

Water Symbols and Eye Rings in the Mexican Codices

Este estudio analiza el significado de un motivo que ha sido identificado en los códices pictóricos y en la escultura del México antiguo como un símbolo acuático: es el círculo alrededor del ojo o el "anteojo". Cuando este círculo se representa en forma de relieve - por ejemplo en el dios del agua y de la tierra, Tlaloc - efectivamente simboliza el agua. También aparece a veces en forma independiente como la insignia abreviada de Tlaloc, o como el chalchihuitl, símbolo del agua y de lo precioso. Los círculos pintados alrededor de los ojos, sin embargo, seguidos se confunden con el "anteojo" y son típicos de dioses de un carácter diferente. Están asociados con la guerra, el fuego y el sol, y con los dioses Camaxtli, Tezcatlipoca y Huitzilopochtli.

This study will present a number of water symbols and attributes of aquatic gods found in the pictorial documents of ancient Mexico. I will analyze here, however, only one symbol - the ring around the eye of Tlaloc, rain, earth, and fertility god - to see if the eye ring is always associated with water-earth deities, or if at times it indicates a different god or gods.

Among the symbols that indicate water in the codices we see the following:

ring or circle = chalchihuitl, jade symbol, "the precious" (Fig. 1)
running water (Fig. 2)
drops of water (Fig. 3)



bowl with water (Fig. 4)
 splash or starfish type of water representation (Fig. 5)
 stellar eye (see Fig. 1)
 shells
 serpent
 serpentine nose of rain god (Fig. 6)
 Tlaloc's serpentine nose with earth-stone symbol (Fig. 7)
 fangs of rain god (Fig. 8)
 noseornament of Chalchiuhtlicue, water goddess (Fig. 9)
 jade necklace
 paper with rubber stains (Fig. 10)
 reed staff
 aquatic flower (see Fig. 10)
 headdress with heron feathers (see Fig. 10)
 headdress with quetzal feathers (Fig. 11)
 rubber balls (Fig. 12)

Returning to the first symbol, the subject of this analysis, Tlaloc's "eye-goggles" or goggles in reality represent the circle symbolizing the drop of water, which is also the chalchihuitl or jade, the precious element. At the same time, the goggles are formed by the twisted body of a serpent, whose fangs are also Tlaloc's fangs. I will return to the importance of the serpent in a moment. Tlaloc's eye within the ring in the codices is usually a stellar eye: we can see this by the fact that it is half-closed in the same way stars are represented (Codex Borgia 28, 67; Codex Borbonicus 7, 11; Codex Nuttall 2, 9, 17 - Fig. 13). Smith (1973: 59) points out that in many dialects of Mixtec, the same word (ti-nuu or te-nuu) means both "stars" and "eyes". Furthermore, ancient Mexican deities, including those concerned with the earth, water, and fertility, were also seen as heavenly bodies. Durán (1967, I: 265, 270, 281, 289) tells us that the constellations indicated the figure that predominated each month and usually portrayed a divinity, for example, a man with bow and arrows (seen in the sky) represented Camaxtli, god of the hunt.

In many cases, especially in the Codex Borgia, the goggle carries the markings of a serpent. Tlaloc's eye-ring, nose volute, curved lip, arms, and shield are marked with the peculiar stripes and dots we see on the serpent (Codex Borgia 20, 25 - Fig. 14). In a representation of Chalchiuhtlicue, the water goddess is wearing a serpent headdress and dress ornaments with the same markings, and her half-moon nose adornment is the serpent itself, also marked in this way (Codex Borgia 65 - Figs. 2, 3, 15). The Tlaloc glyph in the Borgia follows the same pattern (Fig. 1). The closest identification of the snake I have been able to find is the coralillo - although its markings are only stripes - and the rattlesnake (Fig. 16). The codex serpents are usually both striped and dotted. Although the rattlesnake markings are more diamond shaped than rectangular, the dot is present. We must also allow for the artist's interpretation of the serpent designs. The serpent represents not only water but the earth monster, who also has these peculiar markings in the Borgia.

Even if we did not know that certain figures in the pictorial codices were water deities, the streams forming part of their image would tell us so. Furthermore, the historical chronicles often give us the text to fit the illustrations. Sahagún (FC, XI: 247) says that rivers flow from the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue, that mountains "were like ollas (jars) . . . filled with water." That is why settlements were called altepetl (water+hill): "This mountain of water, this river, springs from there, the womb of the mountain. For from there Chalchiuhtlicue sends it . . ." Various codices show the river flowing from Chalchiuhtlicue or from Tlaloc, and in Borgia 67 the water, indicated by chalchihuitls (circles), is inside the mountain, but flows from here to Tlaloc, the male representation of water (Fig. 17). The chalchihuitl itself, of course, has the form of a goggle.

The ring around the eye is not only common in the pictorial codices, but is ubiquitous in Teotihuacan, in the paintings and on clay sculpture. In the latter, the figurines are usually seated or are busts resting upon benches or thrones (Fig. 18). The figures are luxuriously dressed and often wear animal or bird headdresses. These figurines may be funerary representations of lords and the rings around their eyes are not necessarily associated with those of the rain god, although many scholars often automatically call any figure with these circles "Tlaloc". Esther Pasztory (1974: 13f.), however, notes that not all figures wearing rings over their eyes are Tlaloc. She feels that in Teotihuacan art they are seen also on butterflies, and characterize several gods and human figures associated with war and sacrifice.

Innumerable representations of rings around the eyes in the codices show them as if they were facial paint rather than superimposed circles, and are painted black. In this case the eye within the ring is not the half-closed stellar eye like that associated with Tlaloc (Codex Nuttall 19, 65, 67, 70 - Fig. 19). At times a ring around the mouth accompanies the eye rings. The historical chronicles from Central Mexico refer to this type of facial adornment as characteristic of Camaxtli, hunting and war god, whose position in Tlaxcala was similar to that of Huitzilopochtli, Mexica war and sun deity in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco. Durán (1967, I: 73) tells us that in Huexotzinco the figure of Camaxtli was blackened around the eyes. During the feast of the god, Quecholli, the nobles who carried out a ritual hunt dressed themselves in the array of the god, which included black rings around the eyes (Durán 1967, I: 75). The black eye rings, together with an eagle feather headdress, and striped body paint, identified them as great hunters (Durán 1967, I: 281).

Camaxtli was also called Mixcoatl. The "Anales de Cuauhtitlan" (1945: 3, 70f.) tells of early territorial conquests when Mixcoatl and his people killed and burned Itz'papalotl, patron goddess of one Chichimec group. With her ashes the conquerors made black circles around their eyes. The myth probably refers to the emergence of Mixcoatl's group as a separate political entity. The eye rings in this case may be associated with the Teotihuacan figures in a sacred-ancestor sense.

Further identification of black eye rings associated not only with Camaxtli but also with Huitzilopochtli, at the same time they formed one insignia of the ruling class, can be seen in the fiesta of Xocotl Huetzi, feast of the fire god. The latter was patron of the sovereigns and was associated with the gods closely related to the ruling class. During the Xocotl Huetzi festival, a figure of Painal, "the envoy of Huitzilopochtli," led the procession of sacrificial victims. These captives were "stained black in the hollows of the eyes (Sahagún, FC, II: 106 f.), undoubtedly in representation of Huitzilopochtli. The latter was not only a war and sun god (and identified with Camaxtli-Mixcoatl as I have mentioned), but was the Mexica tutelary deity and a protector of their rulers. In the characteristic complexity of Mexican ancient religion, most of the gods shared traits with other deities. In this situation we find Tezcatlipoca, supreme god, who can often be confused with Huitzilopochtli. My object here is not to clarify this situation but to indicate that Tezcatlipoca, also, was at times the possessor of black facial rings, though more frequently the ring was around the mouth (Durán 1967, I: 105). Not only was Huitzilopochtli identified with Camaxtli-Mixcoatl - the latter as war god - but also Tezcatlipoca "became Mixcoatl" ("Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas" 1973: 23, 33, 36 f.)

In the same way that a certain headdress identified its wearer as the bearer of special socio-political and economic functions (Millon 1973: 294-314), rings around the eyes, whether they be the Tlaloc goggles or the Camaxtli-Huitzilopochtli eye rings, probably distinguished nobles, warriors, and leaders whose costume and adornment indicated their religious and civil functions (Fig. 20). Above all, these adornments were indications of rank, inasmuch as certain articles of dress and ornament were reserved exclusively for the sovereigns and nobles (Durán 1971: 200). It was the nobles and outstanding warriors, also, who went to the home of the sun after they had died in battle. Here they helped carry the sun across the sky on a litter, and after four years had passed, they were changed into birds of precious feathers, among them "yellow birds blackened about the eyes" (Sahagún 1952, III: 47).

In discussing here water symbols and eye rings, I have shown that rings around the eyes in the pictorial codices and other pre-Conquest graphic expressions are attributes of different gods, not only of Tlaloc. In the codices the Tlaloc-type goggle may be distinguished easily from the black painted eye ring, while in sculpture - such as the Teotihuacan figurines - both types of rings may be represented in the same manner, by relief circles. We would have to distinguish the water deity goggles by other water attributes on the figure.

The two kinds of deities discussed here both wear the eye rings, although each type represents a different concept; yet this does not disturb us. In ancient Mexico the functions and characteristics of the gods often overlapped. The water and earth gods - of which Tlaloc is one - and their opposites, the sun-sky-fire-war gods (into which category Camaxtli and Huitzilopochtli fit) formed part of the duality and syncretism so characteristic of Mesoamerican thought. Each element was associated at some time with its opposite, that is,

night with day, the sky with earth, life with death, water with fire. These formed a kind of American yin and yang, the opposing yet complementary forces that made the world go around.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Drawings by Aarón Flores, partially revised by the Editor. Sources supplied by the Editor.

Fig. 1: The chalchihuitl, water, jade, and stellar eye symbol, also symbolizes the god Tlaloc (Codex Borgia: 65).

Fig. 2: Running water flows from Chalchiuhtlicue, water goddess (Codex Borgia: 65).

Fig. 3: Drops of water fall from streams of water. Four small circles outside the large circle are chalchihuitl: the circles also symbolize water. The goddess is Chalchiuhtlicue, water deity (Codex Borgia: 17).

Fig. 4: Bowl of water as place glyph (after Peñafiel 1885: Lám. XXVIII).

Fig. 5: Splash of water as place glyph (after Peñafiel 1885: 48).

Fig. 6: Stone figure of the god Tlaloc, showing his eye rings and fangs formed by serpents (Uhde Collection, Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. After Seler).

Fig. 7: Tlaloc's serpentine nose is represented in the same way that stones are often portrayed in the codices (Codex Nuttall).

Fig. 8: Fangs, as well as the ringed eyes, form part of the rain god's insignia (Codex Borgia: 25).

Fig. 9: Chalchiuhtlicue's nose ornament is usually serpentine in form (Codex Borgia: 11).

- Fig. 10: Tlaloc, rain god. Part of his insignia are rubber stained paper, an aquatic flower on the shield, and heron feathers in his headdress (Sahagún: Florentine Codex, Book I, Fig. 4).
- Fig. 11: A headdress with one or two quetzal feathers is also characteristic of Tlaloc and the water deities (Codex Magliabechi: 34).
- Fig. 12: Water gods are seen making offerings of rubber balls (Codex Borgia: 14).
- Fig. 13: Tlaloc's half-closed eye is similar to the stellar eye or star symbol (Codex Borgia: 27).
- Fig. 14: Tlaloc's goggles and adornments often are marked with the same type of stripes and dots we see on serpents (Codex Borgia: 20).
- Fig. 15: The serpent's stripes and dots are also seen on Chalchiuhtlicue's clothing. The goddess's nose ornament and back adornment are also serpents. Among the many symbolic elements in this scene are the snake in the field, probably representing water and earth, and the dismembered serpent, a water element (Codex Borgia: 20).
- Fig. 16: The coral snake (a) and the rattlesnake (b), whose markings are similar to those usually represented in the codices. (Vida de los Reptiles).
- Fig. 17: A river flows from the mountain (circles within the hill indicate water) to Tlaloc, water god (Codex Borgia: 67).
- Fig. 18: Teotihuacan ceramic bust with zoomorphic headdress. The eye rings and bifurcated tongue usually are associated with Tlaloc, rain god (after Séjourné).
- Fig. 19: Circles painted around the eyes of priests and nobles were not always associated with Tlaloc, but with other deities (Codex Nuttall: 70 - top left; 67 - top right; 65 - bottom left; 19 - bottom right).
- Fig. 20: The xicolli (tunic) and jaguar-claw adornment indicate the high status of this individual, who also wears black eye rings as facial paint. These may associate him with Tezcatlipoca; the jaguar claw may be the insignia of Tepeyolotl, one aspect of Tezcatlipoca (Codex Nuttall: 25).



Fig. 1

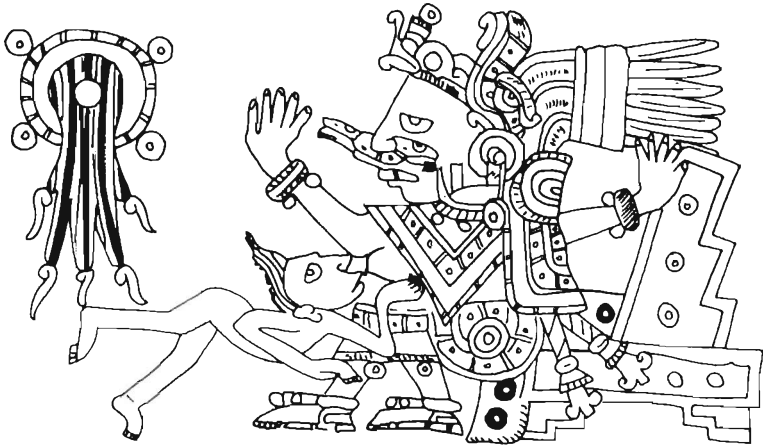


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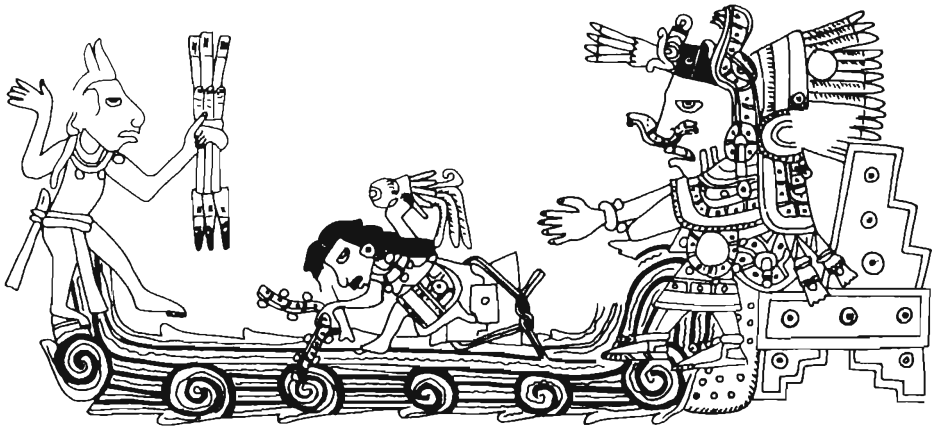


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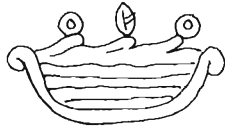


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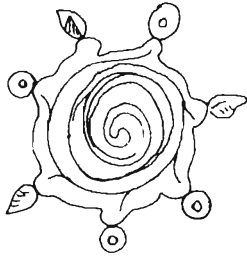


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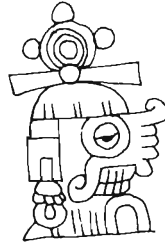


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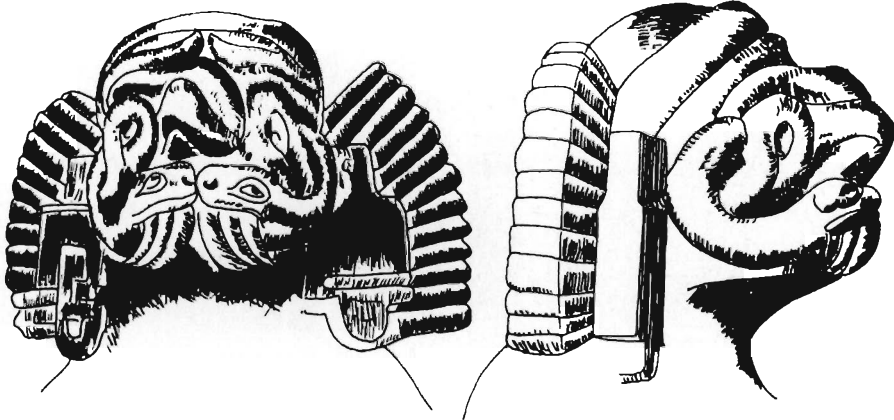


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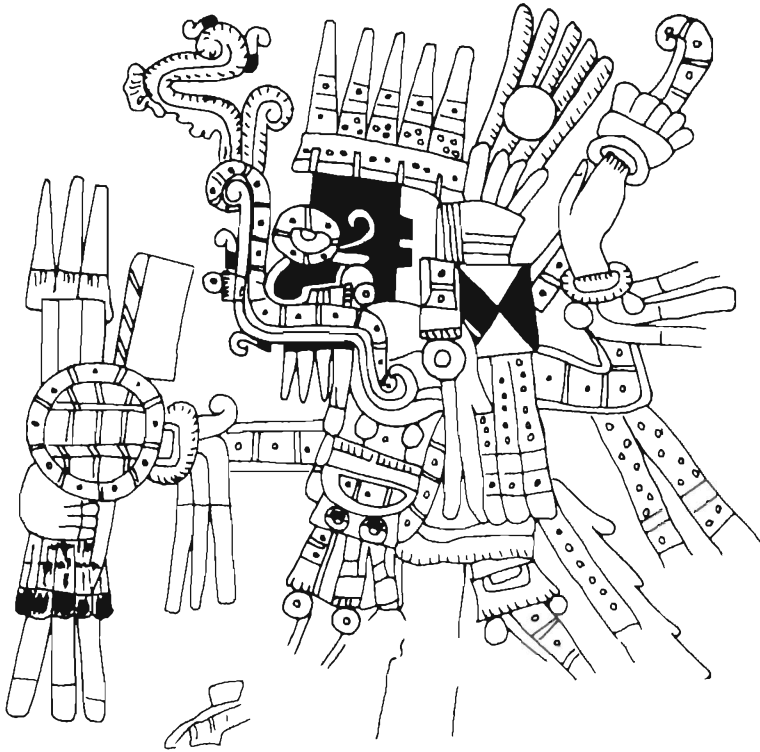


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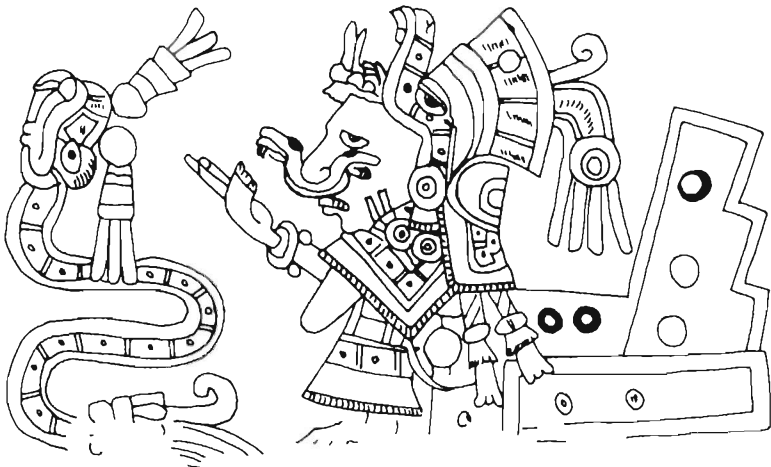


Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

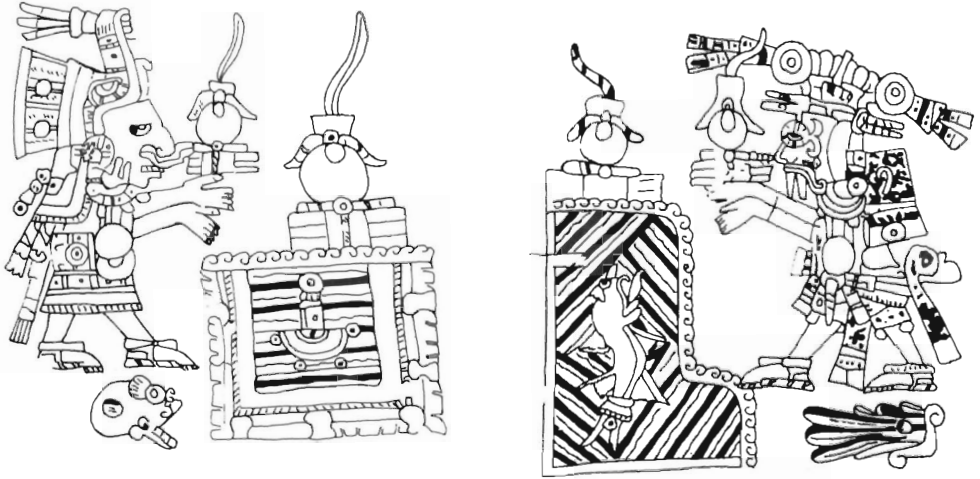


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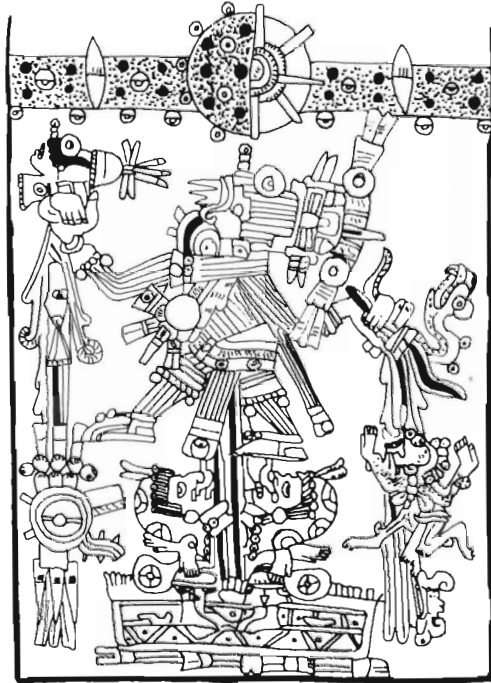


Fig. 13

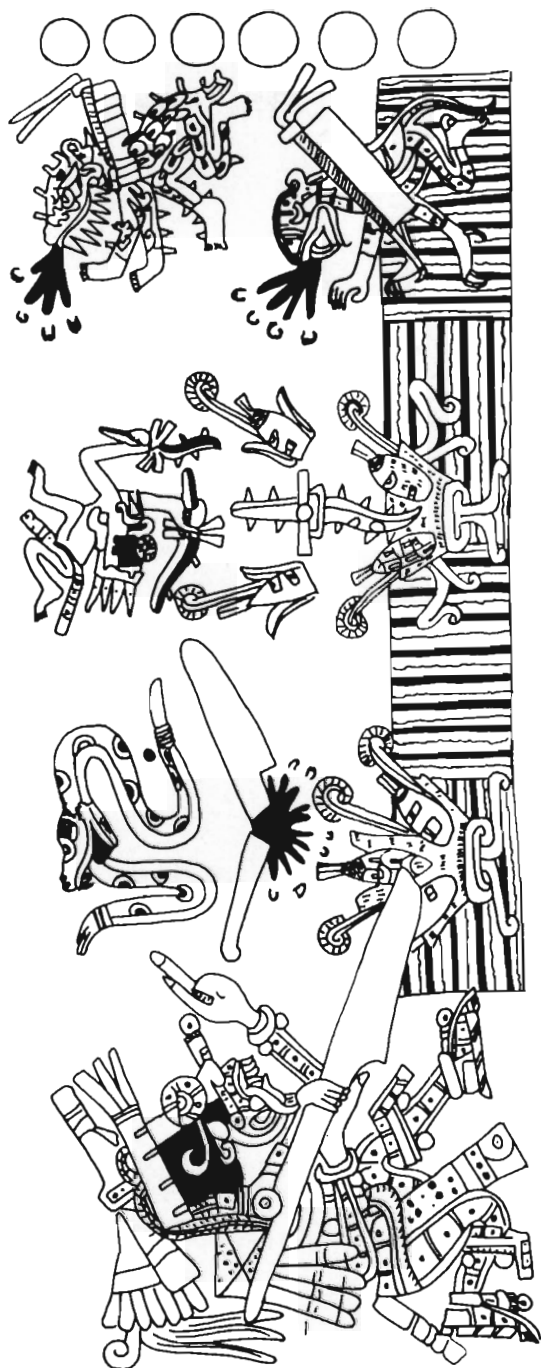


Fig. 14



Fig. 15

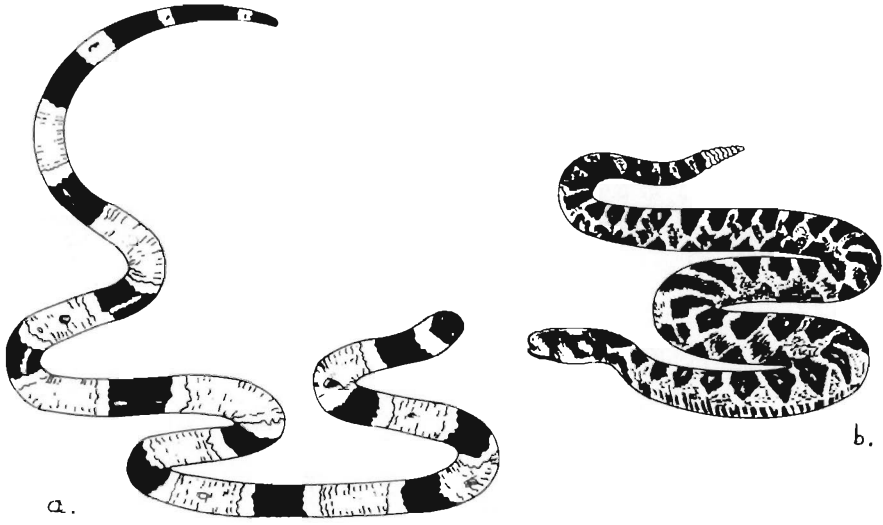


Fig. 16

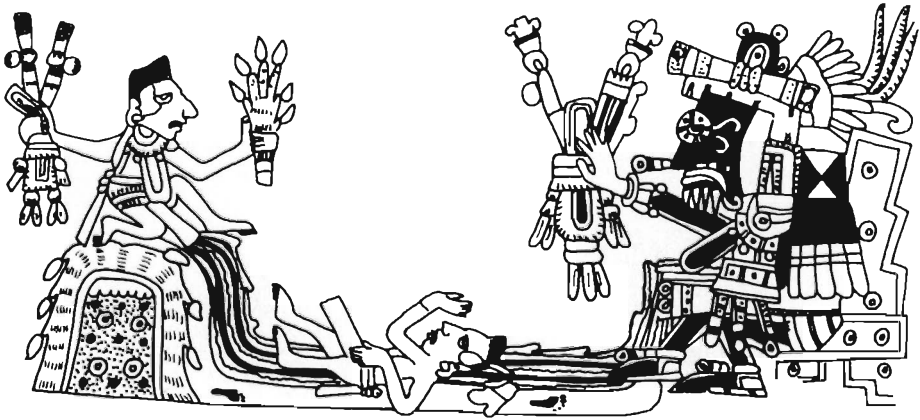


Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 20



Fig. 19