

A Note on the *macquauitl*

Las armas de punta y filo de los guerreros del México Central no presentan diferencias regionales. Para los mixtecos y los aztecos es posible reconstruirlas en base a representaciones en los manuscritos pictográficos y a las descripciones hechas por testigos oculares de la Conquista. Había dos tipos de macanas (*macquauitl*), dos de alabardas, un mazo (*quauh-ololli*) y, además, espadas de ceremonia y de gladiadores desprovistos de filo. Un *macquauitl* y una alabarda se conservaron aún durante el siglo XIX en la Real Armería de Madrid, pero quedaron destruidos en un incendio antes de ser analizados y descritos científicamente.

“*ynic tlachiuhtli avaquavitl tlapatlachxintli vel tlacencavalli necoc tlacamacuicuitl vncan tlactectli yn itztli anonço tecpatl ayocuitltica tlaçalolli*” – this is the description the Sahagún-manuscript of the Academia de la Historica (fol. 68, 69) gives of the main weapon for hand-to-hand combat used by the Eagle and Jaguar warriors of ancient Mexico, the dreaded *macquauitl*.¹ Eduard Seler (1904: 547) translates this as: „*maquavitl*. – ‚Das Handholz‘ (Obsidianschwert.) – ‚ist in folgender Weise hergestellt: – Aus Eichenholz, breit und flach geschnitzt, gut herausgearbeitet, an beiden Seiten mit einer offenen Rinne versehen; dort sind

¹ The spelling of this word varies, I adopted the one Seler uses himself (1904: 546 ff.).



Obsidian- und Feuersteinstücke aufgereiht und mit Schildkrötenkoth (einer Art Harz) festgekittet.“ The Anonymous Conquistador describes it in almost the same terms: “They have swords of this kind, – of wood made like a two-handed sword, but with the hilt not so long; about three fingers in breadth. The edges are grooved, and in the grooves they insert stone knives that cut like a Toledo knife” (1917: 23 and note 17).

Eyewitness reports, such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s about the decapitation of the horse of Pedro de Morón in the battle against the Tlaxcaltecs under Xicotencatl, are full of admiration about the effectiveness of this swordclub.² Bernal Díaz, in his description of the arsenals of Tenochtitlan, even goes one step further than the Anonymous Conquistador in his praise and declares frankly that there he found “unas como macanas, y otras a maera de espadas de a dos manos, egastadas en ellas unas navajas de pedernal, que cortan muy mejor que nuestras espadas”.³

Besides the swordclub a halberd-like slashing spear of the same construction is to be found among the representations in the codices, both pre- and post-Conquest, and in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala (Fig. 1). This halberd seems to be what is mentioned by Bernal Díaz as: “... y otras lanzas más largas que no las nuestras, con una braza de cuchilla, engastadas en ellas muchas navajas, que aunque den con ella en un broquel o rodela no saltan, y cortan, en fin, como navajas, que se rapan con ellas las cabezas ...”⁴

- 2 Bernal Díaz del Castillo: “Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España”, chapter LXIII (1955, I: 190; 1800: 95; 1956: 104; 1965: 159). The Anonymous Conqueror in his “Narrative” says (1917: 23): “I saw one day an Indian fighting with a mounted man, and the Indian gave the horse of his antagonist such a blow in the breast that he opened it to the entrails and it fell dead on the spot. And the same day I saw another Indian give another horse a blow in the neck, that stretched it dead at his feet ...” The latter seems to be the incident of Pedro de Morón.
- 3 Bernal Díaz. “Historia verdadera”, chapter XCI (1955, I: 273); “... clubs like two-handed swords ...” (1800: 141); “... a kind of broadsword, others like twohanded swords set with stone knives that cut better than our swords ...” (1956: 161); „... Säbel, grosse Schwerter, die nur mit zwei Händen geführt werden konnten, Schwerter mit Obsidianklingen ...“ (1965: 253 f.).
- 4 Bernal Diaz. “Historia verdadera”, chapter XCI (1955, I: 273), “... and lances much larger than ours, with blades six feet in length, so strong that if they fix in a shield they do not break, and sharp enough to use as razors ...” (1800: 141); “... and lances much longer than ours, with six feet of blade set with knives that did not come out even when they were driven into a shield – so sharp, in fact, that they could shave their heads with them ...” (1956: 161); „... Lanzen mit ausserordentlich langen und scharfen Spitzen, die durch jeden Schild drangen. Die Mexikaner verwendeten dazu geschliffene Feuersteine (Obsidian), die so scharf waren wie Schermesser. Sie benutzten diese Steine ja auch als Rasiermesser ...“ (1965: 253 f.).

Judging from the above-mentioned representations the sword-like *macquauitl* must have been rather uniformly close to one meter in length, but two basic formal types can be distinguished. The first is of a very elongated triangular outline, with the square-cut tip of the club more than double the width of the grip; the second type has parallel edges, with the body of the club forming an oblong sharply set off against the narrow grip (Figs. 2, 3). Sometimes the *macquauitl* is represented with narrow stripes running crosswise from edge to edge (Fig. 4), probably indicating reinforcing bindings, sometimes we find lines running parallel to the edges (Fig. 5), probably indicating moldings; these parallel lines are more frequent on Type II. A reconstruction of a *macquauitl* in the American Museum of Natural History is based on Type II (Fig. 6). A fairly constant feature is the shape of the grip, which regularly ends in a rounded pommel; in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala these pommels are clearly shown as pierced for the attachment of a fiststrap, which is shown in some cases (see Figs. 1 and 5).

The cutting edges are represented sometimes as continuous, sometimes as composed of short lengths of blades with spaces between them. In most cases they are painted black to indicate obsidian, occasionally they are left white, which might indicate flint (*itztli* and *tecpatl* respectively). The wooden body of the club is sometimes painted red or turquoise green.

There seems to be no national differentiation between these two *macquauitl* types; both are used indiscriminately by Aztecs and Tlaxcaltecs in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala.

The "halberd" must have been somewhat more than a man's height in length; judging from the illustrations in the Codex Mendoza they might have varied from ca. 1.80 m to ca. 2.20 m (Figs. 7, 8). Again there are two basic types to be found, one with a wooden shaft of equal thickness throughout its entire length, and another with a flattened leaf- or diamond-shaped head on top of the shaft. The "halberds" in the Codex Mendoza show a triangular obsidian spear blade above the cutting edges, but those in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala have only the sharpened wooden tip of the broadened shaft-top as a stabbing point. Again, there seems to be no national differentiation among those "halberds".

In the Codex Nuttall (1975: pl. 8) a warrior in a skull *nahualli* carries a "halberd" which — though tasseled in red and green and edged with white (flint?) blades — is practically identical with specimens in the Codex Mendoza (Fig. 9). However, a slashing spear of a different design is the favorite weapon of the hero of the Codex Nuttall. Eight Deer Jaguar Claw. It has a tall tapering head, painted turquoise green, and edged with about half a dozen sparsly pointed spikes; the base of the head bears

a tassel of yellow, trimmed with a tuft of jaguar fur (Fig. 10). The red shaft tapers in a way that the sharpened butt end might serve as a second point. In one case the head is tipped with a triangular spear blade, painted red. Red tips are characteristics of the otherwise white flint tips of arrows and darts – perhaps the white color of the spikes on Eight Deer’s weapon indicates flint. Flint blades seem to be armament of a formidable weapon wielded by a warrior in *nahualli* of a death deity; however, this elbow-shaped club cannot be strictly called a *macquauitl* (Fig. 11, 12).

Macquauitl-like clubs without the cutting edges were used for special purposes, such as for the gladiatorial sacrifice, when the victim bound to the *temalacatl* was handed a *macquauitl* with tufts of eagle down instead of obsidian blades, but they are also found occasionally as fighting weapons (Figs. 13, 14, 15).

However, they are clearly distinct from the ball-headed clubs frequently found – alongside with *macquauitl* of both kinds – in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala (Fig. 16). These clubs seem to be Sahagún’s *quauhololli*. They are described by Seler (1904: 593, Nr. 54): „*quauhololli* – ‚Die Holzkugel‘. *ynic tlaxintli avaquavitl çan quauololtic* – ‚ist aus Eichenholz geschnitzt, nichts als ein runder Gegenstand‘.“

Though there must have been once tens of thousands of *macquauitl* filling the arsenals and littering the battlefields, not a single one seems to have survived to the present day.

However, there is a tantalizing entry and illustration in the third volume of the first published catalogue of the Real Armería, Madrid, 1849. Here are illustrated on plate 9 a *macquauitl* and a *macquauitl*-halberd (Fig. 17); both bearing a striking decorative pattern of white rings set in groups of four, a pattern to be found on the *tonalochimalli* of *Macuilxochitl* and his dark brother *Ixtlilton* (Figs. 18, 19; Seler 1904a: 461 ff., 490 ff.). The two *macquauitl* are flanked by two sixteenth or seventeenth century Turkish shields, but most surprisingly the caption for this plate is: “Rondelas Japonesas – Rondaches Japonaises”.

The entry for plate IX reads as follows:

“Rondaches Japonaises. Deux armures entière de ce genre existent a l’Armeria; la première est rangée sous le no. 2396; la deuxième sous le no. 2459. Nos deux rondaches leur appartiennent. Ces armures sont en fer; elles furent, dit-on, offertes comme présent à Philippe II par l’empereur de la Chine; mais elles peuvent malgré cela être d’origine mogole ou japonaise. On peut voir, tom. II pag. 29, ce que j’ai dit de ces vêtements de guerre plus affreux que terrible et qui, de nos jours, n’épouvantent pas plus les Anglais que ne le ferait l’épée de bois qui accompagne l’une d’entre elles ou la lance de bois qui complète l’autre (fig. 3 de notre planche) ...”

The entry in vol. II (p. 29), mentioned above, reads:

“Armure Chinoise ou Japonaise. Pendant la règne de Philippe II, l’Espagne, dont le commerce avait pris un grand accroissement, se trouva en relations fréquentes avec les contrées les plus lointaines. Ce fut alors que l’empereur de la Chine et le roi du Japon, si l’on s’en rapporte au catalogue de don Abadia, envoyèrent au maître de la Peninsule trois armures fort singulières, accompagnées de trois épées et de deux lances de bois, dont le tranchant ou la pointe était composé de pierres affilées. De ce trois armures nous en donnons deux, celle d’abord que represente notre planche 13, puis celle qui forme notre planche 23. Quant aux épées et aux lances, elles ne sont plus aujourd’hui à la Armeria Real.”

No matter how these “épées et lances de bois” might have come to Madrid – and there are more direct ways imaginable than via the Emperor of China or the King of Japan – they are not there anymore. They perished in the great fire of July, 1884, that struck the Real Armería just shortly before it was scheduled to be opened to the public (Cortés 1950: 6).⁵ It is saddening to think that the last *macquauitl* did survive not quite long enough to be found by Eduard Seler, who published his translation of Sahagún’s description of the *macquauitl* in 1891.

5 Information from Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid, Dec. 11, 1964: “En relación con la copia fotostática de una ilustración del Jubinal ... la cual representaba dos armas de madera con filos de pedernal, pertenecientes a nuestra Real Armería, de las que solicitaba fotografías e información tengo much gusto en manifestarle que, las citadas armas desaparecieron en el incendio de la Armería, del año 1.884. Formaban parte de un valioso regalo que hizo el Emperador del Japón al Rey Felipe II, probablemente en el año 1.584, fecha en que consta, vino a España und Embajada Japonese. De este acontecimiento escribió un extenso relato el Padre Jesuita Gualteri.”

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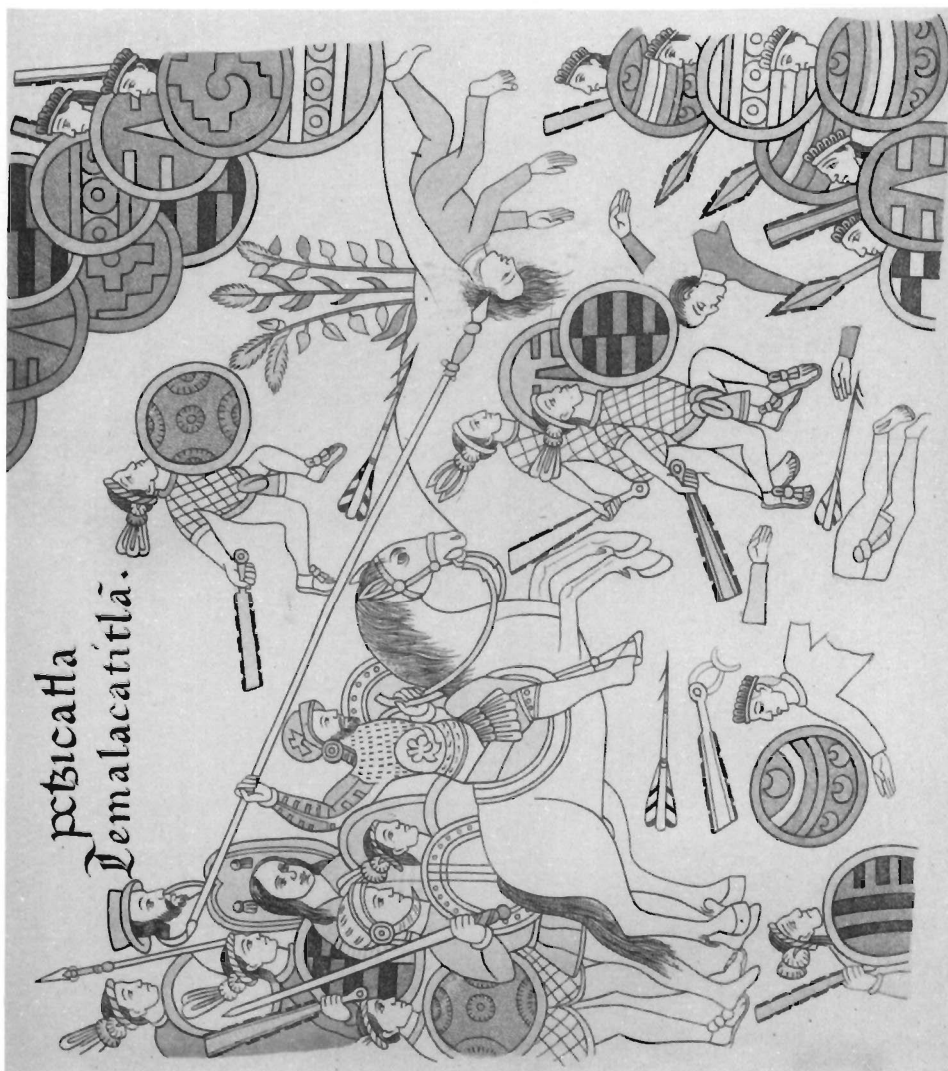
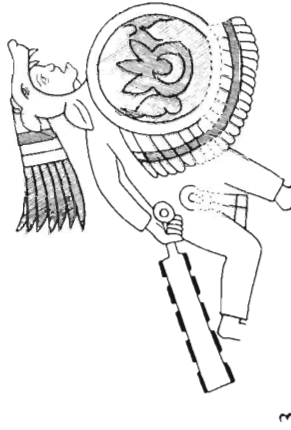


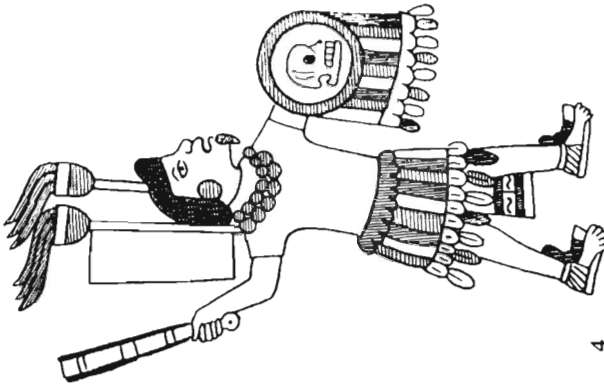
Fig. 1:
Lienzo de Tlaxcala, 26.



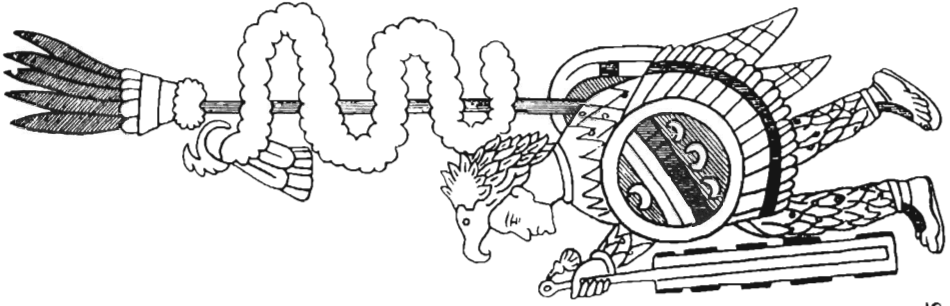
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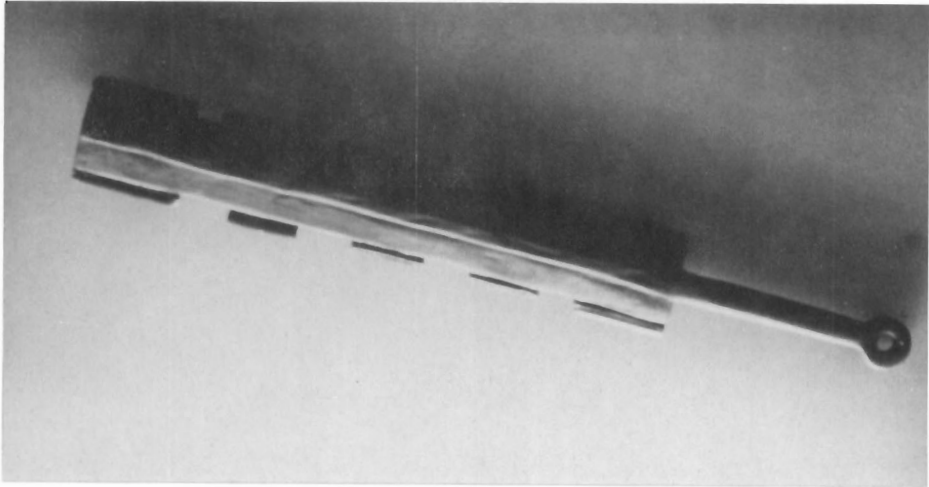


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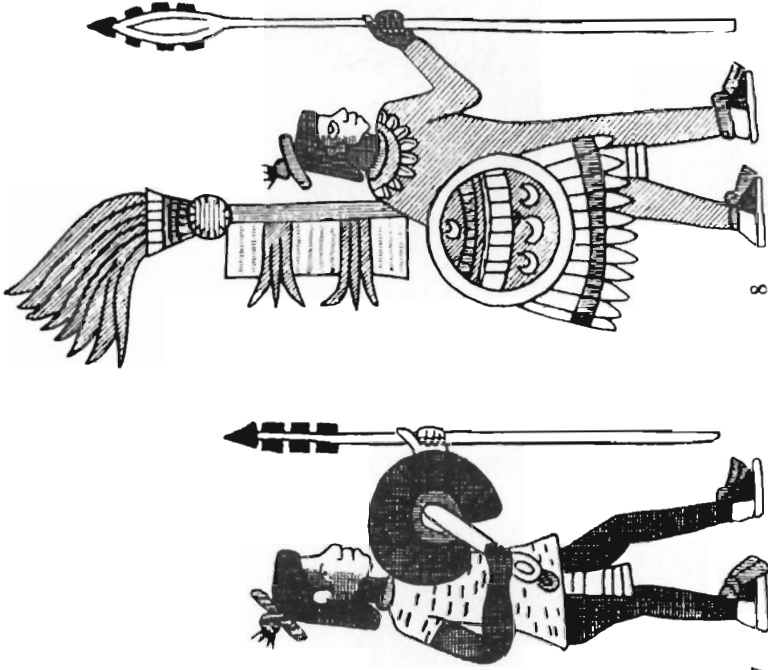


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Fig. 2: Lienzo de Tlaxcala, 34 (after Seler).
Fig. 3: Lienzo de Tlaxcala, 50 (after Seler).
Fig. 4: Sahagún Ms. Academia de la Historia (after Seler).
Fig. 5: Lienzo de Tlaxcala, 48 (after Seler).



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Fig. 6: Reconstruction of *macaquaitl*, using original obsidian blades. American Museum of Natural History, New York.
Fig. 7: Codex Mendoza, 68, 1 (after Seler).
Fig. 8: Codex Mendoza, 68, 22 (after Seler).

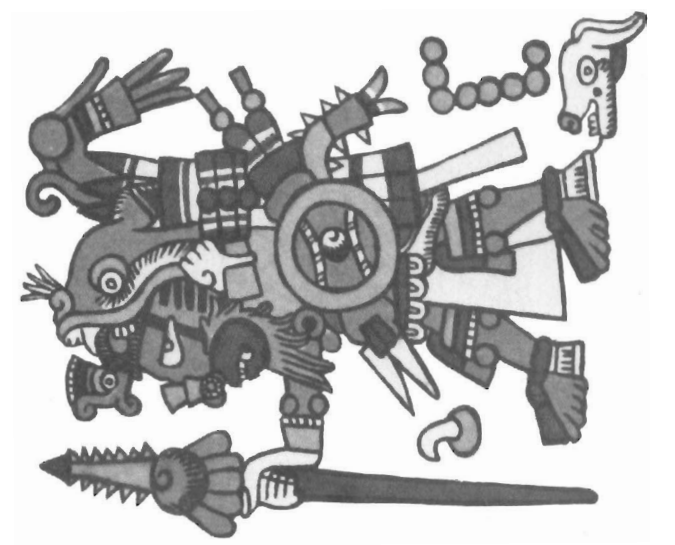


Fig. 10: Codex Nuttall, 70.

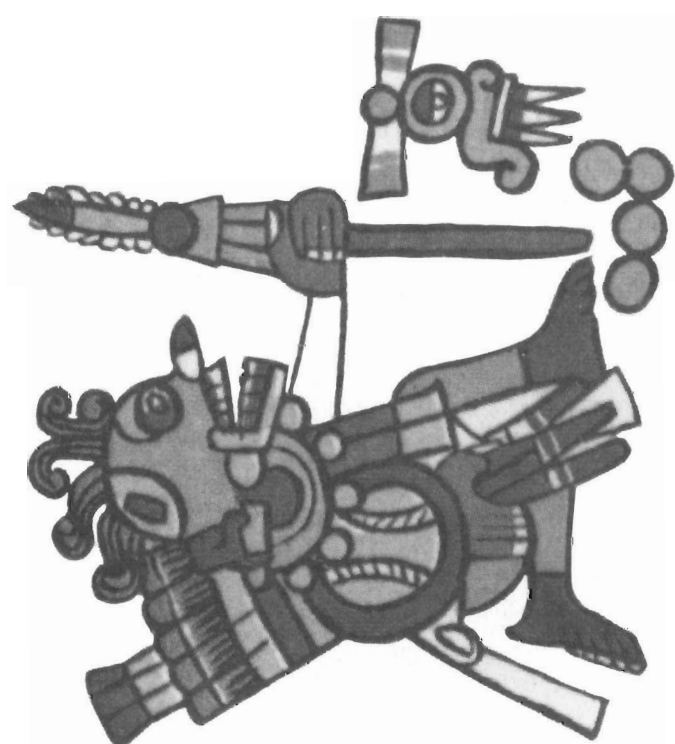


Fig. 9: Codex Nuttall, 8.

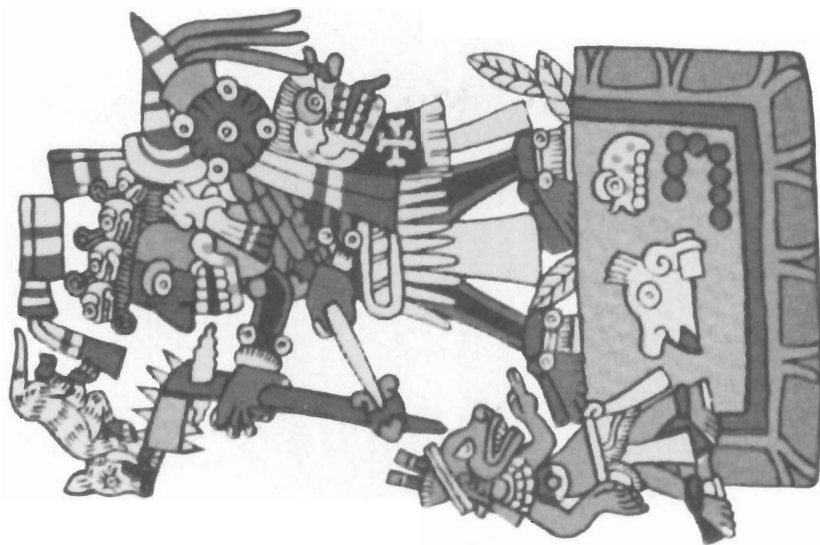


Fig. 12: Codex Nuttall, 68.

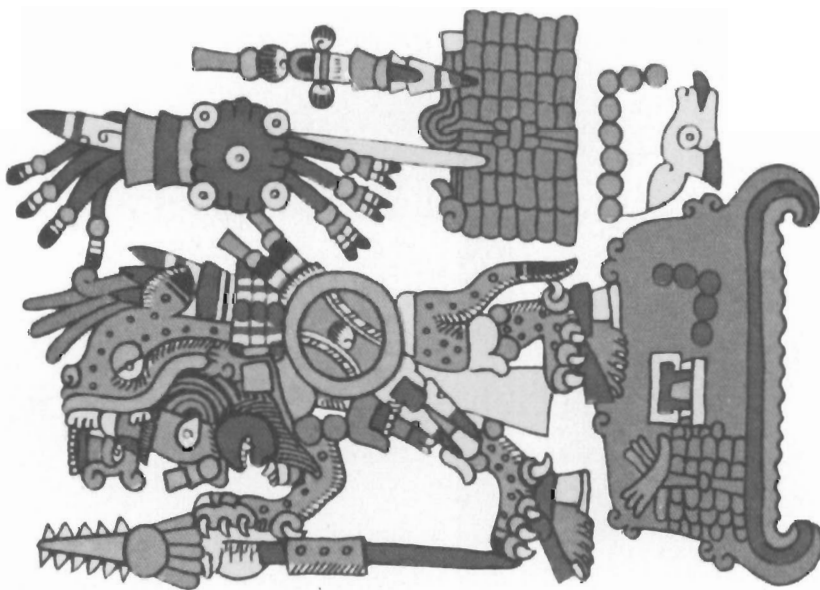
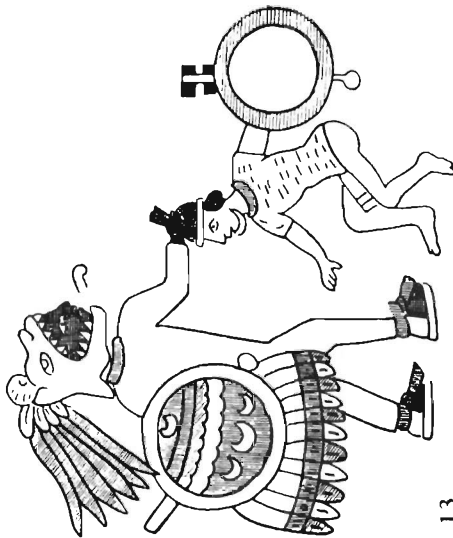
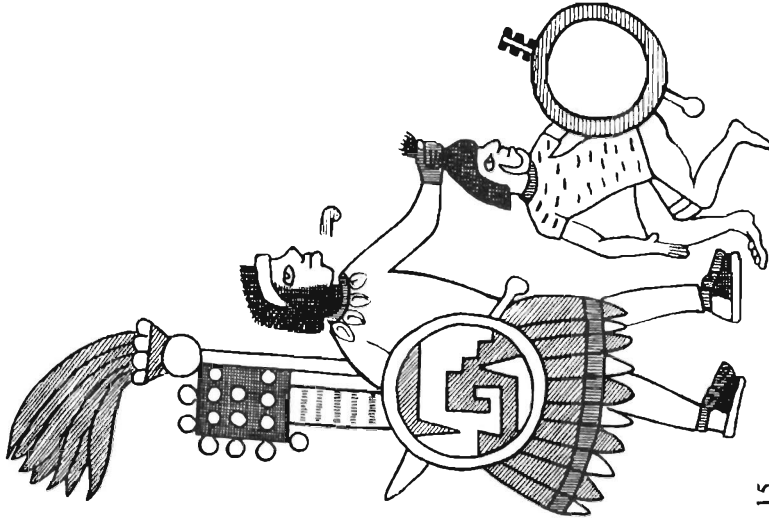


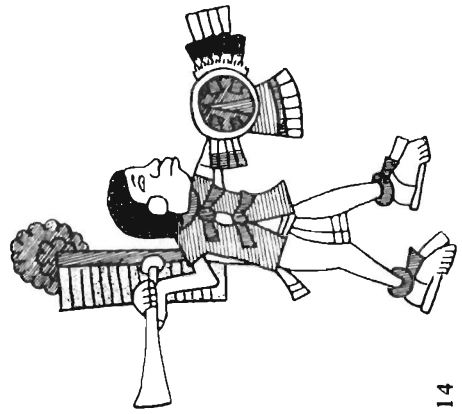
Fig. 11: Codex Nuttall, 68.



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Fig. 13: "Alfaquij" (warrior priest) from Codex Mendoza, 66,6 (after Seiler).
 Fig. 14: Warrior from Xiquipilco. Codex Telleriano-Remensis, 37 (after Seiler).
 Fig. 15: Codex Mendoza, 65, 19 (after Seiler).

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Fig. 16: Battle of Otumpan from Lienzo de Tlaxcala.

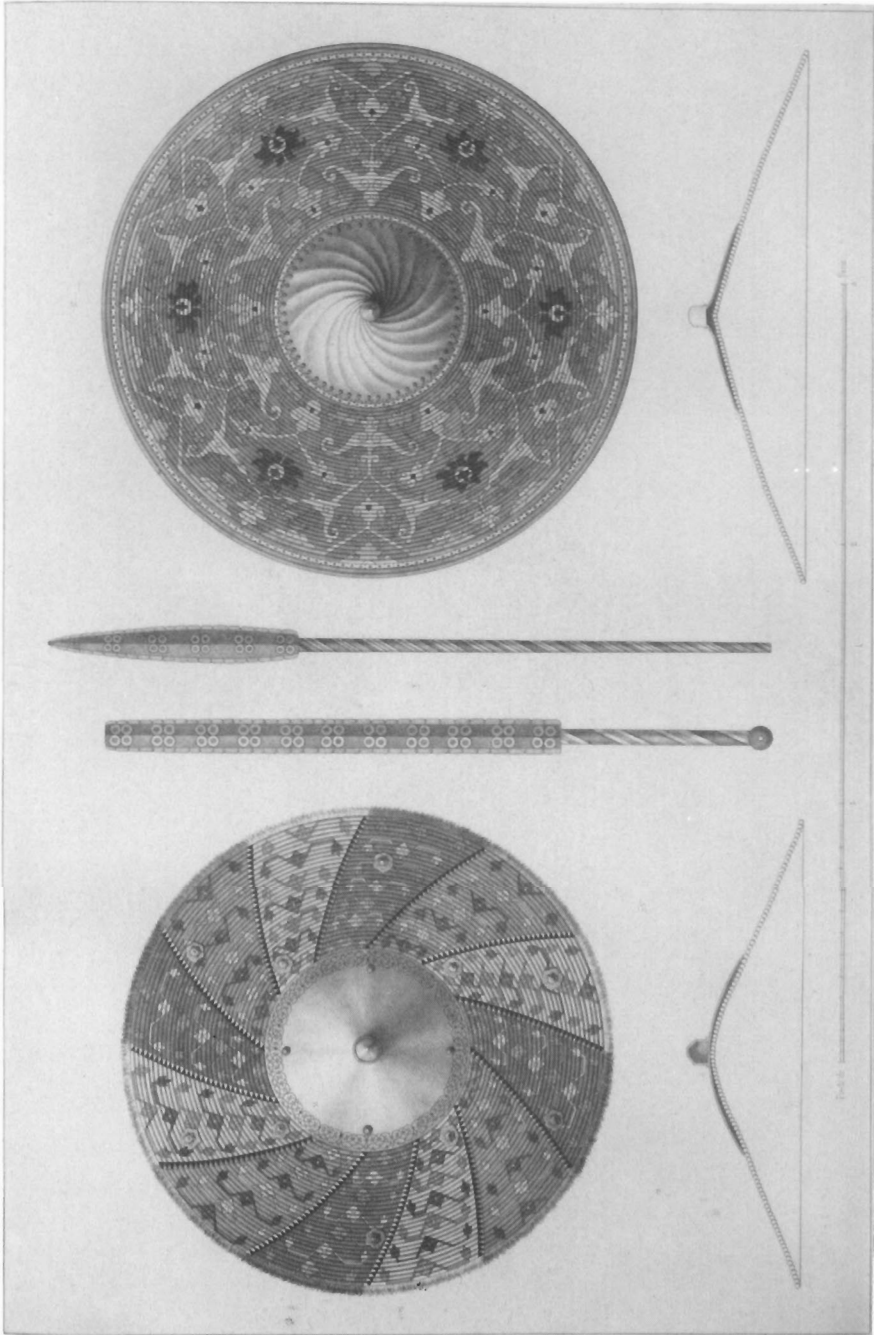


Fig. 17: Plate 9 of the Catalogue of the *Armeria Real de Madrid* (1849)

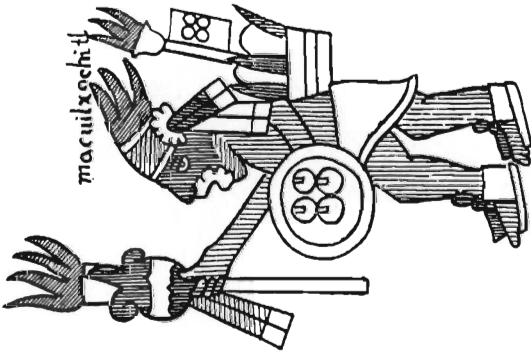


Fig. 18: Macuilxochitl (after Seler).

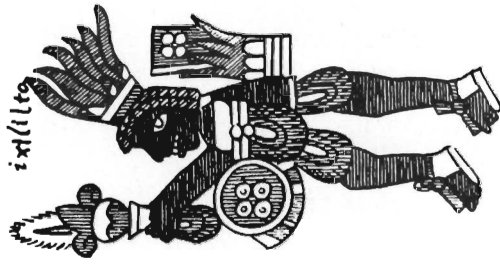


Fig. 19: Ixtliltotl (after Seler).

