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The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan and the Drought of the Year 1-Rabbit

LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN

Sparse, excessive, or inopportune precipitation: these three atmospheric phenomena sum up much of the hardship endured by ancient Mexican societies that based their existence on seasonal rainfed agriculture. As one might expect, rain was only welcome when it fell in adequate amounts at the right times. If both factors did not coincide, the consequences could be devastating, leading to famine, migration, and death (Sánchez Mora 1980). This unpredictable precipitation left a distinctive mark on religion in Mesoamerica. Over the centuries, this vast cultural area was truly obsessed with controlling rainfall by appealing to supernatural forces. The Mexica, of course, were no exception: in nine of the eighteen twenty-day periods that made up their agricultural calendar, important ceremonies were held to promote rain and fertility (Broda 1971; López Luján 1997).

Nearly all of the prayers, offerings, and child sacrifices during these periods were directed at Tlaloc, the rain god and personification of the earth (Klein 1980). He was generally invoked as “The Giver,” as he provided everything necessary for plants to germinate (Sahagún 1989:1:38). He sent rain and running water from Tlalocan, a place of mist, infinite abundance, and perennial verdure (López Austin 1994:182-193). According to the sixteenth century Sahaguntine texts, Tlalocan was a hollow, water-filled mountain replicated by every elevated natural feature in the landscape (Broda 1971:252). For instance, the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1979:Book 11, Chap. 12:223v, translated by Alfredo López Austin) tells us: “they said that the mountains had an occult nature; that only their surface was covered with earth and

rock; that they were like large vessels or houses full of water.”

This is why supplications for rain were commonly made at mountains, ravines, caves, springs, and whirlpools, all sacred places in the geography where communication with Tlaloc was possible (Broda 1971). For the inhabitants of the Basin of Mexico, however, the center par excellence for propitiating rain gods was the Huei Teocalli, Templo Mayor, or Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, a 45-meter-tall pyramid, at the top of which stood the shrines of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the two main protector deities of the Mexica people (López Austin and López Luján 2004:403-455, 2009).

The northern half of the structure evoked a mountain which had the aquatic world stored inside: its platform was decorated with stone sculptures depicting blue frogs and jade serpents, in addition to large braziers carved with the bust of Tlaloc; its sloping sides had bas-reliefs of greenstone beads and whirlpools, as well as protruding rocks that simulated rugged terrain; and its shrine housed the symbols and images of storm and maize deities.

An Exceptional Discovery

The archaeological contexts of Tenochtitlan’s Templo Mayor provide us with a magnificent example that records the desperate actions of the faithful facing nature’s devastating effects. An offering excavated more than four decades ago alludes to a holocaust that took place in the mid-fifteenth century to appease the fury of the rain gods. My presentation herein analyzes this offering in light of data from archaeology, physical anthropology,

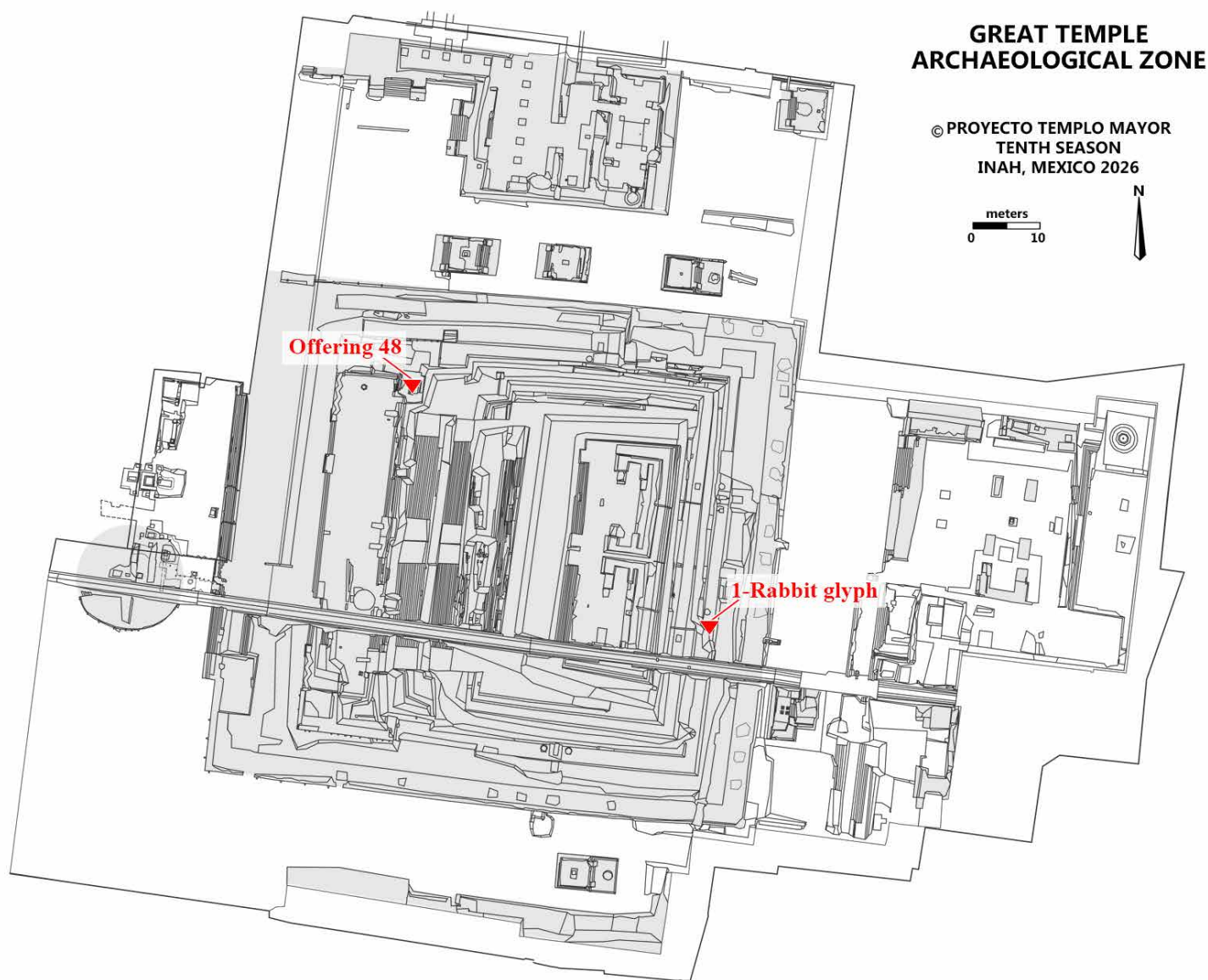


Figure 1. Templo Mayor Archaeological Zone. Michelle De Anda, Templo Mayor Project.

chemistry, history, and meteorology, which together will help elucidate in unusual detail how and why this bloody ceremony was performed.

The story I want to tell you goes back to the summer of 1980, when, just a few days after I joined the Templo Mayor Project in Mexico City, the director, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, asked me to explore an area that shortly before had been occupied by a modern five-story building. According to my own field notes, beneath its concrete foundations, vestiges of the colonial era were beginning to emerge, including a column shaft, a saddle stirrup, a small pearl bracelet, and abundant glazed pottery. Also visible, barely a meter and a half below street level, were the battered walls of a quadrangular stone box, which was soon revealed to contain a

spectacular ritual deposit from Mexica times (Figure 1).

After confirming its presence on July 28, we christened the deposit with the rather unromantic name “Offering 48” and formed a working team with archaeologists Francisco Hinojosa and Maximiliano Acevedo, and physical anthropologist Juan Román. From that moment until January 7 of the following year when we removed the last object from the box, our activity was as intense as it was exciting.

Archaeology

Offering 48 was located in the northwest sector of the Templo Mayor, that is, within the half of the pyramid dedicated to the cult of Tlaloc (López Luján 1982:126-127,

1993:192-205, 2018, 2022). It was found in an ashlar box whose walls were erected in an improvised manner on a small altar from Phase IVa, dating back to the reign of Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina, who governed from 1440 to 1469. The interior of the quadrangular receptacle was stuccoed and measured 5.6 feet from north to south, 3.6 feet from east to west, and at least 1.8 feet deep. Unfortunately, both the box and much of its upper contents had been severely altered by a subsequent colonial building's foundation.

Based on my notes and unpublished field reports, it is possible to reconstruct from start to finish the steps followed in the ritual that gave rise to Offering 48 in the mid-fifteenth century. In short, the officiants of the ceremony began by placing a uniform layer of dark gray sand, apparently of marine origin, at the bottom of the box.

Then they placed several children's corpses on top of the sand, most of them in a flexed supine position, that is, lying on their back with contracted limbs. They must have been richly adorned when they were buried, as some of the exhumed skeletons still wore necklaces made of tiny greenstone beads, while two others had wooden discs covered with turquoise mosaics on their chests. It is interesting to note that five of the skeletons still had a small greenstone bead in their mouth, a funerary practice recorded in documentary sources.

As part of a third layer, the officiants arranged many more child corpses, although this time sprinkled with blue pigment, and applied the same color to the northwest, southwest, and southeast corners of the box. Above these lifeless bodies, they distributed several gourds, as well as seashells, a shell carved in the shape of a flower, small birds, an obsidian blade, and copal aromatic resin.

Finally, in what appears to have been the uppermost layer of the offering, they placed at least eleven polychrome stone sculptures, imitating jars with the visage of Tlaloc. Significantly, they were deliberately laid on their sides in an east-west orientation. Intermingled with the sculptures, we recovered numerous broken human bones with no anatomical connection, pieces of stucco perhaps from the original lid of the box, and many fragments of Spanish and early colonial Mexican pottery.

Physical Anthropology

After a detailed study of the Offering 48 skeletons, Juan Román (1990) counted a total of forty-two skulls, forty right humeri, forty-one right femurs, forty-one left femurs, and forty left fibulas among thousands of other bones, indicating a minimum of forty-two individuals. He also concluded, based on long-bone length and tooth development, that one of them would have been around the age of two years at the time of death, another age

three, thirteen age four, eleven age five, eleven more age six, and five age seven. Although there is no marked sexual dimorphism in such young children, Román estimated from skull and pelvis measurements that at least twenty-two of them were male and six were female.

It is telling that this same analysis revealed that half of these children exhibited evidence of porotic hyperostosis in the anterior portions of the supraorbital plates and the pericranial surfaces of the parietal. This condition is the result of nutritional issues such as iron deficiency-related anemia, poor nutrient absorption, gastrointestinal diseases, and parasitism. Additionally, five of these individuals suffered from circular tooth decay, a cause of which is postpartum malnutrition.

A total of thirty-two individuals presented clear signs of tabular erect cranial modification achieved at a very early age using special cradles with a compression plane at the front of the forehead and another at the back of the occipital squama, giving the skulls a vertically extended appearance. However, there were no marks left by cutting that would allow us to infer ritual practices such as heart extraction, decapitation, or dismemberment. Therefore, Román suggested that these children may have died from having their throats slit.

Chemistry

Many years later, we had the opportunity to perform stable oxygen and phosphate isotope analysis on both the bone and enamel of this group of children in order to determine their geographical origins and residential patterns in the final years of life. Conducted at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and led by Diana Moreiras, the analysis yielded atmospheric water values that supported the idea that the sacrificed children were not born in the Basin of Mexico (Moreiras Reynaga et al. 2021).

Instead, a map of Oxygen 18's isotopic landscape indicates that they originated in a yet-to-be-determined location in Oaxaca or western Mexico. The only exception was a child who possibly came from the highlands of Chiapas or Guatemala. In this regard, we know that Mexica merchants and tribute collectors were frequent visitors to both of these areas where they obtained luxury goods and perhaps slaves.

Documentary Sources and Myth

The field and laboratory data presented thus far make sense when compared to written evidence from the sixteenth century. These documents contain wonderful indigenous mythic narratives that explain the rites embodied in Offering 48. One of the most enlightening passages is found in the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (1965:26, author's translation) which describes



Figure 2. An attendant of the god Tlaloc making rain with a jar during the month Atemoztli. *Tovar Codex*, folio 155r.

the world of the Tlaloque and the peculiar way they made it rain:

They say that the water god has a chamber with four rooms, and in the middle of a large courtyard, there are four large water basins: one is quite good, and from this one it rains when the grains and seeds are growing and the weather is favorable. The other is unfavorable when it rains, and the water causes cobwebs to form on the grains, which then become moldy. Another is when it rains and freezes; another is when it rains and does not hail, and they dry out.

And to make it rain, this water god created many small-bodied ministers, who dwell in the rooms of the said chamber and have pitchers in which they take water from those basins and staffs in their other hand, and when the rain god commands them to go and water certain areas, they take their pitchers and staffs and dispense the water as commanded, and when it thunders, that is when they break the pitchers with their staffs, and when lightning comes, it is from what they had inside or part of the pitcher.

One can infer from this passage that the eleven Tlaloc jar sculptures recovered during our excavation were votive representations of the pitchers used by the god's diminutive servants to make it rain (Figure 2). The officiants would have intentionally placed them on their side, in a position that simulated pouring. Thus, through the mechanism of imitative magic, they attempted to induce copious rainfall.

This proposition is corroborated by other ritual deposits found in the Templo Mayor. For example, in a group of five offerings discovered on the Tlaloc side in the construction fill of Phase III, dating to around 1431 during the reign of the *tlatoani* Itzcoatl (López Luján 1993:212-220, 352-356), each deposit contained a blue pot intentionally laid on its side and a small bowl in an upright position beneath the opening. The latter contained several greenstone beads, which were the quintessential symbol for raindrops.

Globular pots were not the only vessels associated with the solemnities of the rain god (López Luján 1997:97-100, 2006:1:140-143). The inhabitants of Tenochtitlan also used ceramic or stone cups and jugs decorated with Tlaloc's face or simply painted blue. Evidently, the production of these peculiar ritual objects was not exclusive to the Mexica, but dates back to Preclassic times and is distributed throughout most of Mesoamerica.

Documentary Sources and Ritual

For obvious reasons, the writings of Franciscan friars Bernardino de Sahagún, Toribio de Benavente, Gerónimo de Mendieta, and Juan de Torquemada, the Dominican missionary Diego Durán, and even the mestizo chronicler Juan Bautista Pomar contain descriptions of the deeply rooted Mesoamerican custom of sacrificing children that usually occupy considerable space, equivalent to or less than what they devote to its condemnation (López Luján 1993:200-202). Although some report that this rite was also used to predict the outcome of a battle, restore an individual's lost freedom, or liberate one from a terrible illness (Graulich 2016:202-256; López Luján et al. 2010), they all agree that it nearly always was intended to ensure that the Tlaloque would not stop watering crops with their rain.

According to these authors, child sacrifice took place during various festivals in the solar calendar: Sahagún mentions the twenty-day periods of Atlcahualo, Tlacaxipehualiztli, Tozoztontli, and Huei Tozoztli (Sahagún 1989:1:84), but if we take Benavente (1969:36) and Durán (1984:1:292) into account, we would have to add Atemoztli and Izcalli to the list. During these twenty-day festivals, small children personified these Tlaloque, the supernatural beings who, as we have seen, were considered the rain god's "small-bodied ministers" (Broda 1971). For this reason, those chosen had to be very young, have two cowlicks in their hair, and have been born on an auspicious day. In addition, they were dressed in the image and likeness of rain deities and given the name of the place where they later would be sacrificed, for instance that of a hill. Good or bad omens depended on their behavior during the ceremony, as Sahagún's informants explained: "When the children were taken to be killed, if they cried and shed many tears, those who brought them were happy, because they took it as a sign that there would be lots of rain that year" (Sahagún 1989:1:81).

Thanks to the documentary sources, we know that both males and females from the age of three to eight were

sacrificed: According to Pomar (1964-1968:168-169), they were “slaves, given by lords and wealthy people as offerings for this purpose,” but Benavente (1969:35-36) contradicts this by stating that “they were not slaves, but children of nobles.” Whatever the case may be, the killing method par excellence was slitting the throat with a flint knife, although other procedures are also described such as heart extraction, drowning, and death by starvation inside caves whose openings had been sealed (Benavente 1969:35-36; Durán 1984:1:83-86; Mendieta 1945:111; Pomar 1964-1968:168-169). As for the number of victims, Durán (1984:1:83-86) notes that they usually killed one to four children, Benavente (1969:36) mentions a couple in one passage and four in another, Pomar (1964-1968:168-169) says between ten and fifteen, while Sahagún (1989:1:83, 104) vaguely refers to “many.”

The quintessential ritual sites in the Basin of Mexico included small islands (such as Tepetzinco and Tepepulco), mountains (such as Cuauhtepetl, Yoaltecatl, Poyauhtla, Cocotl, and Tetzacualco on Mount Tlaloc), and bodies of water (such as Lake Tetzaco itself) (Benavente 1969:35-36; Durán 1984:1:83-86, 90; Mendieta 1945:111; Pomar 1964-1968:168-169; Sahagún 1989:2:104-105). Later, the corpses would be disposed of in various ways: thrown into caves or ravines, submerged in the Pantitlan whirlpool, buried in stone boxes, or simply cooked and eaten by ritual participants (Benavente 1969:35; Durán 1984:1:86, 90; Pomar 1964-1968:168-169; Sahagún 1989:1:104-105).

Documentary Sources and History

This holocaust of at least forty-two children at the foot of the Templo Mayor does not correspond in terms of the setting or number of victims with what is recounted in the historical record concerning the festival cycle repeated every year in various parts of the Basin of Mexico and the surrounding area. Clearly, Offering 48 is the result of a mass sacrifice, carried out at an atypical location on a single occasion. Otherwise, we surely would have discovered other similar archaeological deposits during our explorations of the sacred precinct. Therefore, I believe that the reasons for this exceptional ceremony must be sought in an equally unique historical event.

In my opinion, the key lies in a basalt frieze that was embedded in the eastern façade of the Templo Mayor belonging to Phases IV and IVa, that is, in a sculptural element of the same building and time as Offering 48 (López Luján 1993:202-203). The frieze has a rectangular calendrical cartouche (indicating a year) carved with the date 1-Rabbit, which corresponds to 1454, according to Alfonso Caso’s Christian-Mexica calendrical correlation (Caso 1967:189). Indigenous annals say that this was when the most devastating drought of the Mexica era occurred (Figure 3). This climatological event was so

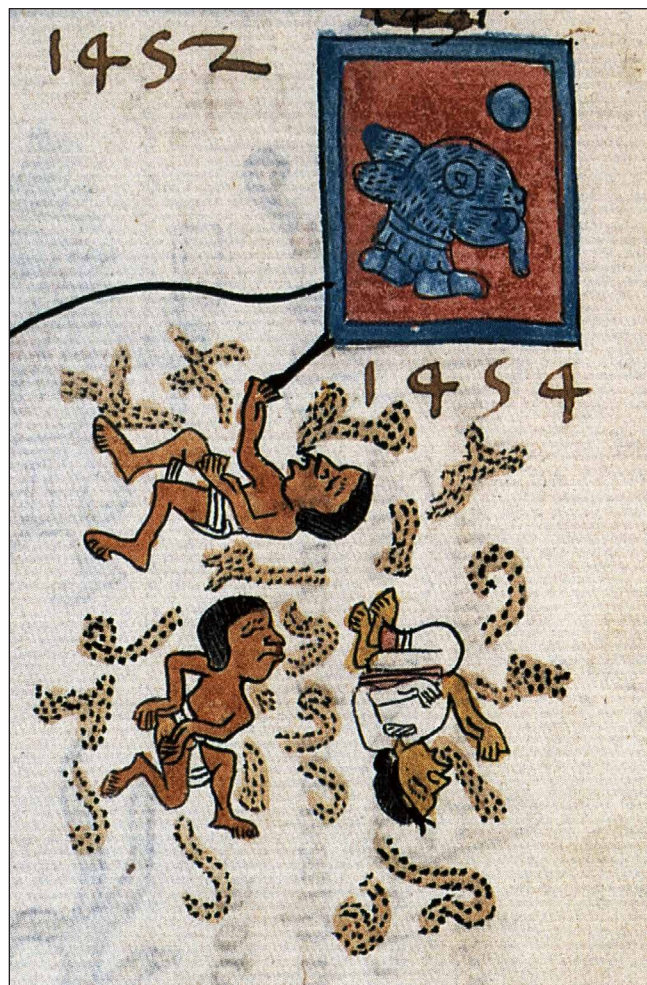


Figure 3. The 1454 plague. *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, folio 32r.

disastrous that Benavente (1969:36) identifies it as the origin of the subsequent widespread practice of child sacrifice.

Its significance is also clear in the work of Durán (1984:2:245), who states that when Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina had his own effigy carved into the rocky cliff at Chapultepec to commemorate his long reign, he ordered the artists to include “the year Ce Tochtli (One Rabbit), when the great famine began.”

This major disaster is also recorded in the various *xiuhamatl* or “books of the years” from the Central Highlands: the *Relaciones originales de Chalco Amaquemecan* (Chimalpahin 1965:99-100, 200-201; Chimalpahin 1997:157-161, 2003:117-121); *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* (1992:52), *Tecamachalco* (1961:167, 251), *Tlatelolco* (1948:56-57), and *Tula* (1979:35); the codices *Aubin* (1981:22, ff. 35r-35v), *en Cruz* (1981:1:17-18), *Huichapan* (1992:Pl. 37, 2001:ff. 35-38), *Mexicanus* (1952:Pl. lxvi), *Telleriano-Remensis* (1995:216-218, ff. 32r-32v), and *Vaticanus A* (1996:ff. 77r-77v), the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (1965:61), and the *Histoire*

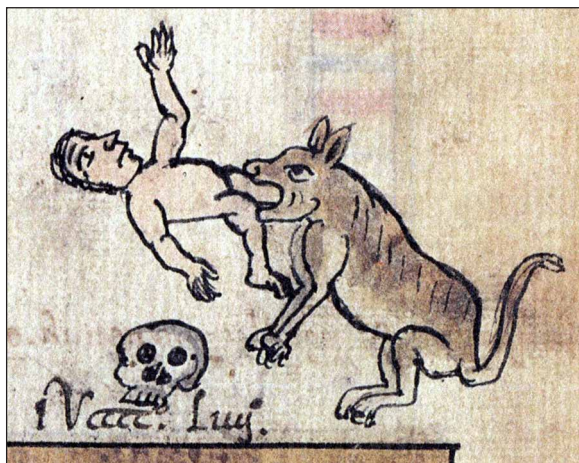


Figure 4. A canine devouring a human corpse.
Códice de Huichapan, plate 37.

mexicaine (1998:88, f. 11v).

As Table 1 shows, the dates of the events—ranging from 1447 to 1457—vary from one source to another. However, by summarizing the extant textual and graphic data, the basic sequence can be reconstructed. Apparently, it all began with light frosts that intensified the following year, coinciding with the germination period of maize. At that time, “it snowed up to the knee” and the lake even froze over. This phenomenon is depicted figuratively with small dots falling on agricultural fields, plants, animals, and humans.

According to Durán (1984:2:241), the frosts were compounded by a severe drought:

The springs dried up, the streams and rivers did not flow, the earth burned like fire, and the sheer dryness caused large cracks and fissures, so that the flowers and leaves of the trees and plants whose roots were scorched by the fire that came out of the earth fell off and their branches dried up, and the maguey did not produce its usual sweet juice, nor could the prickly pear cactus bear fruit, their thick leaves and pads turning downward, wilting feebly, almost cooked by the heat. The maize, as soon as it sprouted, turned yellow and withered, and so did all the other vegetables.

To make matters worse, crops were also attacked by a plague of grasshoppers (*Histoire mexicaine* 1998:88, f. 11v), so people had to eat roots and even “things that were unhealthy” (Durán 1984:2:241).

As a result, famine and disease soon broke out. In some codices, we see depictions of emaciated people vomiting. At that moment, a tremendous death toll ensued. First, according to one source, the fish, frogs, and *axolotl* salamanders of the lake perished, and then humans. Chimalpain (1997:159) tells us: “boy and girl were dying; their bodies certainly turning old because the flesh of the young man and young woman became wrinkled, for the famine was quite severe.” Torquemada (1969:1:121), in turn, says that “there was famine, almost universal, throughout the cold land.”

People were dying everywhere, in the mountains, forests, and grasslands. Their bodies were left there without anyone to bury them, becoming easy prey for vultures, coyotes, and other wild animals, as various pictographs show (Figure 4; *Códice Aubin* 1981:f. 35r; *Códice de Huichapan* 2001:Pl. 37. See also Chimalpahin 1965:99-100, 200-201; Chimalpain 1997:157-159). According to Chimalpain (1997:161), this happened in the fateful year of 1-Rabbit, which “is said and called *necetochhuiloc*,” that is, when everyone was “one-rabbitted.”

Durán (1984:1:241-242) recounts that, faced with such misfortune, Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina “summoned his stewards, factors, and treasurers . . . and asked them to report on the quantity of maize, beans, chili peppers, chia, and all other vegetables and seeds stored in the royal granaries” (Figure 5). From these provisions, he ordered that “every day, a certain amount of tortillas and atole” be prepared and “placed in the city in designated canoes” to be distributed immediately among “the poor and needy, because the nobles and merchants have granaries and landed estates and goods to sustain themselves.” Anyone caught taking food from these provisions without authorization was punished with death.

After a year, the granaries were empty, so the sovereign decided to gather his subjects to offer them one last banquet and break the terrible news. Durán (1984:2:243) states that, in tears, he told them the following:

My sons and brothers, we are not fighting our enemies in the field, for if we were, we would lay down our lives defending ourselves, and in dying we would fulfill our duty. But the one who wages war against us is the lord of creation, of the night, and of the day. For he wishes and wills the clouds not to rain.

Faced with such impotence, Motecuhzoma asked each of them to go and “seek their own remedy,” to which his people replied: “We accept the permission given us to go and find a solution to alleviate our misery and hunger. We will do so by selling our children to those who can feed them, so that they do not perish from starvation” (Durán 1984:2:243).

Therefore, Chimalpain (1997:161) adds that the year 1-Rabbit is also “said and called *netotonacahuiloc*,” which means “everyone was Totonac’d,” because Totonacs from the Gulf Coast came to Tenochtitlan then to take revenge on their enemies by buying them as slaves in exchange for dried maize kernels. Maidens were sold for four hundred maize ears and young men for five hundred. At that time, the Totonacs put wooden collars on the people and took them away from their cities in tears; thus, “they left tied to the stick.”

Something similar happened with the Coahuixca of Guerrero, who took advantage of the situation to enslave and bring such unfortunate people to the sacrificial

Document	7 Acatl (1447)	8 Tecpatl (1448)	9 Calli (1449)	10 Tochtli (1450)	11 Acatl (1451)	12 Tecpatl (1452)	13 Calli (1453)	1 Tochtli (1454)	2 Acatl (1455)	3 Tecpatl (1456)	4 Calli (1457)
<i>Codex en Cruz</i>							frost	famine disease	famine disease	rain	
<i>Codex de Huichapan</i>				famine	frost famine	famine	famine	frost famine loss of life carrion slavery child sacrifice	rain harvests		
<i>Código Aubin de 1576</i>							frost famine	slavery	famine loss of life carrion		rain harvests
<i>Código Telleriano-Remensis</i>	frost loss of life							famine loss of life	harvests		
<i>Código Vaticanus A</i>	frost loss of life							famine loss of life	harvests		
<i>Codex Mexicanus</i>	loss of life						loss of life	loss of life	loss of life		
<i>Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas</i>				frost				frost famine	death penalty of theft of corn		
<i>Anales de Tula</i>					frost			famine	famine	only amaranth famine loss of life	
<i>Anales de Cuauhtitlan</i>					frost			famine	famine	only amaranth famine loss of life carrion	
<i>Anales de Tlatelolco</i>				famine loss of life of animals	frost	frost	frost slavery	drought famine	rain harvests more tribute to Cohuixcas		
<i>Anales de Tecamachalco</i>								famine			
<i>Chimalpain, 3a relación</i>				frost famine	famine loss of life carrion	drought famine	famine	famine loss of life carrion slavery	rain harvests		
<i>Chimalpain, 7a relación</i>			slight frost	big frost famine	famine loss of life carrion	famine	famine	famine drought loss of life carrion slavery aqueduct from Chapultepec	rain harvests		
<i>Histoire mexicaine depuis 1221</i>						plague of grasshoppers famine		famine	famine	only	
<i>Durán, Historia</i>								drought	drought	drought	
<i>Torquemada, Monarquía indiana</i>					frost	frost	drought	no cultivation famine migration slavery	rain harvests		

Table 1. Historical sources mentioning the great drought.



Figure 5. Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina opening the royal granaries. Diego Durán, *Historia*, folio 89r.

stone (*Anales de Tlatelolco* 1948:57). There are reports that some Mexica went to get maize from the Huastecs of Cuextlan, since it was raining there (Chimalpahin 1965:99-100, 200-201; Chimalpain 1997:161, 2003:121). Others traveled to Totonacapan to exchange their children for food, while still others went there of their own free will, accompanied by their entire family, “where they made their permanent home” and “remain to this day” (Durán 1984:2:243-244).

The crisis had many other consequences. The war between the Mexica and the Chalcans was suspended, while the Mazahua in Hidalgo and the Tetzcocans rose up against those of Coatlinchan (*Anales de Cuauhtitlan* 1992:52; Chimalpahin 1965:201-202; *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* 1995:216-218; *Código de Huichapan* 1992:62-63). The sources record all sorts of actions—real or fictional—to deal with the drought. The Tetzcocans, led by Nezahualcoyotl, began construction of an aqueduct that would carry fresh water from the springs of Chapultepec to the island of Tenochtitlan (Chimalpain 2003:121). The Otomí, on the other hand, “sacrificed their children, their relatives, and the crippled,” according to the *Código de Huichapan* (1992:62-63), which brings to mind the malnourished victims in Offering 48.

By 1455–56, the situation had significantly changed. Torquemada (1969:1:158-159) emphasizes that “there was abundant rainfall, and the year was so prosperous that the same lands yielded maize, amaranth, chia, and beans, and many other vegetables, with which all the people of the land were well fed and prospered.” This bonanza is reflected in pictographs depicting scenes

where drops from the sky soak Tlaloc’s shrine or cause maize, amaranth, and other vegetables to grow (*Codex en Cruz* 1981:18-19; *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* 1995:f. 32v). Once normalcy was restored, the Mexica immediately went to Totonacapan to settle their debts and rescue their enslaved relatives, while at the same time taking revenge on the Cohuixca by increasing their tribute and demanding the delivery of exorbitant amounts of greenstone beads and quetzal feathers (*Anales de Tlatelolco* 1948:57; Torquemada 1969:1:158-160).

Meteorology

In relatively recent times, a team led by dendrochronology and paleoclimatology specialists David Stahle and Matthew Therrell has documented a long history of severe droughts in Mesoamerica, by studying the rings of old-growth trees such as Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and *ahuehuete* or Montezuma cypress (*Taxodium mucronatum*) (Therrell et al. 2004; Stahle et al. 2016). It is well known that tree rings document years with lower soil moisture and cooler temperatures, making these plant structures valuable indirect climate indicators of aridity, diminished water levels, and scant agricultural production.

On this scientific basis, the Mexican Drought Atlas¹ was created, which describes the spatial patterns and intensity of soil moisture regimes in the northeast, northwest, southeast, and central parts of the country

¹ <http://drought.memphis.edu/MXDA/>

between 1400 and 2012. This atlas is extremely useful for analyzing climate dynamics over the centuries and corroborating whether they can be linked to historical records of famines, epidemics, migrations, wars, and other social phenomena that afflict civilizations dependent on seasonal rainfed agriculture.

In terms of the topic at hand, the Mexican Drought Atlas incontrovertibly shows that a drought of gigantic proportions took place in central Mexico from 1452 to 1454 and that, after those years of successive crises, there was a recovery around 1455–56. Everything seems to indicate that early summer droughts affected the germination, growth, and flowering of plants prior to the heat wave, while the autumn frosts attacked the maize before it had fully matured. Thus, the concurrence of both phenomena—drought and frost—would have destroyed crops and led to prolonged famine, as corroborated by sixteenth-century documentary sources.

Conclusions

The great drought of the year 1-Rabbit had a devastating impact on the lives of the inhabitants of the Basin of Mexico and its surrounding areas. Archeology, physical anthropology, chemistry, history, and meteorology all bear witness to this disaster of unusual intensity and duration, allowing us to define its main economic, social, and political consequences, namely, famine, disease, plunder, slavery, death, migration, and revolt. At first, the Mexica state exhibited great responsiveness and attempted to mitigate its effects. It opened the royal granaries to redistribute food among the most needy classes, while organizing mass sacrifices of children at the Templo Mayor to appease the wrath of the Tlaloc. For a time, it coped with the tragedy in this manner, but the excessive duration of the crisis made the state vulnerable to Totonac and Coahuilteca opportunism, forcing it to allow the mass exodus of its people.

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A Previously Unpublished Description of El Tajín from 1933 by Helga Larsen (1891–1938)

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In a previous publication in *The PARI Journal*, Helga Larsen's two papers on the Day of the Dead were made available for the first time, almost 90 years after they were written (Nielsen 2024). The present contribution follows up on this initial effort to make Larsen's research and impressions from Indigenous communities and archaeological sites in central Mexico more widely known and accessible. In that previous publication, I presented a condensed biography of Helga Larsen, and I refer the reader to this work for a background on her family, upbringing and her way to Mexico and into Mesoamerican studies (Nielsen 2024:3-7).

As was the case with the two unpublished papers relating to the celebration of the Day of the Dead, a manuscript called "The Sierra," 30 typewritten pages, was discovered in a private archive belonging to Anne-Marie Smith, one of Helga's two surviving grandnieces. However, unlike these previously unseen manuscripts, a copy of a manuscript Helga authored about her trip together with her sister Bodil to El Tajín in 1933 may have been circulating among a narrow circle of friends and colleagues. Thus, while this article was never published, a version found its way to Guy Stresser-Péan (1913–2009) and his wife Claude Stresser-Péan (1929–). They both knew Bodil well and received manuscript copies and notes from her at some point before or after her death. The Stresser-Péans shared Helga and Bodil's deep fascination with the Indigenous cultures of the Sierra del Norte (Figure 1), and in Guy Stresser-Péan's magnum opus on the Christianization process in the region, published in English in the same year he passed away (Stresser-Péan 2009), he included several references to both Helga and Bodil's work, including a 89-page-long typewritten manuscript also called "The Sierra" (Stresser-Péan 2009:585). During correspondence with Claude in spring 2026 it became clear that this is in fact a collection of several manuscripts written between 1933 and 1938, and among them is also the one published here.¹ It should also be mentioned that parts of the section called "Following the Trail of the Dead" in the present article also appears in a separate and almost equally named manuscript (Nielsen 2024:14-21). It has been included here in order to represent the paper as originally envisioned by Larsen, and demonstrates how she worked on various versions, seeking the best format and balance between the topics and experiences described.

We know that by the end of 1934, Helga (Figure 2)

was considering how to share some of her experiences in the northern Sierra in the state of Puebla and Veracruz with an audience—and earn some money from it. In a letter from December 16, she told her friend Elsie McDougall: "I have been writing my notes of my last Sierra trips into a popular article and hope I can sell it. I have lots of excellent photographs but have no idea where to send it to. I have never written for publication and am a bit afraid to start, but I need money so badly because I want to go back to the Sierra in the latter part of January when Bodil has a vacation [...] I cannot write anything of scientific value yet, as I have only skimmed over the surface, but I am taking notes and have a good memory! (Larsen n.d.).² As is apparent from the style of the manuscript with its poetic descriptions of the natural environment and the details of the life on the trails in the mountains and jungles, it was not intended for an academic journal, but presumably for a magazine or some other venue that would provide Helga a much needed addition to her income.

The "Sierra" and the 1933 Expedition to El Tajín

In her manuscript, Helga first sets the stage of the Sierra and its geography, but quickly moves on to the Spanish conquest, and her reflections on the enforced conversion of the Indigenous population, which in her view often led to a religious conflict and "sadly blurred" religious perspectives. This, however, is not what she finds deep

¹ The 89-page manuscript named "The Sierra" is in fact a collection of different papers and letters, quite probably put together by Bodil after Helga's passing away, and there is no indication that Helga herself saw them as a collected whole. The papers are (1) "The Sierra," (2) "The Temple of the Thunderbolt," (3) "Following the Trails of the Dead," (4) "Flying Indians of the Sierra," (5) "San Pablito," (6) "Bark Paper and Witch Dolls," (7) "Santa Ursula," and (8) "Nostalgia," and in addition two letters from Helga (both from 1937). In one of these Helga describes a visit to Xicotepec in 1936, where she "learned that the Dance of the Volador had been abandoned during the past few years but had recently been taken up again after people noticed that the harvest had become less plentiful" (Stresser-Péan 2009:358). The three first papers are identical to the one manuscript published here, except for the final part "Following the Trails of the Dead," to which Helga added five pages describing the return from the Sierra to Mexico City.

² Both Helga Larsen and her sister Bodil Christensen had full-time jobs in Mexico City outside academia. Thus, their field trips and expeditions were carried out mainly on weekends and holidays (see Nielsen 2024).



Figure 1. View of the Sierra from Chahuatlán (ca. 1934–1936). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-2111. © The family of Bodil Christensen.

in the Sierra, where “The earth goddess, who gives the Indian his daily bread, the rain god, who makes corn grow, and the death god who rules in the underworld, are still powerful beings and must be propitiated.”³ Interspersed in the narrative of the first pages are also descriptions from Yucatan and San Pablito in Puebla, making it clear that this is not a paper telling the story of a single trip, but a conglomerate of various trips and observations (including the final part and its focus on the Day of the Dead).

The trip recounted in the section named “The Temple of the Thunderbolt” took place in August 1933, and we can follow the exact dates in Bodil Christensen’s diary (Christensen n.d.). Bodil had been travelling in Yucatan and arrived by train at Oriental in the state of Veracruz on August 6. The following day Helga joined her from Mexico City, and they take the train to Teziutlán, and from there head off northeast to Tlapacoyan—catching a lift on a truck. On August 8 they leave Tlapacoyan on horseback and reach Joloapan later the same day. The next day is not pleasant. They first reach the village of San José Acateno, and then into very difficult terrain, heavy rains and winds, muddy and steep trails. They cross the Tlacolutla River on a ferry “which was really

nothing but a raft with a motor stuck on it” (Christensen n.d.) while remaining mounted on their horses. After additional trials and being on the verge of giving up, they finally make it to Papantla in the northern part of Veracruz. Bodil noted: “Roads awful. Arrived Papantla at 7 PM. Soaked” (Christensen n.d.). Papantla was known for its *voladores* (e.g., Larsen 1937a, 1937b) (Figure 3), but was also the center of Mexico’s vanilla industry, and the town “grows, sells, eats and talks vanilla,” Helga notes, and furthermore that the “The Totonac Indians who live around Papantla are vanilla growers and comparatively well off. The women wear jewelry of gold, and the men are proud of being able to buy the heaviest gold chains for their womenfolks.” On the 10th and 11th, the bad weather prevents them from reaching El Tajín, and they spend the time in local collections and learning about vanilla production.

Then, finally, on August 12, the sky is clear and they can ride the 10 km to the ruins—led by Don Roberto Castañeda. At last they arrive and “The terraced pyramid loomed before us and its multitude of niches gave it a mysterious oriental look.” She provides a lengthy description of the Pyramid of the Niches, the ball court reliefs and the fragments of columns that are laying around. She gives a detailed description of the scene of a human sacrifice in Panel 4 on the South Ball Court: “The face of the victim is a masterpiece of art. The features are strong and Indian and the expression is one

³ See also Ichon 1969; Sandstrom and García Valencia 2005; Stresser-Peán 2009.

of absolute and hopeless surrender. The figures stand out in bold relief and the stone is alive with human suffering.” Helga and Bodil spend the entire day there at El Tajín, but already the following day they begin the return trip, and two days later, on August 15, they are back in Mexico City.

It is not least Helga’s description of El Tajín which is of particular interest from the perspective of Mesoamerican archaeology. In fact, this is one of the earliest careful descriptions of what is now a famous archaeological site, which has been on UNESCO’s world heritage list since 1992. In the mid-1930s few had yet visited, studied or excavated at El Tajín. Agustín García Vega and Ellen Spinden, among others, worked there in the late 1920s and into the 1930s, while more comprehensive later archaeological investigations led by José García Payón would only take place in the 1940s–1950s (see Morante López 2001; Arnold et al. 2008; Koontz 2009:1-13). Helga rightly stated: “No extensive excavations have been carried out [...] and very little has been written about it.” One thing that she notes is the resemblance of the sculptures to those of the Maya area, and she makes a direct comparison with the reliefs from Palenque. Perhaps it was this initial notion that El Tajín might have some kind of cultural relationship to the Maya, that also drew one of the pioneering female



Figure 2. Helga Larsen, ca. 1935–1936. Photo by Bodil Christensen. Private collection. © Anne-Marie Smith.



Figure 3. Voladores at the Parque de Juárez in Papantla (1943). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-4861. © The family of Bodil Christensen.



Figure 4. Tatiana Proskouriakoff in El Tajín in 1945. Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-4975. © The family of Bodil Christensen.

Maya scholars—Tatiana Proskouriakoff - to the site a decade later.

It was Maya archaeologist Edwin Shook (then at the Carnegie Institution of Washington), who suggested to Proskouriakoff to contact Helga's sister, Bodil, who agreed to accompany the Russian-born architect to El Tajín. They set off in 1945, and first travelled by bus to Papantla, riding the last kilometers to the site. Tatiana wrote in her diary: "Tajín left me practically breathless. I never imagined it as such a tremendous site" (Solomon 2002:87, 184, n. 36). The impression was a lasting one and made Tatiana deeply interested in ancient Veracruz, and this would be the one area of Mesoamerica - apart from the Maya—she would publish on at length (e.g., Proskouriakoff 1954, 1971; see also Solomon 2002). It was also on this trip that Bodil photographed Proskouriakoff standing at the base of the Pyramid of the Niches—one of a series of photos from their visit to the site (Figure 4).⁴

The two would remain in contact, and Proskouriakoff visited Bodil again in Mexico City in 1950. In her diary, Tatiana noted on February 26: "She seems to know everything that goes on in Mexico, particularly in archaeology. We had supper together too, and the day seemed short" (quoted in Solomon 2002:107).

Unfortunately, Helga's manuscript does not include a list of photographs she had intended to publish with the text, but the selection that has been chosen to illustrate the present version is mostly from the trip in 1933, supplemented by other photos from the Sierra and from Bodil's subsequent visits to El Tajín in 1943 and 1945.

Acknowledgments

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⁴ This photo also appears on the cover of Char Solomon's biography on Proskouriakoff (Char 2002), although Bodil is not credited with the photo and it is undated. We must assume that Bodil shared a copy with Tatiana who did not note down year or name of the photographer.

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The Sierra

By Helga Larsen

From the hot regions of the coast of Veracruz, the mountains rise in undulating swells. The moisture that blows in from the Gulf of Mexico has cloaked them in an iridescent mantel of ever-green vegetation. Numberless rivers and streams have cut deep gashes along their sides in a hurry to reach the blue waters of the Gulf and heavy rainfalls throughout the year have made this dense virgin forest almost impenetrable. As the first gentle hills lift themselves from the level of the sea, the tropical vegetation little by little changes from palms and graceful vanilla vines to slender bamboos that follow the exotic tree ferns over the rising slopes. Higher up where the tropical winds meet the cool mountain air, coffee and sugar cane thrive among a vegetation of a

more sub-tropical climate, and finally, as the crest of the mountains breaks against the rim of the flat table-land, at an altitude of over seven thousand feet, the silhouette of dark sombre pinetrees is etched against a brilliant sky and straight rows of blue-green magueys march in soldierly order towards a far-flung horizon.

The Sierra de Puebla, as parts of these mountains are called, is a small world within the world which is Mexico. It is a land of mystery and tradition of history and legends of different tribes, languages and customs. Through the southern part of these towering ranges that traverse the states of Puebla and Veracruz from north to south, Cortés passed on his march towards Moctezuma's capital.

Two railways skirt their feet after leaving the State of Veracruz, thus linking the capital with the coast, but they are only slender threads that mean little to the inhabitants of the Sierra, who travel on foot from the highest peaks to the lowlands bartering or selling merchandise. Once in a while the silence of the forest is broken by the hum of the motor of an airplane, but the Indian hardly lifts his eye to the small black speck hurrying past overhead. He accepts it with the same mental remoteness that he accepts everything else that has no direct bearing upon his own existence – and the life of the Sierra goes on unaffected by the outside world and modern civilization with its mechanical wonders, its depression and economical unrest has not yet penetrated to the heart of the forest.

Ancient traditions have managed to survive in many of the villages buried in the vastness of these mountains, thanks to the lofty ranges and deep valleys that have stood like forbidding sentries defending the Indians ever since the reign of cruelty and terror of vandalism and Catholic bigotry, that only too rightly has been identified with Spanish conquests of the Americas, burst into flame in 1519, when Cortés set foot on the soil of Yucatan. Not finding much gold in the poverty stricken peninsula, the conquerors followed the coast to Campeche and crossed to Tabasco, where they first learned about Moctezuma's great and powerful empire and Cortés promptly bid good-bye to the Gulf and from then on hitched his wagon to the glittering star of Mexico.

Although four centuries have passed since Christianity planted its iron-shod heel in the New World and the conquerors with sword and flame forced the Indians to give up their old religion and embrace the Catholic faith, the Indian to-day still clings to many of his old traditions. His ancient gods were wrested from him by force, he was dragged to baptism, made to attend mass and compelled to kneel in front of saints that to him were just strange idols and maybe not so powerful as his own gods that had been worshipped by his race for countless generations. Except for a few pious friars who had come with the conquerors or shortly afterwards

and who in true and sincere Christian love for humanity always tried to lessen the Indian's burden and stand between the conqueror and the conquered, the Spaniards on the whole cared little for the spiritual welfare of the Indian. Having offered him baptism as an alternative to death, the Spanish priests cunningly set about to adapt many of the ancient ceremonies to the catholic religion. Indian dances were allowed in the churches – and never have the Virgin and Christ been more busily engaged in miraculous apparitions than they were in the New World during the sixteenth century, when fortress-like churches rose on the ruins of ancient temples, because the Virgin or Christ were said to have appeared either to the innocent Indian or to the priests themselves. The priests were shrewd and care was always taken to have the Virgin appear where had stood the shrine of the earth goddess or some other female deity and Christ never made the mistake of appearing in any place but where some Aztec god had formerly been worshipped. The Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's Indian patroness, appeared on the hill of Tepeyac near Mexico City, where the temple of the Aztec earth-mother Tonantzin overlooked the valley of Tenochtitlán, now Mexico City. Even to-day the Indians call the Virgin "Tonantzin," which means "Our Venerated Mother," and what they really worship in the dark-skinned Guadalupe is hard to tell. Her starry dress, the flowers at her feet and even the crescent moon in which she stands, are symbols very intimately connected with Tonantzin. Thus with the help of the Catholic priests, the Indian's religious perspectives became sadly blurred and he was caught in the strangling coils of two religions – Pagan and Christian – at war with each other, and as the priests apparently did not always find it worth their while to travel over hard mountain trails to preach the Gospel in far-away villages, the Indian was finally thrown back upon himself to solve the tremendous problem. Is it therefore strange that the age-old faith should rise to the surface of his mind and claim him?

Today, however, there is no religious conflict in the Indian mind. He lives happily in blissful ignorance of what is Catholic and what has been inherited from his ancestors. The problem has been solved effectively by merging the two religions into one and prayers are mumbled in Indian languages with strange invocations to patron saints ensconced on the altars of village churches from where they look down through a film of dust upon the Indians that file in and out of the always open door much as they stroll in and out of the door of their huts. And Indian dancers with plumed head-dresses like Aztec warriors of long ago, chant their songs of praise and perform their rhythmic ritualism in fulfillment of a vow to a dark Madonna.

The Indian has always been and is still deeply religious and in the larger cities is apparently a good Catholic attending mass and dropping his hard-earned

centavos into the ever-ready money box. But what he really thinks, nobody knows. He turns his veiled subtle look on the church and is silent.

In the Sierra and in the deep forest it is different. The seen and unseen forces of nature become deities and are worshipped as such. The earth goddess, who gives the Indian his daily bread, the rain god, who makes corn grow, and the death god who rules in the underworld, are still powerful beings and must be propitiated. On many an altar stone idols are placed next to catholic saints and Indians burn candles and *copal* to both. Sometimes, when the priest has left the church, strange rites take place and clouds of incense rise before idols taken out from their hiding places. Catholic saints and Indian gods are so confused that it is difficult to tell them apart. In a small prayer hut in the bush of Yucatan, I saw an image of San Isidro with all the attributes of Chac, the Maya rain god. And when the cornfields were drying from lack of rain and the Mayas had prayed and said ever so many masses to San Diego, the Patron Saint of the village, I witnessed their ancient rain ceremony Cha-Chac performed by a sorcerer-priest, and strange as it must seem, the next day it poured down! When I asked one of the Mayas why San Diego had failed in bringing rain, he answered, as if the explanation were quite unnecessary:

"Poor San Diego, pobrecito, what does he know about rain! Whenever we need rain, we must go to Chac of course."

Witchcraft is practiced extensively in the villages and every place has its sorcerer or sorceress, who can cure or kill as the saying goes. In an Otomí village in the Puebla mountains, we made friends with a sorceress, who was young and pretty with a ready smile and looked more like a fairy than a witch. She told us many strange things about witchcraft and even gave us a small paper doll made of a native paper beaten out of the bark of a tree called "xalamatl." This paper is used for witchcraft only and is sold on market days in small bundles of about two dozen sheets, five by ten inches in size. The witches are supposed to be able to cast spells on people with these paper dolls. We heard of several cases where they had produced illness even paralysis and death. We were told the story of a Catholic priest who had come to the village to preach against witchcraft and who had fallen victim to a witch and became so ill after returning to his own parish, that he finally decided to send for the "*brujo*" and threatened to give him over to the authorities if he did not cure him. He succeeded in frightening the witch so that he pulled out a small paper doll he had carried inside his shirt and which had been pierced with pins and otherwise mutilated, the doll being the image of the priest. After having destroyed the doll, the priest is said to have recovered. There is a cave somewhere near the same village, where the witches hold black magic ceremonies and so far nobody has been able to follow

them and witness their rites. When there is a drought, the witches gather on the shore of a nearby lagoon and offer paper dolls, live chickens and many other things to the water spirits that dwell in the lake. If the rains are too copious, they do the same thing in order to make them stop! A dead person is buried with a few paper dolls in his hand, which are supposed to help him on his journey to the underworld. And so on, in an infinity of occasions, these little apparently harmless images of paper play their important role in the life of the Indians of the mountains. Personally I believe that the so-called witchcraft mainly consists in a deep knowledge of herbs and medical plants and that the “spells” are worked through this – because the science is as old as the Indian himself.

One rarely sees a purely Catholic service anywhere outside of the larger cities of Mexico. In far-off villages, there is always a faint glimmer of an older religion shining through the Christian rites – a soft echo calling down from other days. So strong was the faith that struck its roots deep in the Indian heart.

The Temple of the Thunderbolt

Indian customs and Indian traditions have always been of such interest to my sister and myself that no hardship has frightened us and no sacrifice has been too great to follow the slender trail to the ruins of an ancient temple or a rumor of a fiesta or ceremony in a far-off village. Long hours in the saddle on steep mountain paths and longer nights on a mat in a hut where even the simplest cot would be unheard of luxury, are part of the price we have paid to see things that few are allowed to witness.

For years we have travelled together through Mexico whenever we have been able to snatch enough days from our regular work and carefully planning each trip, we have been able to cram a whole Indian world into our life in this marvelous country.

We always travel alone. It is difficult to find congenial companions who are willing to put up with the absolute lack of all the comforts they are used to, who can eat the food the Indians eat and live like they do (which is so very essential if any information is to be obtained), who will not mind riding for hours in pouring rain and creep into wet clothes day after day. And there we are happiest when we are alone on the trail and laugh at all the discouraging pictures – ranging from bandits to snakebites – that all our well-meaning friends conjure up for us. And so far through the years we have been roaming through Mexico, we have never once had a disagreeable experience, never heard a discourteous word. On the contrary, we have always met with the utmost hospitality from rich and poor alike and made friendships that have withstood the wear of time.

Of all Mexico the Sierra of Puebla and Veracruz hold a greater fascination for us than any other place and we

have crossed these towering ranges from north to south and from east to west.

The picturesque town of Teziutlán, which nestles among the hills in the north-eastern part of the State of Puebla almost on the border of Veracruz, was our starting point when we set out on our first trek through the Sierra in search of the pyramid El Tajín, which is the Totonac word for Thunderbolt.

Perched high on a truck, we covered the first 25 miles of our journey. A wonderful highway sweeps down through sharp hairpin curves from the apple orchards of Teziutlán to the banana groves of Tlapacoyan. Dense forests of tree ferns towered above us and a faint silver sheen at the very edge of the horizon marked the glittering waters of the Gulf.

Tlapacoyan is a curious little town. Primeval woods press in around it and the houses run irregularly down the slope towards a deep river that flows past under its canopy of bamboo trees. It is a town that stamps itself on your memory on account of its exuberant vegetation. The houses are buried up to the eaves in flowering vines and small fenced-in gardens with pink and dark red hibiscus flank the narrow streets. Clay pots with orchids, roses and sturdy geraniums hang on every wall and even the fence posts seem overflowing with life and send forth long fresh green branches.

At daybreak our horses were saddled and we left Tlapacoyan still asleep behind its closed wooden shutters – although I fancy that many black eyes were peeping at us through the blinds and watched us as we rode out of town.

A few miles ahead a thick wall of vegetation rose like a barricade in front of us. At closer inspection, this apparently impenetrable forest was only a fringe of trees on the banks of the Maria de la Torre River and after having crossed its murky stream, we found ourselves on a rolling plain that followed the curves of the river. Soon, however, the path left the river and struck into the forest again. Palms and bamboo trees hugged the trails on both sides and tropical giants, that rise to a hundred feet in height towered over us. Strange flowers glowed under a screening fence of leaves and a network of lianas clung to the tree-trunks and burst into a flame of purple flowers above the highest branches.

When we arrived at San José A[ca]teno, where we had planned to stop for lunch, it rained. At first a soft drizzle which soon, however changed to a fierce storm. A north wind was blowing in the Gulf and a “norte” means rain in the mountains. There was nothing to do but to go on – hoping that it would clear. It did not. On the contrary, the rain settled down to a steady cloudburst and wind-driven fog trailed over the treetops.

From the village of San José A[ca]teno, we rode for hours through flooded valleys and over rocky hills. It was a hazardous trip as the narrow path was deep in mud. The horses plunged in to half up their legs and

struggled on, slipping and skidding in the sucking mud.

We passed no villages and only here and there with miles between, tiny huts stood in a small clearing with patches of milpas and banana fields between.

Towards nightfall, we arrived at a tobacco plantation, where put up for the night. The next day dawned hopelessly grey and a strong wind whipped the rain against the mountains.

It was impossible to continue our journey through the valley, we were informed, and for a moment we almost decided to turn back – but the prospect of going back was as discouraging as going ahead and when we heard that we might have a chance of getting through by taking a trail that climbed over the crest of the mountains, thus avoiding the slimy marsh of the valleys, we started off again.

The mountains we were supposed to scale stood directly in our path, grim and almost vertical, but it was our only choice. If we wanted to see the Pyramid of the Thunderbolt, the way lay over this rocky wall.

Slowly the horses worked their way up the steep path and it was like riding up a waterfall. The roar and swish of water was all around us, pouring down from the sky, rushing under our feet and rising up through the soaked muddy earth.

Up, up and up rose the trail in steep zigzag curves. Below us the endless miles of forest swayed under the beating rain and Juluápan [Joloapan], the tobacco plantation, became a mere blurred dot in the infinite space of green and presently disappeared in the grey mist of rain.

At last we reached the summit and the trail sloped steeply downward towards the great sweep of the Tlacolutla River. Down, down and down now went the trail and it was worn into deep furrows by the cattle that had been driven over it. Our horses were almost exhausted but struggled gamely on, measuring each step to the width of the furrows.

At noon we reached the turbid yellow river. A straggling settlement of bamboo huts with steep palm-thatched roofs, stood on the high muddy bank. Here and there narrow paths were worn through the earth and led down to the river where slender canoes were tied to their posts. Brown naked children were playing in the water and paying no attention to the rain, and dripping wet buzzards sat in motionless rows on the roofs.

We lunched on scrambled eggs and beans in one of the huts, while we were waiting for the ferry to return from the opposite shore. Our clothes were soaked in spite of “mangas,” which are large squares of rubber with a slit for the head. But in so many hours of heavy rain, even a manga is not sufficient to keep one dry. Our boots were water-logged and uncomfortable, but the scrambled eggs with a generous sprinkling of hot pepper sauce were good and presently we heard the

asthmatic sputtering of a motor and the ferry, which was really nothing but a raft with a motor stuck on it, made port by gently burying the prow in the soft mud of the bank. We rode our horses out on it and without dismounting were carried across the Tlacolutla River.

In front of us stretched what seemed to be an endless lake with bare leafless trees stretching ghostly gnarled arms out of the water.

“Follow the telegraph line,” advised the boatman, and we did, as there was nothing else to follow. Not a hut, nor a sign of human life – only water and water and knee-deep mud, sticky like chewing gum. Then, just as we were certain that we had lost all sense of direction and were riding around in circles, a small village, so to speak, rose from the water. “Agua Dulce”, Sweet Water, it was called and it was well named, as one would never wish to see more sweet – and one might add muddy – water anywhere in the world.

“Be careful of the river – don’t try to cross it,” cried the Indians.

A short distance from Agua Dulce, an otherwise peaceful stream had been churned into a swift flowing raging torrent, about thirty feet deep.

To stay in Agua Dulce maybe for days was out of the question. It was raining hard and the afternoon was well on towards sunset. We were almost at our wit’s end when two young strong-looking Indians came to the rescue and offered to swim our horses over. We gladly accepted and promptly unstrapped our baggage, saddles and all our other belongings.

The boys walked upstream for a few hundred yards and fearlessly threw themselves into the rushing current holding on to the frightened animals. The horses were terror-mad but the boys skillfully steered them across the turbulent waters and landed far below the place where they were supposed to be. In the meantime we had carried the baggage over by balancing across a frail slippery bridge woven of a few bamboo trunks, and we tried hard not to look at the river below that foamed and roared down a deep gorge. Luckily the river at Agua Dulce was our last obstacle and only a short ride over another muddy road was left. Well after dark we entered Papantla and the small comfortless hotel seemed like the most luxurious place in the world. A bowl of hot soup sent the blood tingling through our cold numbed limbs – then everything faded into blackness as sleep claimed us.

The days spent in Papantla, in the northern part of the State of Veracruz, and the center of the vanilla industry, were worth any sacrifice. The town is picturesque and tropical with crooked streets and tiled roofs. The small clan of rich merchants and professional people that always forms the solid upper class of all provincial towns in Mexico, received us hospitably and seemed surprisingly pleased that we should have ventured so far just to see their town and pyramid.

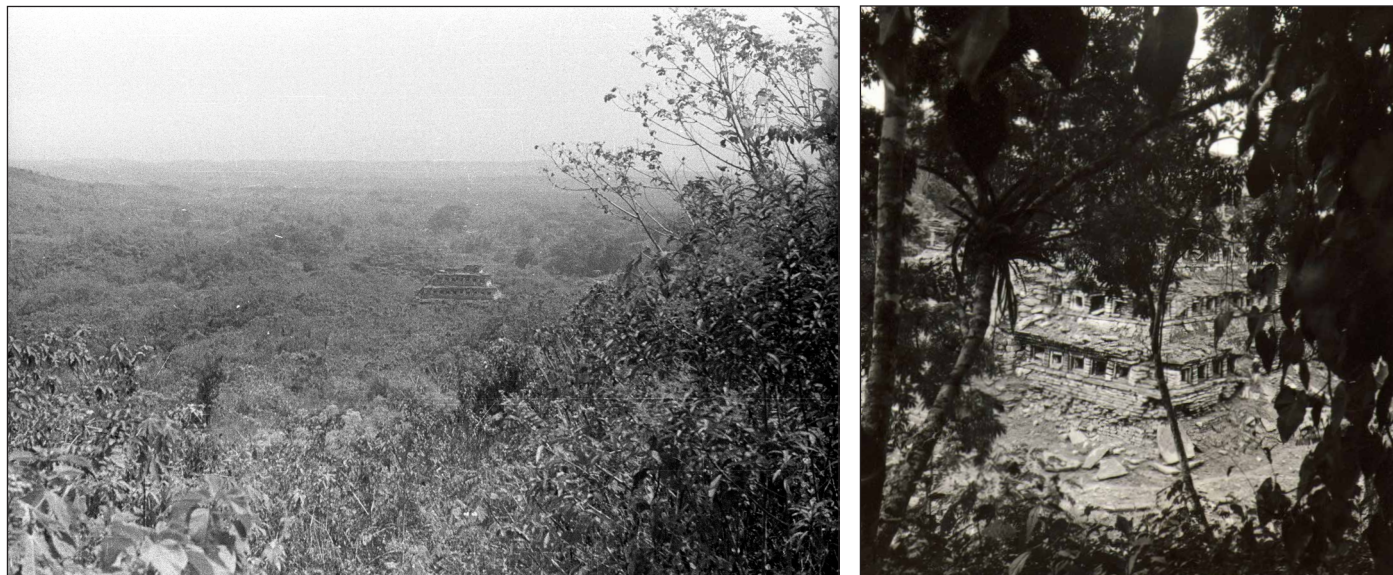


Figure 5. Views of El Tajín and the Pyramid of the Niches. Photos by Bodil Christensen (1943 and 1933). Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-4614 and RV-A173-6214. © The family of Bodil Christensen.

The Totonac Indians who live around Papantla are vanilla growers and comparatively well off. The women wear jewelry of gold and the men are proud of being able to buy the heaviest gold chains for their womenfolk. On Sunday they flock to Papantla for the market, and the women's white dresses and spotless *quechquemiltl*, a sort of shoulder cape worn by almost all Mexican Indian women, set off the brilliant flowers they are so fond of braiding into their hair. They came barefooted along the muddy roads, their white skirts carefully tucked up – proud and straight and balancing large painted bowls on their sleek, black heads.

Papantla grows, sells, smells, eats and talks vanilla and it was interesting to see the slender vine twine around the trees in the forest. Mexico is the home of vanilla, which was first brought to Europe by the Spanish Conquerors. It still grows wild in the forests of Veracruz, but has also been cultivated to the extent that the Indians must fertilize the blossom by carrying the pollen from one blossom to another, which is quite a task considering the density of the forest and the height of the vine. Once a year the vine sends forth its large white wax-like blossoms which curiously enough only bloom in the festoons that droop between the trees and never where the vine twines around the tree trunk. When the vanilla bean is full grown but still green, it is picked and taken to Papantla, where it is sold by weight. Someone told us that the Indians weigh their vanilla by purchasing a kilo of coffee and using that as a unit. But the store-keepers are not always as honest as they should be and rarely give the Indians full weight – hence great difficulties arise regarding the number of kilos to be sold when the vanilla is brought to town. And

some store-keepers now after much bitter experience, carefully ask the Indians whenever they buy coffee, if it is for drinking or for weighing, and if it is for the latter, they give full measure!

In Papantla the vanilla is cured for several months by placing it in the sun and in ovens to ripen. It turns a rich black and is coated with crystalized sugar, and is finally packed in tins and shipped to the United States.

After several days of patient waiting, the clouds finally lifted and the day dawned clear and blue.

It was exactly a week after we had left Mexico City when we set out on the last lap of our journey. The Pyramid of El Tajín stands in a dense tropical forest about seven miles west of Papantla and we were accompanied by Don Roberto, to whom we had a letter of introduction and who had lived practically his whole life in Papantla and knew much about the things that interest us.

The forest soon became so impenetrable that even Don Roberto lost his way. We tried to follow every trail that seemed to lead in the direction of where the pyramid ought to be, until finally, with the help of a Totonac Indian, we stumbled onto the right path and suddenly the rugged structure of El Tajín rose from the semi-gloom of the jungle (Figure 5). The terraced pyramid loomed before us and its multitude of niches gave it a mysterious, oriental look. The Totonac Indians, supposed descendants of the builders of El Tajín and who still live in the forest surrounding it, know nothing of their ancient history. They pass by the foot of the pyramid and glance with no glimmer of recollection at its tiers of niches.

The pyramid is constructed out of a light gray basalt



Figure 6. The Pyramid of the Niches, El Tajín. Photo by Bodil Christensen (1933). Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-6209. © The family of Bodil Christensen.

stone and is composed of seven receding terraces. On the front side only five terraces can be seen, as the first one is still buried in the ground and the last one is completely destroyed (Figure 6). The stones are carefully cut and fitted, some of the larger ones supporting the corners are beautifully bevelled. All four sides are adorned with niches, the number of which decreases with three on each successive terrace, thus giving the structure the usual truncated conical shape

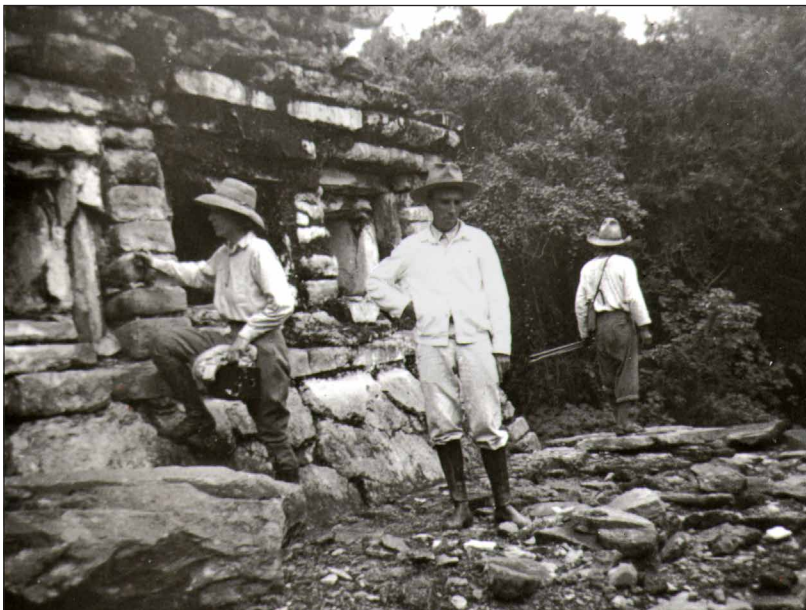


Figure 7. Helga, presumably Don Roberto Casteñeda, and an unidentified Totonac on the Pyramid of the Niches. Photo by Bodil Christensen (1933). Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-6213. © The family of Bodil Christensen.

of all Mexican pyramids. No trace is left of the temple that once crowned the lofty summit. A sort of platform, formed by the protruding cornice of each terrace, makes it possible to walk around the entire pyramid on all the different levels – and if the niches, as many seem to believe, once upon a time contained idols, rites were probably performed on these platforms in front of them (Figure 7).

A broad stairway, facing east, leads to the top, and nine niches, smaller than the ones adorning the pyramid, are placed there and three at intervals on these stairs. The steps are steep and narrow and fashioned for the close grip of sandalled feet.

Ruins of many other buildings, fragments of walls and traces of stairways were hidden among the trees. To the south, rows of exquisitely carved stones were placed in parallel lines running east-west (Figure 8). Many of these stones were more than nine feet long by thirty inches high and flanked high mounds not yet excavated. The quality of the stone is hard, smooth and finely grained and the sculpture is done in an exceedingly precise and elegant manner, that reminds one of the Maya sculptures in Yucatan. Armed warriors with plumed head-dresses march along in solemn processions and the sinuous curves of feathered serpents speak of Quetzalcoatl, the most important deity of the Toltec and Maya pantheon and later adopted by the Aztecs. Many of the scenes are not confined to one stone alone but extend over two or three large monoliths placed on top of one another. Few of them, however, are now in their original position but lie scattered under the trees.

The most dramatic sculpture is the scene of a human sacrifice carved on three stones of which only two are in place. The scene of sacrifice is pictured exactly as related by ancient chroniclers and painted in the codices. The stone resting on the ground is carved with a frieze of the beautiful design of interlaced feathers, that is found on almost every object considered Totonac (Figure 9). On the second and third stones are four human beings. To the right a chieftain is sitting on a low pyramidal chair. He is richly attired and adorned with precious jewels and flowing plumes. In his hand he holds a scepter. In front of him stands the priest about to perform the dreadful rite. His body bends forward in a free and natural pose and in his uplifted hand he holds the terrible sacrificial stone knife. The victim is half sitting half

lying on a low stool, his head flung back and the curve of his chest lifted towards the sacrificial knife. A second priest is standing behind him holding his arms firmly and forcing his body backwards. The face of the victim is a masterpiece of art. The features are strong and Indian and the expression is one of absolute and hopeless surrender. The figures stand out in bold relief and the stone is alive with human suffering.

To the north of the pyramid, numberless sections of circular pillars, more than three feet in diameter, were strewn on the ground. (Figure 10) Deep carvings covered every inch of their surface. Once upon a time they were supporting roofs or buildings that have entirely disappeared and today not one pillar is standing.

Near this group stands a large irregular stone, partly destroyed, but the carving is still beautifully clear. Two personages are rendering homage to a tree on top of a mountain. Again a great resemblance to the Maya sculpture is evident, and one cannot help but see a deep fundamental likeness between this scene and the much larger sculpture from the Old Maya Empire called the Cross of Palenque, which is now in the National Museum of Mexico, where two figures are making offering to the Tree of Life (Figure 11).

No extensive excavations have been carried out since the pyramid was uncovered /?/ years ago and very little has been written about it. Perhaps future scientific investigations will unravel its history and prove the hypothesis of a Mexican archaeologist, that the number of niches in a mysterious way should correspond to a certain number of synodical revolutions of the planet Venus as well as to the solar calendar and that El Tajín was built for some cosmogonic cult, and like many other Mexican pyramids is a plastic representation of an astronomical phenomenon.

The extension covered by the ruined city must have been vast and its inhabitants counted by the thousands – but everything has been forgotten. During the years following the conquest, the arrogant invaders were far too busy destroying the Indian civilization to delve into its history, and numerous hieroglyphic manuscripts were burned in zealous fanaticism without the least thought of their valuable contents. But although no records have come down



Figure 8. Bodil photographing Panel 2 of the South Ball Court in El Tajín. Photo by Helga Larsen (1933). Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-6228. © The family of Bodil Christensen.

to us of the intense life that once throbbed inside these crumbled walls, one somehow feels the presence of the people that centuries ago created these palaces – their shadows seem to haunt the places where they lived and dreamed, hoped and died – where wars were fought and mighty gods held sway.

Strange thoughts come to one at contemplating Mexico's marvelous ruins – deserted silent temples, dead cities and palaces of forgotten rulers. Mute manifestations of the many different races,



Figure 9. Panel 4 of the South Ball Court in El Tajín with scene showing human sacrifice. Photo by Bodil Christensen (1933). Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-6227. © The family of Bodil Christensen.



Figure 10. Stack of column fragments, including Building Columns Sculptures 2 and 4. Photo by Bodil Christensen (1943). Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-4612. © The family of Bodil Christensen.

whose descendants now make up the country we call Mexico and whose history and past we strive to learn.

The gleaming white cities of Yucatan, the temples of Palenque, the fortresses of Monte Alban, the strong massive buildings of Mitla, and the mysterious pyramid of El Tajín were all for some unknown reason abandoned, and the forest, held in check for centuries by the sheer force of man, crept stealthily back and in a rising tide swept the shining cities with their towering pyramids and painted temples into a sea of oblivion. The magnificent buildings were slowly smothered in the steady swell of the forest. All contours were lost. Time gnawed at the very root of massive masonry. Lintels rotted away and one by one the carved pillars and strong walls came crashing down. Trees and flowers threaded a green embroidery over the gray surface. The sacred cities disappeared – lost in the bottomless sea of centuries. In the minds of their people, memory faded – gallant deeds, art and craft paled and were forgotten.

“Ya es hora, it is time to go,” Don Roberto’s voice seemed to come from another world and sounded so strangely out of place (Figure 12).

The sun had swung towards the west and shadows were already creeping up the stairs. The stillness of the forest was profound. No chirping of birds broke through the silence, none of all the happy noises that hum through the forest during the day. Nature stood silent waiting for dusk, and the noises of night had not yet commenced. It was indeed time to go. Unwillingly we mounted our horses. The pyramid lay flushed under the slanting rays of a late afternoon sun, palpitating with life – and yet all was dead, only stone and faded colors. It was as if Time had marched gaily along and then suddenly halted and stopped forever the motion of Life.

Only one thing was alive: the Forest. With a sullen savage strength it pressed in around the pyramid and in silent passion embraced the carved warriors that stared at us with stony eyes as we passed them on our way and filled us with an ancient mysterious fear, as if dark

heathen blood were stirring under the ashen pallor.

Then the last ray of the setting sun fell like a drawn sword among the deep-fluted trunks and the forest rung down her impenetrable green curtain and shut out the Temple of the Thunderbolt – blotting it out as if it had never existed.

Following the Trail of the Dead

It was the last day of October and all the villages of Mexico were getting ready for the Feast of the Dead – and we were deep in the mountains, riding towards Quetzalan in the southeastern part of the Sierra.

Every hut along the road was busy raising altars with *ofrendas* or offerings, which is the custom throughout Mexico on All Saints Day. The first of November is dedicated to the souls of children and second to the adults.

The altars were bowers of flowers, mostly the “*cempoalxochitl*,” which is the Aztec word for the Calendula or double marigold, and which is the flower of death in Mexico. Garlands of this deep orange colored flower were draped over images of favorite saints and hung in loops from the ceilings and trailed along the floors. Tamales, bread, cooked vegetables, sweets, bunches of different fruits and other delicacies that had been dear to the heart of the departed ones, were heaped high on the altars with the Indian’s unerring sense of color, and the entire family, even tiny babies, were to keep the vigil through the night.

Paths of yellow petals were strewn from the road to the huts, beginning with a cross also of petals: “*El Camino de las Animas*,” “The Path of the Spirits” they are called and supposed to guide the souls to their former homes. The road itself had been swept and stone carefully removed, so that the spirits should not stumble and hurt themselves in their nocturnal wandering.

After two days and two nights of watch, during which the dead are supposed to have visited their worldly abodes and partaken in the feast by smelling the food set out for them, the living make merry and gorge themselves with all the delicacies prepared with such love for the dead. This part of the feast is called “to raise the offering” and every stranger or friend passing the hut must be invited in and given food. And we,

who in curiosity followed many paths of yellow petals, were feasted and lived like queens on spicy tamales, fruit and delicious bread for many days of our journey. It is a beautiful fiesta with all the wistful sadness that makes Indian ceremonies so sincere.

Every little altar along the road, where the weary traveller is supposed to rest for a moment protected by the guiding spirit, was heaped with yellow flowers and burning candles. On the cemetery the graves were adorned with more yellow and purple flowers and small wax tapers. All rubbish had been swept away and crowds of Indians filed in and out day and night. Death to the Indian has not the final quality as to us, it is rather a part of life and accepted philosophically.

We spent the night of November first on a mountain top in a hospitable hut where sweet tamales for the little souls were steaming in large clay pots and the crisp brown "pan de muerte," "bread of the dead," was taken from bee-hive ovens one reads about in fairy tales. Every member of the family was hurrying to get ready for the vigil and as the sun swooped down behind the forest, all the villages of the mountains had opened their doors to receive their dead.

While we were eating our sketchy supper on a bench outside the hut that overlooked the deep ravines through which we had just ridden and the towering mountains that rolled away towards the horizon, the light waned quickly and a sudden coolness rose from the valley. The forest breathed a grey vapor that clung to the mountain tops and dimmer and dimmer grew the shadowy trees until darkness shrouded the world. Then suddenly the mist disappeared and the sky was clear again with myriads of stars that seemed to shoot trembling beams into the velvet night. Great bats flitted past on noiseless wings and weird sounds rose from the forest – faint noises of the strange intense life that is heard but seldom seen in the woods. A flutter of birds seeking shelter for the night, a soft swishing of branches as some animal was prowling through the night, and in the vast solitude of the Sierra, voices dropped to a whisper and one felt that Nature was an actual force full of mystery and hostility to man. The air was filled with a heavy scent of flowers that had released their fragrances in the cool night air. Somewhere in the darkness our horses were munching corn in their slow deliberate way.

A shaft of light fell from the open door of the hut, beckoning the wandering souls of small children to enter. The *señora* and her two grown daughters were sitting on the floor in front of the altar making *tamales* for the souls of the grown-ups, wrapped the snow-white *masa* or cornmeal around a piece of chicken meat, and dapped a spoonful of red pepper sauce on it, for while the *tamales* for the children are sweet, the ones for the big souls are spicy and hot with chile and herbs – and finally it was all folded into dried corn husks and placed in the *olla* to steam. They worked silently without many words

and the flickering lights from the colored *veladores* on the altar played on their serious brown faces. During the first night of watch no candles are used, as the children are supposed to be more fond of the small brightly colored *veladores* or lamps where a burning wick floats in oil, but for the second night, the altar is aflame with candles for the grown-ups.

Our room was a barn-like shed with one chair and bed made of a board on trestles, but we rolled up in our blankets, used our saddles for pillows and slept soundly through the long hours of night.

It was still dark when our mozo called us, but a penetrating chill in the air told us that dawn was not far off. The horses were soon saddled and the luggage securely fastened behind and with an *adios* to our host, who was the only one around, as the family had retired to sleep after the watch, we started down the trail.

In the first grey light of the new day the world lay wrapped in fog and heavy dewdrops fell from leaves and boughs. The horses were frisky in the cool morning air and set off at a lively pace.

Little by little a red glow spread over the east and flights of birds – black against the flaming dawn – were



Figure 11. Panel 1 from the Pyramid of the Niches, El Tajín. Photo by Bodil Christensen (1933). Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-6234. © The family of Bodil Christensen.



Figure 12. Helga at the Pyramid of the Niches, El Tajín. Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-6221. © The family of Bodil Christensen.

winging their way to their feeding grounds, and as the sun rose above the rim of the forest, its ruddy light lit up the world and threw a halo of gold around the towers of the church of Nauzontla and its small houses that grouped themselves irregularly over the mountainside.

The town of Nauzontla was still asleep and seemed entirely deserted by humanity when we dismounted on the plaza and announced our arrival by knocking loudly on the door of the house of the *Presidente Municipal*. After a while, voices were heard inside and with the scraping noise of heavy bolts being pushed back, the door swung open and a fat pleasant-looking woman bade us enter. The *Presidente* was still in the land of dreams, she informed us, but if we would like a cup of coffee, he would probably be awake by the time we had finished. Nothing in the world sounded more tempting than hot coffee and we accepted gratefully. An embroidered cloth was spread over the table on the balcony overlooking the *barranca* and a delicious breakfast of coffee, milk and “pan de muerto” made the world still brighter and by the time the *Presidente* arrived on the scene, we were ready for anything. Like all the *presidentes* we have ever come in contact with, this one was eager to help us with

information and following his advice, we continued our journey, so as not to miss the fiesta in Cuetzalan.

The freshness of the morning had already disappeared and the sun had won a final victory over the fog and shone from a cloudless sky. The steaming earth breathed an aroma of moist loam and growing living things and the path led us down through many curves until the steep roofs of Cuetzalan were seen far off shimmering in the light.

Cuetzalan is built on a sloping mountain so that the narrow cobbled streets are like the stairs of an ancient pyramid. The town is extremely picturesque with one-story old world houses, but its most striking feature is the sun-bleached tile roofs that protrude far over the streets and give the town a weird irregular look, but offer absolute shelter during the heavy rains, so that one can walk through town without getting wet even in the worst downpour. Cuetzalan is about two thousand feet above the sea level and the climate is quite tropical.

We had a letter of introduction to Don Luis, whom we found in his large spacious house just at the corner of the plaza. He glanced over the letter and with the courtesy of all Mexico offered us his house and told us that any friend of Don Vicente’s (who had written the letter) was a friend of his. He called his wife and after the usual general introduction and polite murmurings, we all settled into the stiff embrace of old fashioned plush chairs, that seemed a bit out of place in such a warm climate.

Don Luis clapped his hands and a young Indian girl appeared with a tray containing a bottle of cognac and glasses and we were urged to have a *copita* (small drink), as nothing was better for you after a long hot ride than a glass of cognac – so said our host.

Don Luis was no ordinary man. His manners, though casual, were those of a Mexican *caballero*. He was dressed in the picturesque charro costume of the Mexican horsemen and probably passed most of his life in the saddle. He was apparently a man of means and owned large extensions of land, many thousand heads of cattle and a store in which was sold everything necessary to life in a town like Cuetzalan. His three children were attending school in Mexico City, and he and his wife had made several trips both to the States and to Europe.

When we told him that we were anxious to visit the ruins of Yohualichan, he sent a boy to fetch his friend Don Pepe, who, he assured us, would be delighted to take us.

Don Pepe’s large figure soon loomed in the doorway and his booming voice acknowledged the introduction. He was a man much older than Don Luis, straightforward and frank in his manner and spoke *nahuatl*, which is the ancient Aztec language, as well as Spanish.

As it was decided that we should leave almost

immediately so as to be able to return for the fiesta in the cemetery, we rushed to the hotel, swallowed a light lunch and told our boy to saddle the horses.

Yohualichan, which means the “dwelling of night” is a pyramid very similar to El Tajín, but smaller and more destroyed. In fact we found it entirely covered with a thick growth of vegetation and Don Pepe told us that the Indians clean it once a year and plant their corn on the terraces! It looked somehow more ancient than El Tajín and the niches were more crudely constructed. No sculptured stones were to be found, but many untouched mounds surround a sort of grand plaza presided over by the pyramid. It looked sadly forlorn and forgotten, and indeed it is.

Two hours’ ride from Yohualichan would have taken us into the State of Veracruz and the mountains towering behind us seemed suddenly to disintegrate and lose themselves in the undulating plains that swept before us towards the coast of the Gulf, some fifty miles distant. The landscape was very tropical and feathery bamboo trees and slender palms waved over bright green fields of sugar cane.

On our way back to Cuetzalan we overtook many Indians going to the fiesta in the cemetery. Don Pepe knew them all and called to them in nahuatl and their musical answer drifted back to us flecked with bursts of laughter. They gave us a swift appraising glance that seemed to take us in from head to feet – which indeed it did, according to letters we have later received from Don Pepe, telling us that many of the Indians had come to see him just to ask about us. Who were we? Why were we dressed as men? Why did we ride astride and not sideways as other women? Were we *Analtencas* (which means “from the other side of the water”)? How big was the ocean and how did one come across it? Was it possible to cross in a canoe? Did we raise corn over there? And many other questions that were not so easy for Don Pepe to answer.

As soon as we returned to Cuetzalan we hurried to the cemetery. A colorful life ebbed and flowed through the gate. The church, which stands at the far end of the graveyard, is a miniature of the famous shrine in France and its graceful spire is studded with rows of brown clay ollas that shine in the sun like burnished copper. Inside, it was aglow with candles that threw fugitive shadows over the whitewashed walls and drew a shining web of gold around the kneeling figures. Outside in the cemetery, the graves were a riot of color. Indian girls sat in silent prayers on the tombs of their dear ones, while the men were busy watering the flowers and lighting more candles. The women were dressed in white or dark-blue skirts, not cheap machine-made cotton, but finely woven by hand. The skirt was drawn tightly around the hips and all the fullness gathered into deep pleats in front, which gave a singular graceful rhythm to their walk. A bright girdle held it in place. A white

quechquemitl, also hand-woven and as fine as cobweb, fell over the shoulders and covered a gaily embroidered blouse. The blouse is worn only at fiestas, and during ordinary days the *quechquemitl* takes its place and the warm brown curve of throat and breast gleams through its lace-like folds. The hair was piled high on the head and interwoven with black and bright-colored wool in such quantities that it stood out in front of their foreheads in thick heavy coils which made them look like Japanese Geishas, but which is probably meant to give shade. No rebozo or shawl is used in this part of the country and the women enter the church with uncovered heads or with a *quechquemitl* folded cornerwise and placed on top of the elaborate coiffure. The whole dress is absolutely pre-Cortesian, with straight lines such as was the custom before the art of cutting material was brought over from Europe.

During the hours of the afternoon the cemetery grew brighter with colors and looked like a page torn from a picture book. Many of the Indians had brought their dinner and camped comfortably on large tombstones or spread their food on the brilliant carpet of flowers. As dusk took possession of the land, the candles flamed with increased intensity and crosses that had gleamed so white during the day now loomed black and sinister against a crimson sunset.

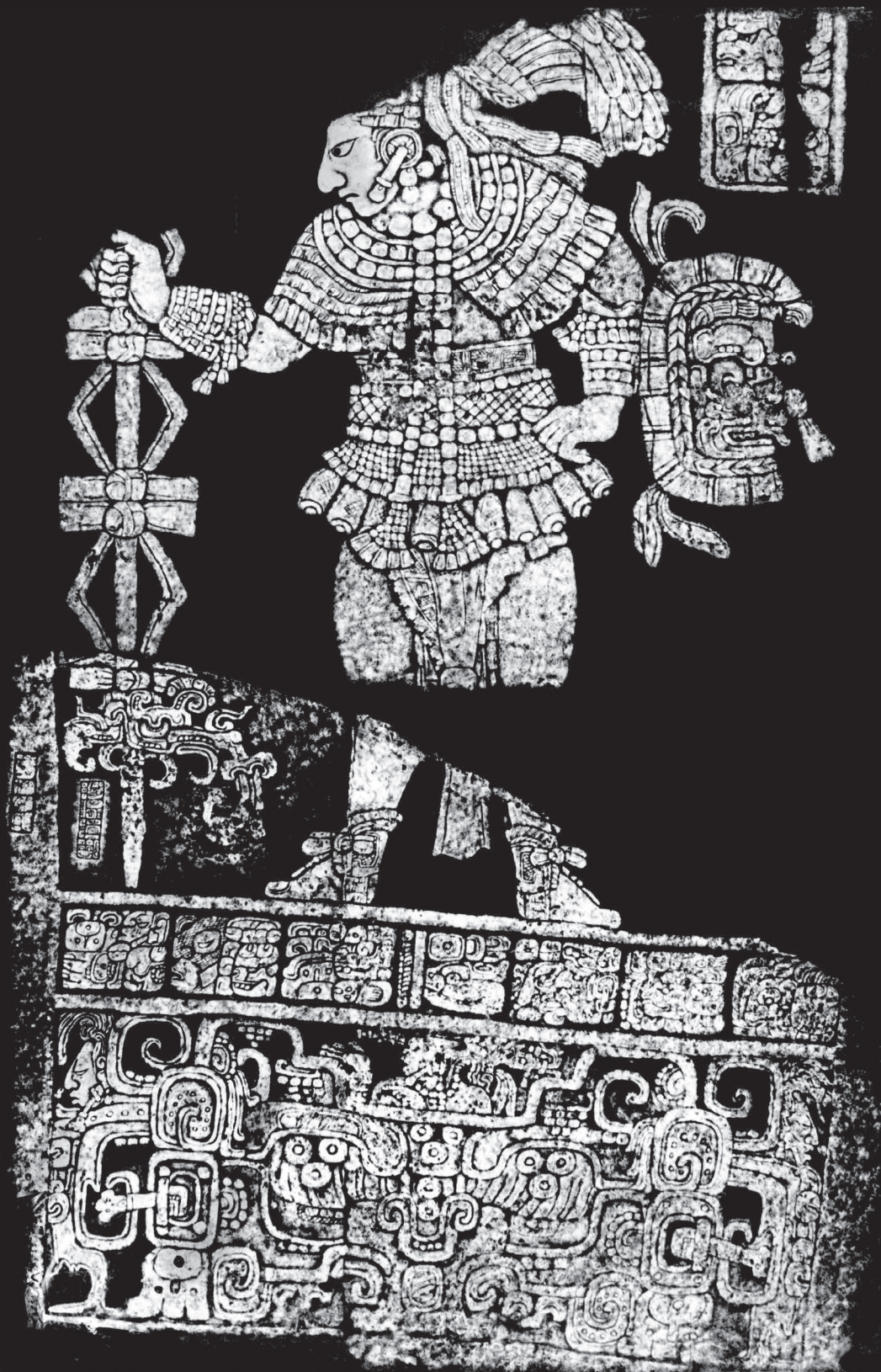
Late in the night, Indian dancers with tinkling bells on wrists and ankles paid their tribute to the dead and wove their intricate steps among the graves to the deep notes of a drum and the shrill anguished tune of a reed flute. We watched them in the first pale hours of dawn and their fantastic costumes, red masks, brilliant green plumes and blazing shields, on which was painted a very Europeanized image of the sun, made them indeed look like spirits from another world. Were they warriors of the sun dancing in the silent night to the honor of Mictlantecuhtli, Lord of the Underworld. Maybe. Who knows? The Indians themselves did not seem to know – or would not tell.

As the sun slanted its first golden rays over the tombs, the dancers filed into the church to attend the mass – again this startling mixture of Pagan and Christian rites.

After mass, the cemetery once more glowed with the colorful throng of Indians – homewardbound. The road that led from Cuetzalan to the mountains was dotted with moving figures returning to their villages to take up again the chores and duties of their daily life.

The Feast of the Dead was finished.

As the coolness of the morning gave way to the stifling heat of the tropical day, the small cemetery lay again deserted under the flagellating rays of the sun, its silent inhabitants sweltering in death as they had done in life. But the flowers on the graves, now drooping and wilted, marked the places of those whose memory was still cherished in the hearts of friends.



Bonampak Stela 1. Rubbing by Merle Greene Robertson.



Figure 1. Detail (maize god) from Bonampak Stela 1.
Rubbing by Merle Greene Robertson.



Detail of Bonampak Stela 2.
Rubbing by Merle Greene Robertson.