "gold." (translation by the author)

With the Tomb 7 gold finds, a number of pectorals have basal flanges or "feet" which also appear with codical portrayals of gold jewelry, including in the *Codex Laud* and the Mixtec *Codex Nuttall* (Figure 30a–b). Caso (1969:81) noted that this curious convention derives from the gold frog pendants of Costa Rica and Panama—surely a major source of gold in Mesoamerica—which do in fact have very broad, flattened rear feet. Although not previously noted, these "feet flanges" also occur on gold jewelry on headbands worn by Xipe Totec in the *Vaticanus B* and *Aubin Tonalamatl* as well as the Aztec *Borbonicus* codices (Figure 30c-e).

A striking link between gold and the cult of Xipe Totec is their relation to curing skin and eye diseases, perhaps

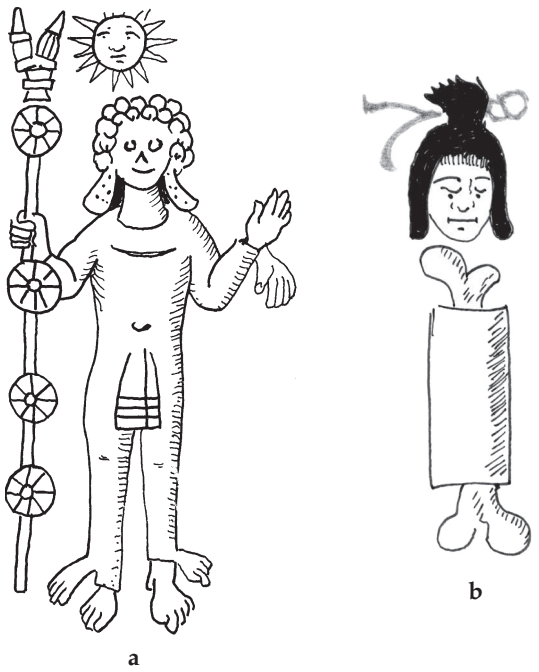


Figure 28. Portrayals of Tlacaxipehualiztli from the *Florentine Codex* (drawings by author): (a) Xipe Totec impersonator with sun; (b) severed head and femur trophies from sacrificed captive.

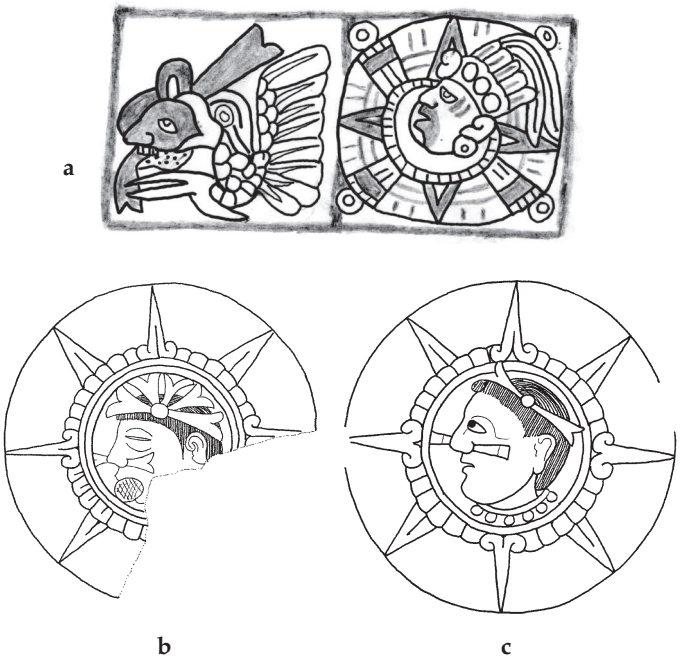


Figure 29. Xipe Totec and the sun (drawings by author): (a) Xipe Totec with quail and Tonatiuh, *Aubin Tonalamatl*, p. 20; (b) Xipe Totec in solar disk, *Codex Yanhuitlan*; (c) figure with headdress of Xipe Totec in solar disk, *Codex Yanhuitlan*.

Figure 30. Portrayals of gold and Xipe Totec during the Late Postclassic (drawings by author): (a) gold element with basal flanges, *Codex Laud*, p. 10; (b) gold pectoral with basal flanges, *Codex Nuttall*, p. 47; (c) Xipe Totec with gold element in headdress, *Codex Borbonicus*, p. 14; (d) Xipe Totec with gold headdress element and pectoral with gold sign, note staff with stacked "bow ties" and "swallow tail" pennants, *Codex Vaticanus B*, p. 62; (e) Xipe Totec with two gold signs in headdress, *Aubin Tonalamatl*, p. 14.

because the eyes are covered with the thin skin of the lids. According to the *Florentine Codex*, gold was used to alleviate skin ailments: "The advised took the excrement of the sun [gold], for they said that it was pustule medicine" (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 11:234). In another passage, it is stated that wearing the flayed skins would cure "sores," "scabby skin," or "maladies of the eyes" (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:58). Although Xipe Totec cured eye and skin problems he could also cause them:

> …his attribute was that he struck people, he bewitched people, he visited people with blisters, festering, pimples, eye pains, watering of the eyes, festering about the eyelashes, lice about the eyes, opacity, filling of the eyes with flesh, withering of the eyes, cataracts, glazing of the eyes. (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 1:39)

The curious relation of gold, Xipe Totec, and eye ailments may have been present during the Early Postclassic period. Mention has been made of small *repoussé* sheet gold masks from the Sacred Cenote. One of the largest of these has the Late Postclassic Aztec sign for gold placed directly over the eyes (Figure 19d). Clearly, there was a strong equivalence between gold and the skin of Xipe Totec, and in a description of his accoutrements the *Florentine Codex* states that "his [human] skin collar was of gold beaten thin" (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 9:70). As André Emmerich (1965:132) noted for Xipe Totec, he "is portrayed wearing the skin of the sacrificial victim, symbolizing the new skin of fresh crops and also, by inference, the thin sheets of beaten gold that were the earliest form of the metal the ancient Indian craftsmen were able to work." In other words, the skin symbolized a golden "suit," an appropriate garment for the newly reborn vernal sun deity. Typically, gold is found as very thin veins in quartz, the "mother rock," and a great deal of gold occurs naturally as tiny thin flecks (gold dust) much like skin effluvia, or "dandruff." As noted in the *Florentine Codex*, "it is not as if it abounds, it is not heaped up; it just forms veins in the earth, in the mountain. It is that which can be excavated, can be washed, can be cast" (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 11:233).

A Late Postclassic carved wooden staff discovered in the Sacred Cenote at Chichen Itza has a face covered in sheet gold, and the similarity to applied skin is striking indeed (see Lothrop 1952:Fig. 53d). A Late Postclassic Aztatlan effigy vessel from the vicinity of Amapa, Nayarit, depicts Xipe Totec with a gilded face, much as if the god truly wears a "skin of gold" (Figure 21b). In the hymn of Xipe Totec recorded in the *Florentine Codex*, there is reference to the golden garb or vestments of the god, or *teocuitlaquemitl* (see Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 2:240). As Seler (1963:1:129) notes, this could only refer to the sacrificial skin donned by this fierce and fearsome god.

As with many gods of ancient Mesoamerica, the historic origin of the contact period Xipe Totec is complex. Nicholson (1972:214) notes that according to sixteenth-century accounts, he was the original god of the Tlapanecs, or Yopi, from the coastal region of Guerrero: "Xipe was particularly associated at contact with the Zapotec of Oaxaca and the Yopi-Tlapaneca of the Oaxaca border region." To the Aztec, his temple was the Yompico, "land of the Yopis," and his characteristic pointed cap with swallowtail pennant was known as the *yopitzontli* "hair of the Yopis" (Seler 1963:1:128). Although some of the earliest known examples

of this god appear on Late Classic Zapotec urns from Oaxaca, it is likely that the Early Classic statue from the Xalla compound at Teotihuacan is a still more ancient portrayal of this being, here as a probable victim in the bloody rites of scaffold sacrifice. Although Xipe was probably present during the Classic period in central Mexico, there is no evidence that the spring *veintena* rites of Tlacaxipehualiztli were present, as in contrast to the Classic Maya, there is no epigraphic evidence of the eighteen twenty-day months and five extra days, only yearbearer dates designating specific 365-day years. In addition, due to the lack of a leap year for the 365-day vague year, during the Classic period this month would have been celebrated at a later, different time of year, not at the spring equinox.

In this study, I have stressed the militaristic nature of the month of Tlacaxipehualiztli, a theme that has been noted by others, including the recent work by González Gónzalez (2011:320), who also notes that March marked the beginning season of Aztec military campaigns. It was also at this time that lords from nearby cities and provinces and even enemies came to witness the spectacle of gore and gladiatorial battle, clearly in part as intimidation (see Durán 1994:169-173, 474-475). After one Tlacaxipehualiztl the rulers of other polities were "filled with astonishment and fright" (Durán 1994:473). At the same time, the Aztec warriors were honored and exhorted to bravely engage in battle for the sun (Durán 1994:475). As noted by Broda (1970:237), "Tlaxapehualiztli was aimed at terrorizing the enemies and subdued peoples, while filling the people of Tenochtitlan with satisfaction and pride." Tlacaxipehualiztli certainly concerned rejuvenation, but not of the earth but the sun at vernal equinox as the ecliptic moves slowly northward.

There is a strong martial aspect to the rites of Tlacaxipehualiztli and its relation to worshipping and nourishing the fierce sun god Tonatiuh, a being that was also closely related to gold as well as war. However, to argue that the flayed skin of Xipe Totec only signifies gold is untenable, as this being was already present in the Classic period before the widespread advent of metals in the Early Postclassic. Xipe Totec is a complex being with a complex history, and it is no more helpful to posit that his skin only represents gold as it is to simply state that it represents the earth's new spring growth. That noted, the relation of Xipe Totec to gold is very clear, including even eye and skin ailments pertaining specifically to gold and the donning of human skin during the rites of Tlacaxipehualiztli. Although Late Postclassic images of Xipe Totec appear almost placid and peaceful, this is simply because the skin is lifeless in the eternal sleep of the dead. In reality, the early colonial accounts make clear that the wearer was by no means passive but rather extremely aggressive and a being of conflict and turmoil. This is not simply a twenty-first century projection, as the sixteenth century accounts are explicit about the repellent nature of the flayed skins, including their horrific smell as well as their frightening appearance and the wearers' threatening behavior. Xipe Totec was the embodiment of violent conflict, and the *Vaticanus A* goes so far as to state that Xipe Totec was the original creator of war (Corona Nuñez 1964:30). To Seler and many subsequent researchers he is a god of the earth and fertility related to the verdant growth of spring, but actually a great deal if not most of the *veintena* month of Tlacaxipehualiztli concerned solar worship, providing the sun god Tonatiuh with sacrificial hearts, blood, and his new resplendent skin of shining gold.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the following colleagues for their assistance and comments during the preparation of this paper: Leonardo López Luján, Stephen Houston, Travis Stanton, Jeremy Coltman, Yvonne Fleitman, Francisco Estrada-Belli, Vera Tiesler, Andrew Scherer, Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos, Patricia Plunket, Yael Barschak, Gabriela Uruñuela, and Caitlin Earley. In addition, I am especially grateful to John Pohl for his encouragement and many suggestions throughout the process of writing the study.

References

Baudez, Claude
1994 *Maya Sculpture of Copán: The Iconography*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Beliaev, Dmitri, and Stephen D. Houston.
2020 A Sacrificial Sign in Maya Writing. *Maya Decipherment:* mayadecipherment.com/2020/06/20/a-sacrificial-sign-in-maya-writing/

Beyer, Hermann
1933 *Shell Ornament Sets from the Huasteca, Mexico*. Middle American Research Series 5(4). Tulane University, New Orleans.
1965 ¿Guerrero o dios? Nota arqueológica acerca de estatua mexicana del Museo de Historia Natural de Nueva York. In *El Mexico Antiguo* 10:343-352.

Broda, Johanna
1970 Tlacaxipehualiztli: A Reconstruction of an Aztec Festival from 16th Century Sources. *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 5:197-327.

Caplan, Alison
2021 Blower of Sun-Excrement: Nahua Lost Wax Gold Casting in the Florentine Codex, Book 9, Chapter 16. *West 86th* 28(2):215-231.

Carrasco Franco, Germán
1973 *Arte precolombino de México: cerámica, piedra, metal*. Ediciones Lito Offset Fersa, Mexico City.

Caso, Alfonso
1938 *Exploraciones en Oaxaca: Quinta y sexta temporadas, 1936-1937*. Publicación 34. Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, Mexico City.
1956 La Cruz de Topiltepec, Tepozcolula, Oax. In *Estudios antropológicos publicados en homenaje al doctor Manuel Gamio*, pp. 171-182. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City.

Caso, Alfonso, continued
1958 *The Aztec: People of the Sun*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
1969 *El tesoro de Monte Alban*. Memorias del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia 3. Instituto Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.
1971 Calendrical Systems of Central Mexico. In *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, Part 1, edited by Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal, pp. 333-348. Handbook of Middle American Indians, Vol. 10. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Caso, Alfonso, and Ignacio Bernal
1952 *Urnas de Oaxaca*. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.

Chinchilla Mazariegos, Oswaldo
2014 Flaying, Dismemberment, and Ritual Human Sacrifice on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala. *The PARI Journal* 14(3):1-12.

Coe, Michael D.
1973 *The Maya Scribe and His World*, The Grolier Club, New York.

Corona Nuñez, José
1964 *Antigüedades de México*, vol. 3. Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público México, Mexico City.

Couch, N. C. Christopher
1985 *The Festival Cycle of the Aztec Codex Borbonicus*. BAR International Series 270. British Archaeological Reports, Oxford.
1988 *Pre-Columbian Art from the Ernst Erickson Collection at the American Museum of Natural History*. American Museum of Natural History, New York.

Durán, Fray Diego
1971 *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden, trans. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
1994 *The History of the Indies of New Spain*. Doris Heyden, trans. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Easby, Elizabeth Kennedy
1966 *Ancient Art of Latin America from the Collection of Jay C. Leff*. The Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Earley, Caitlin C.
2023 *The Comitán Valley: Sculpture and Identity on the Maya Frontier*. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Ekholm Gordon F., and Dan Eban
1979 *The Maremont Collection of Pre-Columbian Art*. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Emmerich, André
1965 *Sweat of the Sun and Tears of the Moon: Gold and Silver in Pre-Columbian Art*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.

Estrada-Belli, Francisco
2002 *Archaeological Excavations at Holmul, Peten, Guatemala: Preliminary Results of the Third Season, 2002*. Vanderbilt University, New Orleans.

Estrada-Belli, Francisco, Alexandre Tokovinine, Jennifer M. Foley, Heather Hurst, Gene A. Ware, David Stuart, and Nikolai Grube
2009 A Maya Palace at Holmul, Peten, Guatemala, and the Teotihuacan "Entrada": Evidence from Murals 7 and 9. *Latin American Antiquity* 20(1):228-259.

Fash, Barbara W., Alexandre Tokovonine, and Ian Graham
2022 *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Volume 3: Part 4: Yaxchilan.* Peabody Museum Press; Dumbarton Oaks Publications, Cambridge, MA.

Fleitman, Yvonne
2022 *Divine Food: Maize, Cacao and Maguey*. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Frassani, Alessia, and Ludo Snijers
2020 Another Look at Codex Yanhuitlan: Material, Stylistic, and Historical Considerations on an Early Colonial Pictographic Manuscript. *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 42 (116):61- 92.

Gamboa Cabezas, Luis M.
2012 Quetzalcoatl and Xipe Totec: A New Discovery at Chichen Itza. In *Children of the Plumed Serpent*, edited by Virginia M. Fields, John M. D. Pohl, and Victoria L. Lyell, pp. 54-57. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.

Garibay Kintana, Ángel
1979 *Teogonía e historia de los mexicanos. Tres opúscolos del siglo XVI*. 3rd ed. Editorial Porrua, Mexico City.

Goldstein, Marylin M., curator
1987 *Ceremonial Sculpture of Ancient Veracruz*. Hillwood Art Gallery, Long Island University, Brookville.

Goldstein, Marilyn, and Lourdes Suárez Diez, curators
1997 *Conchas Precolombinas: Mesoamerican Art Created from Seashells.* Hillwood Art Museum, Long Island University, C.W. Post Campus, Brookville.

Gónzalez Gónzalez, Carlos Javier
2011 *Xipe Tótec: Guerra y regeneración del maíz en la religion mexica*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City.
2016 *Xipe Tótec y la regeneración de la vida.* Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.

Graham, Ian
1967 *Archaeological Explorations in El Peten, Guatemala*. Middle American Research Institute, Publication 33. Tulane University, New Orleans.

Graham, Ian, and Eric von Euw
1977 *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Volume 3, Part 1: Yaxchilan.* Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Graham, Ian, and Peter Mathews
1996 *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Volume 6, Part 2: Tonina.* Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Graulich, Michelle
1982 Tlacaxiphualiztli ou la fête aztèque de la moisson et la guerre. *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 12:215-254.

Gutierrez Solana, Nelly, and Susan K. Hamilton
1977 *Las esculturas en terracotta de El Zapotal, Veracruz.* Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City.

Hammer, Olga, ed.
1971 *Ancient Art of Veracruz*. Ethnic Council of Los Angeles, Los Angeles.

Hammond, Norman, and Karl Taube
2019 The Aberdeen Celt: An Early Twentieth-Century Olmec Find. *Antiquity* 93(368):488-501.

Hernández Ibar, and Guilhem Olivier
2023 The Forgotten Gods of Ixtapantango (Estado de México): A Comparative Study of Rock Paintings at an Early Postclassic Site. In *When East Meets West: Chichen Itza, Tula, and the Postclassic Mesoamerican World*, edited by Travis W. Stanton, Karl A. Taube, Jeremy D. Coltman, and Nelda I. Marengo Camacho, v. 2, pp. 489-514. BAR Publishing, Oxford.

Houston, Stephen D.
2020 Canonical Space and Maya Markets. *Maya Decipherment*: mayadecipherment.com/2020/08/18/canonical-space-and-maya-markets/

Inomata, Takeshi, and Daniela Triadan
2015 Middle Preclassic Caches from Ceibal, Guatemala. In *Maya Archaeology 3*, edited by Charles Golden, Stephen Houston, and Joel Skidmore, pp. 56-91. Precolumbia Mesoweb Press, San Francisco.

Joralemon, David
1974 Ritual Blood-Sacrifice Among the Ancient Maya: Part I. In *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque, Part II: A Conference on the Art, Iconography, and Dynastic History of Palenque, 1973*, edited by Merle Greene Robertson, pp. 59-75. Robert Louis Stevenson School; Pre-Columbian Art Research, Pebble Beach, CA.

Kerr, Justin
1990 *The Maya Vase Book: A Corpus of Rollout Photographs of Maya Vases, Volume 2*. Kerr Associates, New York.

Kowalski, Jeff
1989 *The Mythological Identity of the Figure on the La Esperanza ("Chinkultik") Ball Court Marker*. Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing 27. Center for Maya Research, Washington, D.C.

Kubler, George, and Charles Gibson
1951 *The Tovar Calendar*. Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, Vol. 11. Yale University Press, New Haven.

Linné, Sigvald
1934 *Archaeological Researches at Teotihuacan, Mexico*. The Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, Pub. 1. Victor Pettersons Bokindustriakteibolag, Stockhom.

López Luján, Leonardo, Laura Filoy Nadal, Barbara W. Fash, William L. Fash, and Pilar Hernández
2006 The Destruction of Images at Teotihuacan: Anthropomorphic Sculpture, Elite Cults, and the End of a Civilization. *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 49/50:12-39.

Lothrop, Samuel Kirkland
1952 *Metals from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichen Itza, Yucatan.* Memoirs 10(2). Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Marquina, Ignacio
1951 *Arquitectura prehispanica*. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.

Martin, Simon, and Nikolai Grube
2008 *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya*. 2nd ed. Thames and Hudson, London and New York.

Mathiowetz, Michael D.
2023 Journey to Dawn: Gold Disk Pectorals and Divine Solar Authority in Postclassic Mesoamerica, West Mexico, and the Lower Central American Connection. In *When East Meets West: Chichen Itza, Tula, and the Postclassic Mesoamerican World*, edited by Travis W. Stanton, Karl A. Taube, Jeremy D. Coltman, and Nelda I. Marengo Camacho, v. 1, pp. 85-126. BAR Publishing, Oxford.

Meighan, Clement W., ed.
1976 *The Archaeology of Amapa, Nayarit*. The Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles.

Miles, S. W.
1965 Sculpture of the Guatemala-Chiapas Highlands and Pacific Slopes, and Associated Hieroglyphs. In *Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica*, Part 1, edited by Gordon R. Willey, pp. 237-275. Handbook of Middle American Indians, Vol. 2. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Miller, Arthur G.
1995 *The Painted Tombs of Oaxaca: Living with the Dead*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Müller, Florencia
1978 *La alfaría de Cholula*. Serie Arqueología. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.

Navarrete, Carlos
1984 *Guia para el estudio de los monumentos esculpidos de Chinkultic, Chiapas*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City.

Neff, Hector, Mark Navarro Castillo, and Sachiko Sakai
2023 A Mesoamerica Tradeware Revisited: Mexican Influences in the Origins and Evolution of Plumbate Pottery. In *When East Meets West: Chichen Itza, Tula, and the Postclassic Mesoamerican World*, edited by Travis W. Stanton, Karl A. Taube, Jeremy D. Coltman, and Nelda I. Marengo Camacho, v. 2, pp. 693-723. BAR Publishing, Oxford.

Nicholson, H. B.
1972 The Cult of Xipe Totec in Mesoamerica. In *Religion en Mesoamerica, XII Mesa Redonda*, edited by Jaime Litvag King and Noemi Castillo Trejo, pp. 213-218. Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, Mexico City.

Orrego Corizo, Miguel, and Rudy Larios Villalta
1983 *Reporte de las investigaciones arqueológicas en el Grupo SE-11*. Instituto de Antropología e Historia de Guatemala; Parque Nacional de Tikal, Guatemala City.

Orr, Heather
2003 Stone Balls and Masked Men: Ballgame as Combat Ritual, Dainzú, Oaxaca. *Ancient America* 5:73-104. Center for Ancient American Studies, Barnardsville.

Pasztory, Esther
1983 *Aztec Art*. Harry N. Abrams, New York.

Pillsbury, Joanne, Miriam Doutriaux, Reiko Ishihara-Brito, and Alaxandre Tokovinine, eds.
2012 *Ancient Maya Art at Dumbarton Oaks*. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

Robelo, Cecelio A.
1980 *Diccionaría de mitología nahuatl*. 2 vols. Editorial Innovación. Mexico City.

Robicsek, Francis, and Donald Hales
1981 *The Maya Book of the Dead*. University of Virginia Art Museum, Charlottsville.

Roskamp, Hans
2010 God of Metals: Tlatlauhqui Tezcatlipoca and the Sacred Symbolism of Metallurgy in Michoacan, West Mexico. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 2(1):69-78.
2017 Los dioses y la metalurgia en el Michoacán antiguo. *Arqueología Mexicana* 24(144):64-67.

Sahagún, Fray Bernardino
1950-1982 *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. Arthur J. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, trans. University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

Schele, Linda, and Peter Mathews
1979 *The Bodega of Palenque, Chiapas*. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

Scherer, Andrew K.
2025 *As Gods Kill: Morality and Social Violence among the Precolonial Maya*. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Scott, Sue
1993 *Teotihuacan Mazapan Figurines and the Xipe Totec Statue: A Link Between the Basin of Mexico and the Valley of Oaxaca*. Vanderbilt Publications in Anthropology no. 44, Vanderbilt University, Nashville.

Seler, Eduard
1902-1923 *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach- und Altertumskunde*. 5 vols. Asher; Behrend, Berlin.
1963 *Comentarios al Códice Borgia.* 2 vols. with facsimile. Fondo de la Cultura Económica, Mexico City.

Séjourné, Laurette
1959 *Un palacio en la ciudad de los dioses [Teotihuacan].* Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.

Shook, Edwin M., and Elayne Marquis
1996 *Secrets in Stone: Yokes, Hachas and Palmas From Southeastern Mesoamerica.* American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

Steck, Francis Borgia
1951 *Motolonia's History of the Indies of New Spain*. Acadamy of American Franciscan History, Washington, D.C.

Stone, Andrea
1989 Disconnection, Foreign Insignia, and Political Expansion: Teotihuacan and the Warrior Stela of Piedras Negras. In *Mesoamerica after the Decline of Teotihuacan A.D. 700–900*, edited by Richard A. Diehl and Janet Catherine Berlo, pp. 153-172. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

Stone, Andrea, and Marc Zender
2011 *Reading Maya Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Maya Painting and Sculpture.* Thames and Hudson, London and New York.

Stuart, David, and Ian Graham
2003 *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Volume 9, Part 1: Piedras Negras*. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Sugiyama, Saburo
2005 *Human Sacrifice, Militarism, and Rulership: Materialization of State Ideology at the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, Teotihuacan*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Taube, Karl A.
1988 A Study of Classic Maya Scaffold Sacrifice, in *Maya Iconography*, edited by Elizabeth P. Benson and Gillett G. Griffin, pp. 330-351. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
1992 *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan*. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.
2004 *Olmec Art at Dumbarton Oaks*. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.
2012 The Symbolism of Turquoise in Ancient Mesoamerica. In *Turquoise in Mexico and North America: Science, Conservation, Culture and Collections*, edited by J. C. H. King, Max Carocci, Carolyn Cartwright, Colin McEwan, and Rebecca Stacy, pp. 117-134. The British Museum, London.
2015 The Huastec Sun God: Portrayals of Solar Imagery, Sacrifice and War in Postclassic Huastec Iconography. In *The Huasteca: Cultural History and Regional Exchange*, edited by Katherine A. Faust and Kim N. Richter, pp. 98-127. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
2018 The Ballgame, Boxing and Ritual Bloodsport in Ancient Mesoamerica. In *Play, Ritual and Belief in Animals and Early Human Societies*, edited by Colin Renfrew, Iain Morley, and Michael Boyd, pp. 264-301. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
2025 Olmec Religion: Ritual, Cosmology and Gods. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Olmecs*, editedy by Christopher A. Poole and Carl Wendt, pp. 644-665. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Taube, Karl, and Stephen Houston
2015 Masks and Iconography. In *Temple of the Night Sun: A Royal Tomb at El Diablo, Guatemala*, by Stephen Houston, Sarah Newman, Edwin Román, and Thomas Garrison, pp. 208-229. Precolumbia Mesoweb Press, San Francisco.

Taube, Karl, and Marc Zender
2009 American Gladiators: Ritual Boxing in Ancient Mesoamerica. In *Blood and Beauty: Organized Violence in the Art and Archaeology of Mesoamerica and Central America*, edited by Heather Orr and Rex Koontz, pp. 161-220. The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles.

Tedlock, Dennis
2003 *Rabinal Achi: A Mayan Drama of War and Sacrifice*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Thompson, J. Eric S.
1940 *Mexico before Cortez: An Account of the Daily Life, Religion and Ritual of the Aztecs and Kindred Peoples*. Charles Scribner's Sons, London and New York.

Tiesler, Vera, Ramon Arturo-Pacheco, Jorge Gómez Valdés, and Annick Daniels
2013 Posthumous Body Manipulation in the Classic Period Mixtecilla: Reevaluating Human Remains of Ossuary 1 from El Zapotal, Veracruz. *Latin American Antiquity* 24(1):47-71.

Trik, Helen, and Michael E. Kampen
1983 *The Graffiti of Tikal*. Tikal Report 31. Monograph 57. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Turner, Andrew D., and Cynthia Kristan-Graham
2023 Tula and the Origins and Characteristics of an Epiclassic-Early Postclassic Art Tradition. In *When East Meets West: Chichen Itza, Tula, and the Postclassic Mesoamerican World*, edited by Travis W. Stanton, Karl A. Taube, Jeremy D. Coltman, and Nelda I. Marengo Camacho, v. 1, pp. 427-478. BAR Publishing, Oxford.

Urcid, Javier
2023 La depredación como metáfora sacrificial. *Arqueología Mexicana* 30(280):38-44.

Uruñuela y Ladrón de Geuvara, Gabriela, and Patricia Plunket Nagoda
2023 Cholula's Decline and Regeneration in the Post-Teotihuacan World. In *When East Meets West: Chichen Itza, Tula, and the Postclassic Mesoamerican World*, edited by Travis W. Stanton, Karl A. Taube, Jeremy D. Coltman, and Nelda I. Marengo Camacho, v. 2, pp. 515-533. BAR Publishing, Oxford.

Verano, John, Santiago Uceda, Claude Chapdelaine, Richard Tello, María Isabel Paredes, and Victor Pimentel
1999 Modified Human Skulls from the Urban Sector of the Pyramids of Moche, Northern Peru. *Latin American Antiquity* 10(1):59-70.

Von Winning, Hasso
1968 *Pre-Columbian Art of Mexico and Central America*. Harry N. Abrams, New York.