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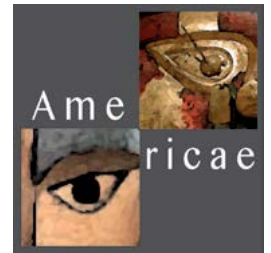
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# Auto-sacrifice at Teotihuacan

Claude-François BAUDEZ †

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Bloodletting, together with a variable amount of pain, was probably common practice in most of Mesoamerica, well before the beginnings of Teotihuacan. A mural painting from Tlacuilapaxco shows priests presenting or offering maguey spines planted into a thick layer of vegetal material. The maguey spine is one of the recorded glyphs at La Ventilla. In the Portico 2 murals from Tepantitla, a recurrent motive is interpreted as a vessel containing plants used in self-sacrificial rituals. This hypothesis is confirmed at Atetelco where the motive is constantly associated with spiny plants used in penitential rites as well as with weapons such as knives and arrowheads. Together, they define an environment close to the *huitztlampa* of the Aztecs identified as the south direction at the time of the Conquest. The use of maguey spines in penitential rites was not only due to their technical properties as sacrificial instruments, it also made the penitents participate in a universe of war, sacrifice and death, foreshadowing future developments in Postclassic Central Mexico.

Key word: auto-sacrifice, bloodletting, rituals, iconography, instruments, glyphs, war, death, Teotihuacan.

## El auto-sacrificio en Teotihuacan

*La sangría infligida a sí mismo con más o menos dolor era práctica corriente en la mayor parte de Mesoamérica, mucho antes de los principios de Teotihuacan. Un mural en Tlacuilapaxco enseña sacerdotes presentando u ofreciendo espigas de maguey clavadas en una espesa capa vegetal. La espina de maguey es uno de los glifos pintados sobre un piso de La Ventilla. En los murales del Pórtico 2 de Tepantitla, un motivo recurrente es interpretado como una vasija que contiene plantas asociadas al ritual de auto-sacrificio. Esta hipótesis se confirma en Atetelco donde el motivo se ve sistemáticamente asociado con plantas espinosas, cuchillos y puntas de flecha. Definen un contexto similar al huitztlampa de los aztecas, que en el tiempo de la Conquista se identificaba con el sur. El uso de espigas de maguey en ritos penitenciales no era debido solamente a la eficiencia de esos instrumentos de tortura; con ellos, los penitentes participaban en un universo de guerra, de sacrificio y de muerte, que anunciaba los desarrollos del Posclásico en el Centro de México.*

Palabras claves: auto-sacrificio, sangría, ritos, iconografía, instrumentos, glifos, guerra, muerte, Teotihuacan.

## L'autosacrifice à Teotihuacan

*Les saignées plus ou moins douloureuses que l'on s'infligeait à soi-même devaient être une pratique courante dans l'essentiel de la Mésoamérique bien avant les débuts de Teotihuacan. Une peinture murale de Tlacuilapaxco montre des prêtres exhibant ou offrant des épines d'agave fichées dans une épaisse couche de végétaux. L'épine d'agave est un des glyphes peints sur un sol à La Ventilla. Sur les peintures murales du Portique 2 de Tepantitla, on voit un motif répété qui est interprété comme un récipient contenant des plantes utilisées dans les rites d'autosacrifice. Cette hypothèse est confirmée à Atetelco où le motif est constamment associé à des plantes épineuses utilisées dans des rites pénitentiels ainsi qu'à des armes (couteaux et pointes de flèches). Ces divers éléments définissent un environnement proche du huitztlampa des Aztèques, que l'on identifie comme la région du sud au temps de la Conquête. L'utilisation des épines d'agave dans les rites de pénitence ne tenait pas seulement à leurs propriétés techniques comme instruments de sacrifice ; elles faisaient en réalité entrer les pénitents dans l'univers de la guerre, du sacrifice et de la mort, ce qui annonçait de futurs développements dans le Mexique central du Postclassique.*

Mots-clés : autosacrifice, saignée, rites, iconographie, instruments, glyphes, guerre, mort, Teotihuacan.

**A**UTO- OR SELF-SACRIFICE is neither a suicide nor a mutilation, but a self-inflicted bloodletting that includes a varying amount of pain. Many religions around the world made or make room for self-inflicted mortifications, from privations to self-torture, but, in Mesoamerica, auto-sacrifice was exceptionally important in terms of ubiquity, frequency and violence. The purpose of this paper is to review the available evidence of this rite at Teotihuacan, and examine the relations it might have had there with power.

Instruments, images and glyphs testify to the current practice of self-sacrifice at Teotihuacan.

## INSTRUMENTS

Although unambiguous self-sacrificial instruments are still lacking in the archaeological record, some implements may have been used for self-sacrifice, such as two green stone needles from Burial 6 of the Pyramid of the Moon, found on the back of 6-A and 6-B, the two non-decapitated victims (Sugiyama and López Luján 2006). These jade implements were probably reserved for ritual use, in contrast with bone needles of domestic usage (Gamio 1922: 215, lám. 119c).

The two Burial 6 needles are so similar in shape and size (10,3 x 0,6 x 0,6 and 10 x 0,5 x 0,6 cm) that they may have formed a pair, made purposely for the occasion. Their point is sharp while the rounded proximal end bears a very narrow perforation. Was the function of this eye to introduce strings or other elements through the flesh, or was the hole used only for suspension? Pereira has called my attention to other green stone artifacts published by Gamio under the heading “objetos rituales” (*ibid.*: 216 and lám. 121a). The longest (20 cm) has pointed ends, the shortest one has one bevelled end, while it is sharp on another. The ritual usage of the thickest instrument is demonstrated through two engraved designs; this artifact bears a hole at one end (*ibid.*: fig. 94a-b).

Sugiyama (2005: 132, fig. 57) suggested that some of the obsidian artifacts he collected in the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent could have been used for bloodletting. He was referring to his types D and E, consisting of bifacial, bi-pointed implements. Although they occurred in clusters, no correlation could be found between them and the interred individuals, therefore showing no evidence that “assisted self-sacrifice” had been inflicted on the victims, before their execution. The bifacial implements seem to have been associated with other kinds of objects as components of offering sets, like those in the deposits of the Pyramid of the Moon, or others at Tikal or Tenochtitlan. Furthermore, the use for bloodletting of bifacial instruments similar to types D and E has not been reported in later contexts. While concentrations of obsidian blades, occupying strategic locations in the deposits, may have been instrumental in self-sacrifice rituals, there is nothing that proves it. Sugiyama (*ibid.*: 130) further observes that the green color does not seem significant in this context and therefore may not imply a ritual meaning.

## IMAGES

At La Ventilla, Sector 2, a self-sacrificial scene was painted in a small sunken patio, not far from the Plaza de los Glifos, and on the same floor (Zúñiga 1995; Aguilera y Cabrera 1999). It shows a man standing, naked with the exception of a loincloth turned around the waist, a headdress, a pair of earplugs and a collar of three elements (Figure 1). His left hand rests on his left thigh; his right arm extends forward above sexual organs of important proportions. From his penis flows a stream containing eye signs, like the streams flowing on the walls of the Tlalocan patio at Tepantitla. It leads to a drain located on the eastern side of the small patio.<sup>1</sup> The stream connecting the penis to the drain reveals both the origin and the destination of sacrificial blood, a pictorial convention commonly used in the Postclassic

1. “de éste [el pene] sale una corriente –de agua– con signos de ojos que llega a la salida del drenaje” (Zúñiga 1995: 189).

manuscripts (Figure 2). From the male organ, three drops also fall directly on magueys, drawn as a few *pencas* and a flower. The flower probably adds to the plants the meaning of “precious,” like in Postclassic images. More magueys are standing behind the personage, below a large rubber ball<sup>2</sup>; embellished with *chalchihuites* and paper ties, it is topped by an important adorned scroll, probably signaling smoke.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1. Self-sacrifice painted on a floor at La Ventilla, Zone 2. After a drawing by Nicolas Latsanopoulos.



Figure 2. The black Quetzalcoatl sacrificing himself; his blood nourishes the four aspects of Yohualtecuhtli, Lord of the Night. *Codex Borgia* 35, detail.

2. This motive was interpreted by Zúñiga (1995) as a bag of copal incense, and as a jar, from which “emerge un líquido que arriba se convierte en una gran virgula florida” by Aguilera y Cabrera (1999). It is part of the offerings depicted in the murals of the Temple of the Agriculture (de la Fuente 1995: 106, pl. 5). In the central Mexico tradition, as illustrated in the Postclassic manuscripts, it remained the conventional image of a rubber ball (see for instance *Codex Nuttall*, pl. 22 in Couvreur 2005: fig. 12).

3. Page 95a of the Maya *Madrid Codex* shows “copal and spiral [rubber] glyphs in alternation, over scenes of the ear-piercing rite” (Lounsbury 1973: fig. 13, 114-115). In Mesoamerica bloodletting and incense burning were frequently associated. The archetypal Aztec priest carries a self-sacrificial implement in one hand and a long-handled incense pan in the other.

## SOUTHEAST WALL



Figure 3. Southeastern wall of the Tlalocan Patio at Tepantitla (after Uriarte 1995: fig. 19).

The scene represents a penitent performing penis sacrifice while rubber is burning. His blood contributes to fertility in two ways: directly, by feeding the magueys, cultivated plants of considerable economic and symbolic importance and, indirectly, as the blood stream feeds the drain network, giving it a microcosmic dimension.

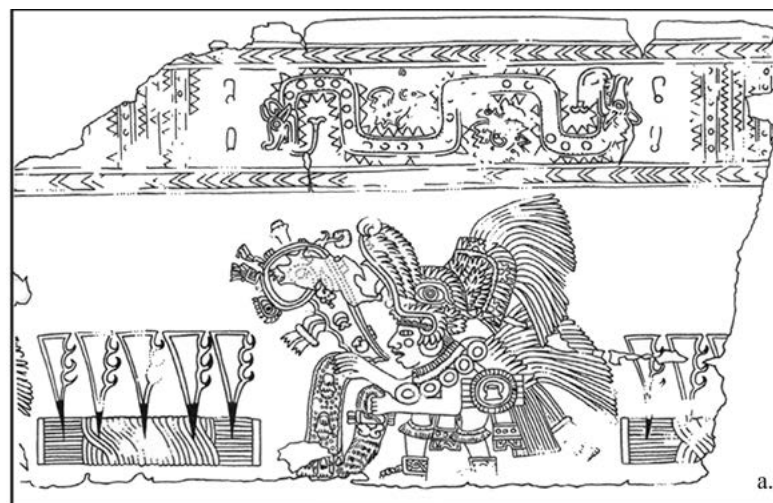
The penitential scene from La Ventilla finds its parallel in the sacrificial act painted on the southeastern wall of the Tlalocan Patio at Tepantitla (Figure 3, Zone 15). A crying and moaning naked man is flourishing a leafy branch, a fertility symbol that may have been also used as a call for penance. According to Motolinía, in the XVIth century, a branch planted in the patio was signaling penitence for all, when were over the eighty-day penance of the clerics.<sup>4</sup> A red and blue stream (blood and water?) bursts out of his chest to feed the river system below, which in turn connects to the water-filled mountain. In both cases the sacrifice is not offered to a god but to cultivated plants or water networks.

On a Tlacuilapaxco mural, self-sacrificial offerings alternate with priests in procession (Figure 4a). The former consist of five or four maguey spines planted into a plaited mat, calling to mind the Aztec *zacatapayollis*, the grass balls into which the bloody spines were inserted.<sup>5</sup>

4. Motolinía (1985: 108) “hasta que se cumplieran los ochenta días en fin de los cuales tomaban un ramo pequeño y poníanle en el patio adonde todos lo viesan, el cual era señal que todos habían de comenzar el ayuno [...]. En estos días del ayuno salía aquel ministro viejo a los pueblos de la comarca, como a su beneficio, a pedir el hornazo, y llevaba un ramo en la mano, e iba en casa de los señores.”

5. Taube (2000: 11-12) states that “the repeating element in front of the figures constitutes a glyphic element qualifying not particular individuals, but the group as a whole.” I don’t see why this element

Here, as well as at La Ventilla or Techinantitla, the instrument is drawn as a pointed triangle with spines on one side only. This means that the penitents were not content with the needle-like point terminating the leaf, but were also using its lateral spines to let blood. But since the whole leaf was too broad to use, they would cut it along one side. The Late Postclassic instruments, although more stylized, also present one-sided spines. They even sometimes show the end of the leaf split in two (Figure 4c).



b.



c.

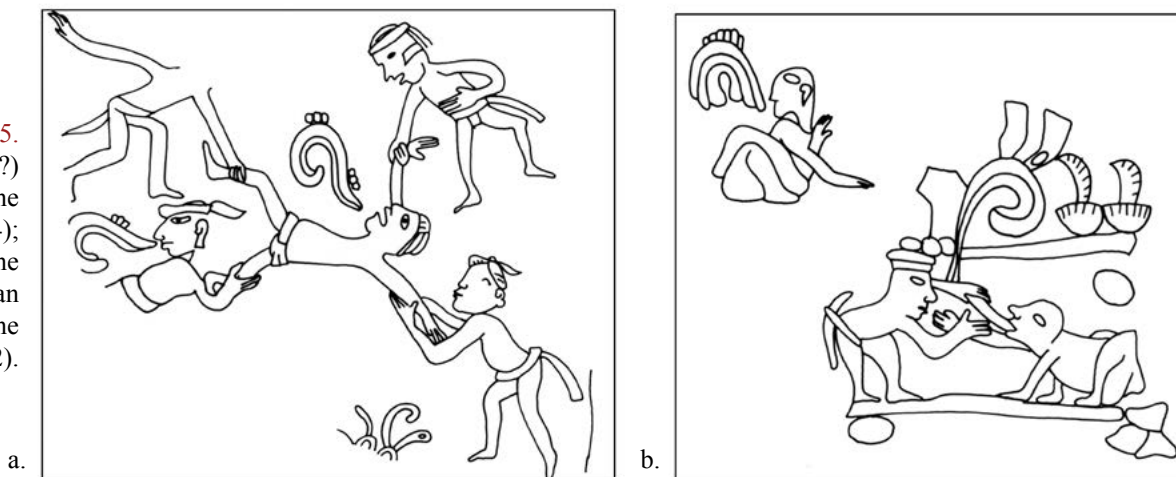
Figure 4. a. Tlacuilapaxco mural (after Berrin 1988: VI-21); b. The “spine-in-mat” glyph from the Plaza de los Glifos at La Ventilla (after photo by M.E. Ruiz Gallut); c. Two self-sacrificial maguey spines. *Codex Borbonicus* 20, detail.

## GLYPHS

A maguey spine inserted into a mat (Figure 4b) is one of the 42 glyphs painted on the floor of the Patio de los Glifos, in Sector 2 at La Ventilla, dated Late

would be treated here as a glyph; it is the representation of a cult object, the end product of a rite performed by the human figures. No one would consider as a glyph the representation of an Aztec *zacatapayollis* toward which processions of warriors converge.

**Figure 5.**  
 a. Mock (?)  
 sacrificial scene  
 (Zone SE 4);  
 b. Piercing the  
 tongue of an  
 infant (Zone  
 SW 2).



Tlamimilolpa/Early Xolalpan (A.D. 350-450); it has been suggested that the glyphs represented insignia of important individuals to mark their seats during an assembly (Cabrera 1995b).<sup>6</sup> At Techinantla, a triangular arrangement of three spine glyphs is attached to a tree located in the middle of a series of nine (Berrin 1988: Pl. 1). It identifies this particular plant as a maguey, which is further confirmed by more spines and yellow flowers attached to the end of its leaves.

At Tepantitla, the painted walls limiting the so-called Tlalocan patio are made of two parts. On the upper part (*tablero*), an allegory of fertility is painted as a watery universe that includes a tree mountain image, an allegorical figure, and, on the border, portraits of Tlaloc giving birth to water streams. On the lower part of the walls (*talud*) are painted:

- landscapes consisting of a water-filled mountain, rivers, irrigated fields, orchards and various cultivated plants, buildings and other man-made constructions;
- scenes in which take part a varying number of small—5 to 8 cm high—human actors, in very dynamic attitudes. At least eight different ball games, in which chance plays a major part, have been identified.<sup>7</sup> Other scenes are sacrificial: on one (Figure 3: SE 4 i.e. Zone 4 of southeastern wall), four figures hold a man's limbs to

6. There is a clear difference between this representation of a unique element at La Ventilla, associated with other glyphs, and the same motive repeated several times at Tacuilapaxco that we interpreted above as an image of real self-sacrificial maguey spines (and not as glyphs).

7. The most detailed game is the stickball game played with markers, which is painted on the northeast wall (Baudez 2007: fig. 10). The other ballgames are all together on the southeastern wall (Figure 3). In zone 1, two opponents move balls with sticks. Not far, two isolated players hit a ball with their foot. On zone 7, *tlachtli*, where the ball is hit with the hips without the help of hands, is played by one and by two players. On zone 10, a man holding a ball is facing his companions who mimic a sort of centipede walk. On zone 13, four people play with skittles, topped with a ball and inserted into the ground; a frontally presented man seems to play a referee. Finally, on zone 14, two players, facing each other, handle each a group of five balls; again, a referee watches the game.

keep him lying on his back (Figure 5a), a clear allusion to human sacrifice through cardiotomy. On another (SW 2 i.e. Zone 2 of southwestern wall), a man is piercing the tongue of an infant walking on four (Figure 5b). The SE 15 scene represents a naked man, crying and moaning, the paradigm of a victim whose sacrifice contributes to abundant rainfall and general prosperity. He is brandishing a leafy branch, a likely call for penance. On SE 3, a group of four men hold one or two branches, also possibly calling for self-sacrifice.

The interpretation of the remaining scenes is generally problematic; some look more like rituals, others appear as games or dances.

Glyphs are here defined as pictograms that explain, confirm or modify the scenes with which they are associated, through their semantic or phonetic value. They may consist of one single sign, or a combination of several. Their association with a scene may result from proximity, such as the sign placed at the base of a tree to indicate its species or a toponym; the glyph, simple or compound, is sometimes attached to a “speech scroll,” as if the message were delivered by one of the scene's actors. Finally, other pictograms appear as free or floating, without showing any particular connection (Figure 6).

To determine the meaning of a glyph when it occurs only once is very problematic. Suggested readings by Taube, such as the “trussed bird game” (Figure 3, Zone 10) or the kicking one's leg game (Taube 2000: fig. 24), are only possibilities among dozens of others. There are some exceptions, such as a compound from the south wall (S1) showing a plant growing out of a skull; this well-known death-and-rebirth image, widely distributed in Mesoamerica, is easy to interpret. A glyph that occurs several times consists of two parallel short sticks: they may be used in the games or have a value of ten, like among the Maya or in Oaxaca. The few occurrences of an old man's head do not give a clue to the glyph.

Three floating glyphs, called “fillers” by Pasztory (1976), differ from the others in being recurrent. The image of a flying butterfly occurs 18 times in the surviving parts of the Tlalocan murals; in our western perspective, the insect evokes spring and happiness and



Figure 6. South wall of the Tlalocan patio (corresponding to Zones 3 and 4 in Uriarte's reference drawing).

is often mentioned as a characteristic of a paradisiacal Tlalocan. Actually, at Teotihuacan, butterflies are war and warrior images, and their presence here means war and sacrifice.

The motive I call "broken-vessel" has 17 occurrences. It is made of joint pieces, like fragments of a vessel broken on the spot, that differ from each other, in size, shape and color. Some of them present round dotted areas that recall the decoration of anthropomorphic *candeleros*.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore likely that these vessels represent *candeleros* broken in a termination ritual. According to Linda Manzanilla (personal communication 2009), analyses of the residues from *candeleros* show that these small ceramic, one- or multi-chambered containers were used for burning copal and/or collecting blood.<sup>9</sup>

I interpret the third glyph, with a minimum of 29 occurrences, as a self-sacrificial icon. It looks like a flower opening on long, feather-like elements.<sup>10</sup> A wavy red line divides it into two parts: a blue rounded base and a yellow flaring body decorated with radiating lines. It is presented as a container, since its opening is always

upward; the only exception to this rule occurs when the flower is empty and shown lying on its side (Figure 6). Note how close it is to a maguey plant, the source of self-sacrificial instruments. Short parallel traits ornate the convex side of the elements with bent ends that protrude from the flower. As their number vary from one to three, and as they are oriented either to the left or to the right, they appear as independent from the flower; it is then obvious that the glyph, as a whole, is not a natural form and is made of two parts: a flower-like container of added elements. Their curved end sets them apart from the straight lancets of the Postclassic manuscripts.

If interpreted as the indication of a flexible, probably vegetal, material, it would refer to bloodstained branches or palms, like those presented in the container of page 79b in the *Codex Vaticanus B* (Figure 7). However, one may consider that the curved end is not a realistic notation, but a convention that would make self-sacrificial instruments analogous to the curved knives used to open the chest of human victims. This hypothesis allows us to understand why only their outer side is "armed."



Figure 7. Cihuacoatl 5 Rain patronizing the 19th *trecena* beginning with the day 1 Eagle. In the container, seen in cross-section, a skeletal figure is surrounded by blood-drenched palms and lancets. *Codex Vaticanus B*, p. 79b.

8. Pasztory (1976) describes the motive as "curvilinear free forms in several colors" while Uriarte (1995: 245) calls it "símbolo lobulado de colores." Caso had proposed that they represent rocks; Pasztory (*ibid.*) observes that they could as well represent clouds.

9. Serna, quoted by Nuttall (1904) tells that on the sixth movable festival dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, devotees sent to the temple "small salt-cellars" containing eight to ten drops or more of their own blood, absorbed by means of strips of paper which were subsequently burnt, with copal gum, on the altars of the temple.

10. Clara Millon interpreted the flower-and-protruding-elements as a spore (personal communication 1968 to Pasztory 1976: 187). The latter author simply calls it a flowerlike element. Uriarte (1995: 245) calls the motive, "*flor de doble corola [...] con hojas largas como plumas.*" For Cabrera (1995a: 206-207) it is a "*flor con espiga(s) or una especie de borla que tiene espigas*"; he notices that it is similar to what Jorge Angulo (personal communication) calls "*malinalli o zacaton o zacate de carbonero.*"

Why would a container of instruments or of blood-smearred palms be represented as a flower? Eduard Seler (1992: 90) noted that, in Aztec iconography, flowers or jade beads (*chalchihuitl*) are frequently attached to the

tip of self-sacrificial instruments to indicate the preciousness of the blood (*eztli*) smeared on them. Flowers surround the vegetal material into which lancets are planted on page 32 of the *Codex Nuttall* (Figure 8). If, in the Tepantitla compound, the blood container is a flower, it is to emphasize the precious quality of its content.



Figure 8. Flowers surround the vegetal material into which lancets are planted. *Codex Nuttall*, p. 32.

The logical bond between the bloodletting and its offering is explicitly illustrated on SW 2 (Figure 5b). The same scene includes two superimposed floors, on which rest figures and objects. Note how rare are ground lines in the Tlalocan paintings; all scenes are floating in space, with three exceptions: the ballgame *tlachtli*, in which the ball is hit with the hips, is shown on two parallel floors. Players throw themselves down to throw back lower balls. The presence of the floor is mandatory in order to understand the action. The same can be said of the game depicted in SE 13, where the sticks that support the balls are shown driven into the ground. In SW 2 (Figure 5b), a headdress wearing man stands on the lower floor; he is shown piercing the tongue of a naked infant, still walking on four. Two flower-containers, with one palm in each, rest on an upper floor. To the left, another naked child waits his turn. This scene calls to mind an episode of the Aztec festival *Tozoztontli*, during which the priests were piercing the ears, the tongues and the calves of boys, twelve-year-old and under (Durán 1967, I: 247). I suggest that the two levels describe two successive moments of “assisted” self-sacrifice: blood offerings follow the bloodletting pictured on the lower level.

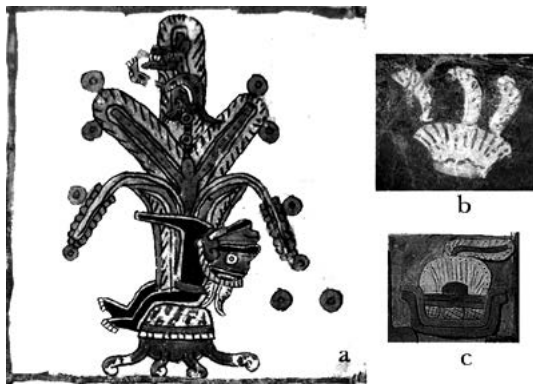
Esther Pasztory suggested that the individuals who carry someone on their shoulders (SE 1 and 9) are taking children to their sacrifice (1976: 196). The aggressive and decisive attitude of the “child,” however, does not correspond to that of a victim. The same author (*ibid.*: 188, note 1) noticed the likeness of the “flower-container” glyph to a motive that is repeated several times on the upper frieze of the Palace of the Stuccoes at Acanceh, Yucatan (Figure 9c). She quotes Seler describing the stucco modeled motive as a cup containing a ball of down stuck with a long feather (Seler 1998: pl. XI). The German scholar interpreted the cup’s content as down, since the same motive was found on the wings of several of the birds modeled on the Acanceh façade. Virginia Miller (1991: 31) objected, writing: “the wing

patterns can hardly be seen as naturalistic representations of feathers.” Actually, the Seler’s argument has to be taken the other way around: this is not the cup motive that has been borrowed from the bird, but the bird’s wing that has borrowed the cup’s content as a self-sacrificial image. In the same vein, the squirrel (character 3) borrows for his tail the element planted into the cup. The purpose of these borrowings is to allow the characters of the façade to appear as penitents.

Taube (2000: 25-26 and fig. 19), following Stuart (2000), interprets the “cup” motive in the Acanceh façade as a glyph with a phonetic reading of *pu*. This word, meaning “rushes,” would be a reference to the city of Tollan. Taube (*ibid.*), however, does not take into account the flexible element planted into the cup; Virginia Miller (1991: 32) sees in it “some kind of blood-letting implement such as stingray spine or obsidian blade, although it appears to be of the same material as the vessel’s content, and it is bent rather than straight like most perforators.” Like the elements protruding from the Tepantitla flowers, it is flexible and designates leaves or palms, used to absorb self-sacrificial blood.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, they look very similar to branches of the *mezquite* as illustrated in page 18 of *Codex Vaticanus B* (Figure 9a; Anders and Jansen 1993). Being of the same material, the rounded form into which it is set also represents plants (Figure 9c). The crisscrossed red spots on the bottom would represent bloodstains or drops. However, one cannot help but wonder why these cups so much resemble the Stuart’s *pu* glyph; would it be possible that the rushes expressed by the glyph, instead of referring to Tollan, actually mean sticks (made of rushes) deposited in the cup after having been passed through the flesh? Taube’s interpretation of the Acanceh façade is politically oriented: the characters are “massive glyphs,” toponyms placed under the aegis of Tollan, the City of Rushes. The sky even confirms this, since rain clouds are “a metaphor for governance.” Adversely, Virginia Miller deciphers the façade’s composition as a mythological and cosmological message. The stepped forms are mountains or caves inhabited by animals and one man, representatives of the natural and mythical world. While she sees the importance of rain, she notes the ambiguity of water, that may also be “precious water,” that is blood. The “fanlike elements,” interpreted as eyes, would “impart rank or some quality like preciousness” to water drops.

Coming back to Tepantitla, if we were able to understand the relationships between our three fillers and the associated scenes, we would better understand what the latter represent, and evaluate the semantic incidence every filler type may have had on the murals. These

11. “The yellow so-called ‘down-ball’ might then be a material for absorbing blood, such as the woven grass balls used by the Mexica” (Miller 1991: 32). The protruding element is here very close to those planted into the Tepantitla “flower-containers.”



**Figure 9.** a. Tezcatlipoca clinging to a mezquite tree. *Codex Vaticanus B*, 18, after Anders and Jansen 1993; b. The Tepantitla “flower-container” glyph; c. The Acanceh “cup” (after Miller 1991).

glyphs play a role more important than simply “filling” blanks. It is possible that they had an incidence on the murals’ meanings since their distribution does not appear to be random. The 18 preserved butterflies are found only with the southeastern mural (Figure 3). The “broken-vessel” occurs 17 times, particularly in the northeastern mural where the stickball game takes place (Figure 10), and the southern half of the southeastern mural. The “flower-container” glyph, with its 29 occurrences, is rather evenly distributed elsewhere, except in the northern part of the southeast wall where it does not show up. The problems we face in ascertaining the “fillers” roles are due in part to the low proportion of preserved paintings (from 30 to 70%).

While it is likely that the butterflies mean war and the flower-container glyphs indicate auto-sacrificial offerings, the “broken-vessel” sign would represent the remains of vessels and *candeleros* broken in a termination ritual, when the self-sacrificial offering is discarded or burnt, and its container broken into pieces. The association of the “flower-container” with the “broken-vessel” is repeated at Atetelco in a composition from the Pórtico 1 of the Patio Norte. There, murals 2-3 are divided into two parts by a rectangular border (*cenefa*). The paintings on the *talud*

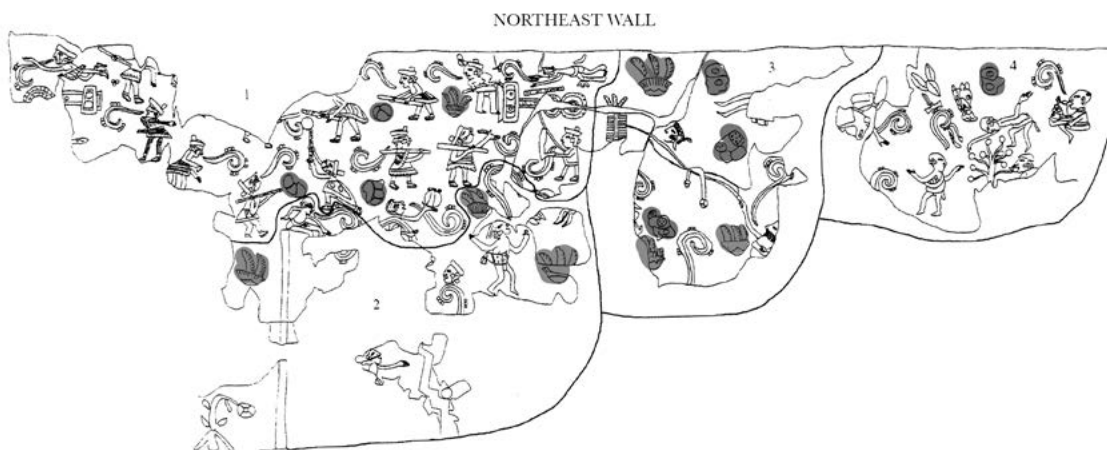
are facing down, while those on the *tablero* are facing up (Figure 11, next page). The *talud* presents two birds seen in profile, standing on U-shaped pedestals. The latter contain knives in their lateral scrolls; a kind of headdress, framed by two arrow points above, two echino-cactus (*biznagas*) and two knives below, occupy the center of the pedestals. These elements refer to war, sacrifice and self-sacrifice.

Upside down paintings on the *tablero* consist of a serrated range crowned with knives, and include three major mountains backing three frontal birds. They are standing on U-shaped pedestals, whose roots show under their base. At the pedestals’ level, the “flower-container” and the “broken-vessel” glyphs are repeated several times each (Figure 12b); their association, without any participation of the butterfly glyph, would suggest that they are probably related; this relation is even more likely, when considering that they both occur in a sacrificial and self-sacrificial context.

Actually, above the mountainous range, the “flower-container” glyph alternates with prickly-pear shrubs. Another row, above the latter, is made of arrow points vertically planted into circular elements (?) and of two thorny shrubs: maguey and echino-cactus (Figure 12b).

The opposite directions of the murals’ two parts may correspond to mirror images of cardinal directions. The *tablero*, combining thorny shrubs, knives and self-sacrificial offerings, appears as an equivalent of the mythical land that the Aztecs called *huitztlampa*, “country of spines.” At the same time, it is a hilly country, a desert environment, a land of penitence and a likely place of origin. While in Aztec times, it corresponded to the geographical south, in the Early Classic period it could have referred to another cardinal direction.

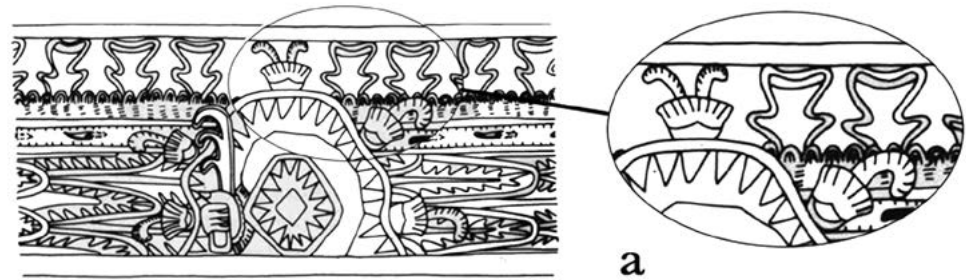
The border framing murals 2-3 consists of a coyote—an animal associated with arid environment—whose body is made of two interlaced bands, one being furry, the other plain. Numerous paws are equally distributed on the border. “Flower-container” glyphs, flames, and arrow points are scattered on these different parts (Figure 12c), expressing the qualities expected from the warrior that the coyote represents.



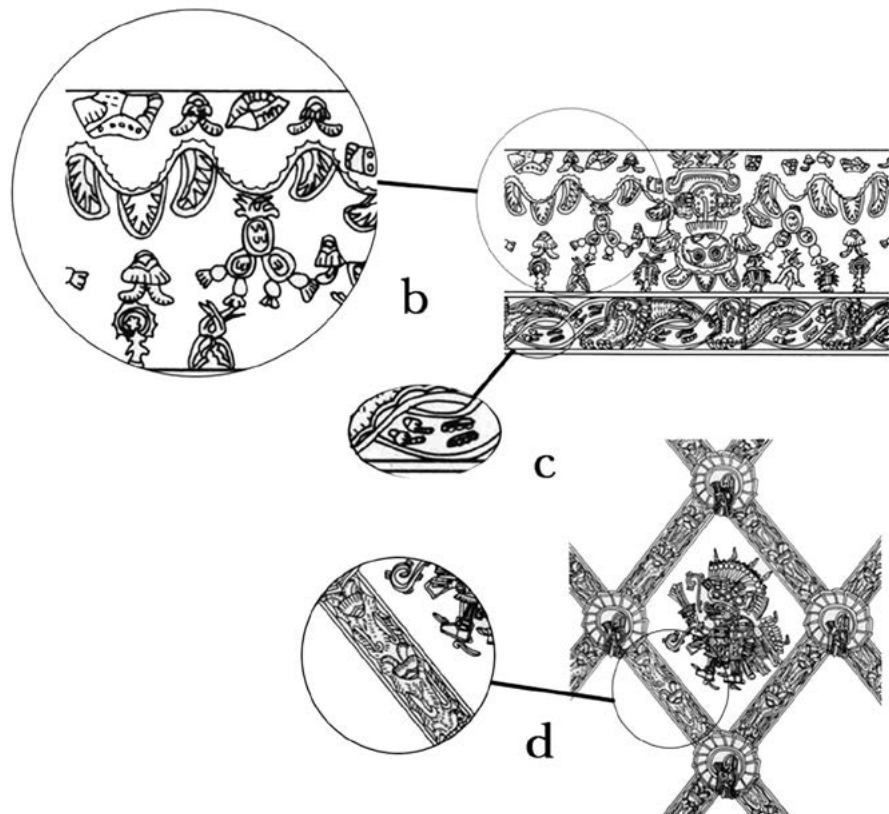
**Figure 10.** Northeastern wall of the Tlalocan Patio at Tepantitla (after Uriarte 1995: fig. 2).



**Figure 11.** Atetelco, Patio Norte, Pórtico 1: murals 2-3 (after a drawing by J.F. Villaseñor, in Cabrera Castro 1995a: fig. 18-18).



**Figure 12.** Atetelco, autosacrificial iconography; a. Patio Blanco, Pórtico 1; the frame of murals 5-7 shows “flower-container” glyphs; b. Patio Norte, Pórtico 1, upper part of murals 2-3 showing “flower-container” and “broken-vessel” glyphs together with knives and thorny shrubs; c. Frame of same murals showing “flower-container” glyphs in the plain band of the coyote’s body; d. Patio Blanco, Pórtico 1, murals 5-7. The frames contain flame and “flower-container” glyphs (in Cabrera Castro 1995a: fig. 18.3, 18.18, and 18.2).



From the same Pórtico 1, other paintings show coyotes on pedestals that include the same elements as the pedestals on which the birds are standing.

Still at Atetelco, but in the Patio Blanco area, murals 5-7 of Pórtico 1 consist of human figures disguised as coyotes, who appear individually inside diamond-shaped cells formed by intersecting furry bands. “Flower-container” glyphs as well as flames are scattered in these bands, associating, once more, coyote iconography with self-sacrifice (Figure 12d). The central motive of the border that frames these murals is a mountain containing points, from which emerges a hand holding an eccentric knife (Figure 12a); it is framed with knives and “flower-container” signs, and is topped by a row of planted arrows.

In the same area, the walls of Pórtico 2 are decorated with a procession of netted jaguars and plain coyotes devouring human hearts (Figure 13); these carnivorous animals supposedly represent military orders. On the associated border is a coyote whose body is made of two interlacing bands: one is netted to represent the jaguar, the other is furry and adorned with long triangular points that may represent the spines used in self-sacrifices.

Tepantitla and Atetelco, besides being the only compounds to depict wounded ballplayers (Baudez 2007), and where contrasting interlaced bands are used, are also the only ones that have in common both the “flower-container” and the “broken-vessel” glyphs. Their exclusive common elements reveal the privileged relationships between the two compounds.

## CONCLUSIONS

Self-sacrifice was a well-established ritual at Teotihuacan as evidenced through instruments, images and glyphs. While the maguey spine—using both the point at the end and the spines on one side—was the

favoured implement, stone instruments (jade needles, obsidian points and blades) may also have been in use. One image from La Ventilla is an allegory of self-sacrifice, showing a man with a bleeding penis contributing to the general fertility.

At Tlacuilapaxco, priests in procession alternate with early versions of the *zacatapayolli*. A glyph, recurrent on the murals of the Tlalocan Patio at Tepantitla, refers to the same rite. One to three spines depicted to look like sacrificial knives or flexible elements that represent blood-absorbing palms or leaves are planted into a flower, a symbol for preciousness. This interpretation is strengthened by comparing this icon with a motive from the Aanceh façade. Finally, at Atetelco, we found the “flower-container” and “broken-vessel” glyphs together in contexts of both war and sacrifice.

It is surprising that two different ways of representing self-sacrificial offerings happen to coexist in Xolalpan times at neighboring sites. The first one at Tlacuilapaxco (and formerly at La Ventilla) is a rather realistic rendering of the maguey leaf point used in the ritual, while the second one, at Tepantitla and Atetelco, is more conventional. It is therefore possible that their respective meanings be slightly different.

We don’t have satisfactory answers about the role of the three “fillers” in the Tlalocan murals. Do the differences in distribution we have observed have any meaning, or are their respective associations random? In a study of the stickball game depicted on the northeastern wall of the Tlalocan Patio (Baudez 2007), I suggested that the purpose of this violent game was to designate wounded players as sacrificial victims. Did the numerous games of chance, using balls of varying size, in the murals of the eastern side, have the function of letting fate decide who would sacrifice oneself? This hypothesis would justify the abundant distribution of self-sacrifice symbols in these same areas. Following Pasztory and others, Caso’s



Figure 13. Atetelco, Patio Blanco, Pórtico 2, East wall. Procession of netted jaguars and coyotes framed by a coyote whose body is made of two interlacing bands (in Cabrera Castro 1995a: fig. 18.6).

“paradise” hypothesis has to be qualified. The Tlalocan murals contain many references to sacrificial rites, and we may suspect that entertainment was not always the sole purpose of the games.

A mythical universe including both Tamoanchan and Tlalocan is depicted on the walls of the Tepantitla patio (Toscano 1970; López Austin 1995). On the *tablero* and *cenefa*, Tamoanchan is the world of the supernaturals, and include a cosmic tree with its guilloche trunk, an allegoric giving figure, and rain-making Tlalocs. On the *talud*, the Tlalocan landscape includes a water-filled mountain, rivers, irrigated fields and orchards; all these benefits to the humans come from the wet, dark, and fertile underworld. Men must repay them with penitence, suffering and blood. What the Tepantitla murals show are not a place of eternal happiness but a much more complex and ambiguous universe in which men must pay back with pain and blood the benefits they receive.

At Atetelco, images of arrow points, sacrificial knives, and offerings of one’s blood, are frequently associated as if to tell us that war, human sacrifice, and self-sacrifice are different aspects of the same thing. It is at Atetelco that we understand the importance of maguey and other spiny shrubs; since they are eternal sources of procurement for self-sacrificial implements, these plants have become emblematic of the sacrifice of one’s self. They also define an arid environment probably associated with a cardinal direction and a place of origin. The frequent association of self-sacrificial iconography with images of felines and canines, as well as with the warriors these animals represent, indicates how important to warriors was the sacrifice of self.

As far as we know, most of the self-sacrificial rite as practiced in Postclassic Mexico, was already in use at Teotihuacan, some twelve centuries earlier. Bones from symbolically significant animals were worked into perforators, and there is ample evidence that maguey spines were completed with obsidian and green stone instruments. We don’t know whether the Teotihuacan penitents were passing twigs or cords through their flesh; nor if their tongue was a favorite spot for bloodletting. At Teotihuacan, as well as everywhere in Mesoamerica, the execution of the rite was followed by the presentation of instruments or plants smeared with blood, then by their destruction. An earlier form of *zacatapayolli* was known, as well as the use of the flower as a symbol of precious blood.

Apparently, the rite rationale conformed to general Mesoamerican practices and beliefs. The role of suffering was paramount. Images showed the narrow connection between the sacrifice of others and the sacrifice of self. Both were believed necessary to get benevolent rains and plentiful harvests.

A major question concerns the relationships between auto-sacrifice and power. Since the great majority of Classic Maya self-sacrifice images show only kingly people practicing it, some scholars are tempted to pretend that

only the rulers and their families sacrificed themselves. We don’t accept such an argument: the absence of an actor or an object in the iconographic corpus does not imply that he, she or it, did not exist in real life. We think that the Mayas as well as the Teotihuacanos were following the same model as the Aztecs later: everyone was supposed to give his or her blood, but the frequency and the severity of the rite depended on one’s situation on the social or religious scale. It was asked of the Aztec king to bleed often and painfully; high priests had to be more pious than other clerics; ordinary people were rarely requested to give their blood and were free to experience pain or not; finally, bloodletting was exceptional for women and infants. At Teotihuacan, self-sacrifice is associated with the two powerful classes depicted on the walls: the priests and warriors, the latter sometimes pictured as animals (canines, felines, birds) that represent military orders. If our suspicion that the Tlalocan games of chance had the purpose of choosing victims by fate, more ordinary people may have been concerned by this ceremony.

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