

# **Shared Cosmvision in the Mesoamerican Codices**

Sandra Reddick

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Harvard University

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Sandra Reddick

The history of Mesoamerica, in both pre-Hispanic and post-conquest times, is a rich and complex history spanning a variety of city states, empires, languages, over 350,000 square miles, and thousands of years of development. From this area, about two dozen codices, or written books, survive from three of the different Mesoamerican cultures: Maya, Mixtec, and Aztec. Despite the distinct differences between these cultures, certain elements appear across the codices, revealing a shared cosmovision that spans both place and time. This paper will show some of these elements and demonstrate the shared cosmovision among them.

## **Introduction**

Over the past dozen years, I have been actively studying Maya art, language, architecture, and history with a primary interest in Maya painted pottery and manuscripts. I have traveled previously to Mexico City to visit the Templo Mayor excavation site, the archaeological site of Teotihuacan, and Mexico City's wonderful museums. Though I had been exposed from time to time to both Aztec and Mixtec art and writing, the stylistic differences produced by these "not Maya" cultures didn't initially resonate for me like the Maya artwork did. However, during our lectures in "Moctezuma's Mexico: Then and Now," I was introduced to several Aztec pre and post conquest manuscripts which I hadn't studied previously. While studying documents such as the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer and the Codex Mendoza, I noticed what was, for me, unexpected. I saw clear commonalities between these documents and the Maya documents that I was more familiar with.

This paper will demonstrate elements of a shared and persistent Mesoamerican Cosmovision, as revealed within and across documents we call codices, authored by scribes from three distinct Mesoamerican cultures and spanning an estimated 500 years of Mesoamerican civilization. While many such elements exist, this paper will examine only a small subset which includes maize, human sacrifice, sacred caves, the 260-day ritual calendar, deities, and the Mesoamerican ballgame. In addition to Cosmovision, examples of the following major course themes will be called out: Gift Exchange, Long Durée, and Archetype/Repetition.

### **Definition of Cosmovision**

Cosmovision describes a system of values, how the world is viewed and ones' place within that world view. Cosmovision, a learned construct, is formed by what we are taught from the time we are born and typically evolves throughout our lives. Handed down to us by our parents, preachers, or teachers, it is influenced by everything we are exposed to or take part in, such as family, school, church, cities, governments, culture, sports, or the media. Inga Clendinnen explains how cosmvision is formed when she states: "The men and women of any particular culture are trained in the great reflexive, reiterative texts of that culture: in myths and stories, in games and play, in commonsense pragmatics, in aesthetic and moral preferences; their imaginations stretched and shaped to particular themes and possibilities." (Aztecs, 337).

Today, our academic, religious, and scientific training along with our thoughts, ideas, experiences, and day-to-day realities all shape our modern individual and collective understanding of our world and of the universe and serves to form both our individual and collective cosmvision. Through careful cultivation, our individual belief systems may sufficiently align with the collective cosmvision of those around us in the society we live in. The study of Mesoamerican Cosmovision seeks to understand, based on the evidence left behind,

what people thought their place in the world was and why they maintained these beliefs. In the study of Mesoamerican Cosmovision, codices provide written evidence for us to study and learn about components of their world view, what was important to them, their rituals, and how they experienced their world and viewed their place within it.

### **Writing and Codices in Nueva España**

The Spaniards were initially surprised that the indigenous of Mesoamerica had not only writing, but also books. In 'De Orbe Novo, a series of letters written to the Pope published in 1521, Peter Martyr D'Anghera describes the accidental arrival of Cortez in Cozumel in the year 1519, after Cortez's expedition was blown off course en route to Isla de los Sacrificios. He notes his surprise, stating "They [Cortez and his men] even discovered, Most Holy Father, many books" (De Orbe Novo Vol 2, 27). D'Anghera also describes, in an earlier letter, an encounter where the situation was reversed. He retells a story told to him of an indigenous fugitive who upon witnessing a Spaniard reading a book, asks with surprise, "You also have books? You also understand the signs by which you communicate with the absent?" (De Orbe Novo Vol 1, 400). Fr. Bernadino de Sahagún reported that the Aztecs described their codices as the "guides, rules, models, standards, and even torches that illuminated the way for the Aztec people" (Boone, Cycles of Time, 2). Writing, in its many forms, including alphabetic, syllabic, logographic, pictographic, and cartographic, serve as a mechanism for both documenting and transmitting knowledge, from person to person and from generation to generation. From these accounts, we can see that the indigenous peoples of ancient Mesoamerica were aware that books and writing served this function.

Codices then were not only mechanisms of recording histories, rituals, and beliefs, but also served to sustain the shared Cosmovision within their culture, and potentially transmit that

Cosmovision between distant and disparate cultures. The review taken up here is to identify and demonstrate where shared interests, ways of life, rituals, and belief systems, in other words, a shared Mesoamerican Cosmovision, are revealed through the writings preserved in these ancient manuscripts.

### **Survey of Available Codices**

For this analysis, I will examine imagery from the following Codices, or painted documents, which survive from three major Mesoamerican cultures: Aztec, Mixtec, and Maya.

1. Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2 is an early post-conquest cartographic history, commissioned in the mid-sixteenth century by the indigenous lords of Cuauhtinchan and painted in traditional pre-conquest style (Boone, *House of the Eagle*, 27–29). Drawn on a single large sheet of amate paper, this 109 x 204 centimeter details the founding of the polity of Cuauhtinchan, beginning with the Cuauhtinchan people's emergence from the mythical Place of Seven Caves, Chicomoztoc (Boone, *House of the Eagle*, 27–28). It details their lengthy search for a home, the hardships encountered along the way, and their ultimate settling at Cuauhtinchan, or House of the Eagle (Boone, *House of the Eagle*, 27). The story told is a typical Mesoamerican origin/migration/foundation story and conveys information about both the passage of time as well as spacial location of the events (Boone, *House of the Eagle*, 27–28).
2. The Codex Borbonicus is an Aztec post-conquest screenfold manuscript, painted in pre-conquest style and believed to have originated in or near Tenochtitlan (Boone, *Cycles of Time*, 211–212). This painted manuscript is considered an Aztec masterpiece and our best surviving example of Mexica cosmovision (Boone, *Cycles of Time*, 6). While most

Codices are read from right to left, the Codex Borbonicus is unusual, as it is read from left to right (Boone, *Cycles of Time*, 67)

3. The Codex Fejérváry-Mayer and Codex Laud are pre-Hispanic manuscripts and considered to be stylistic twins (Boone, *Cycles of Time*, 226). The provenance of these codices is the subject of much debate as they demonstrate Aztec/Nahua, Mixtec, and Gulf Coast traits. It has been suggested that these two manuscripts may have originated to the east of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, in Teotitlan del Camino or Tochtepec (Boone, *Cycles of Time*, 229) or possibly even as far east as Veracruz, on the Gulf of Mexico (Taube, *Aztec & Maya Myths*, 18). Both are described as ritual calendars (Boone, *Cycles of Time*, 5).
4. The Codex Borgia is screenfold manuscript, beautifully painted on 76 pages. These fan-fold pages were made from 14 different sections of animal skins, attached end to end, trimmed to a uniform 27 cm, and whitewashed with powdered lime-plaster (Díaz and Rodgers, *Codex Borgia*, xiii). Although this codex includes many elements widely considered to be of Aztec origin, it also contains many clearly Mixtec elements as well, making its classification as Aztec or Mixtec unclear (Díaz and Rodgers, *Codex Borgia*, xiv). While its exact provenance is unknown, it is believed to have originated from Mexico's southern central highlands in the areas now known as Oaxaca or Puebla shortly before the conquest, perhaps in the late 1400's or early 1500 (Díaz and Rodgers, *Codex Borgia*, xiv).
5. The Madrid Codex is one of only four surviving Maya codices and the longest of them all, at 112 pages (Vail and Aveni, *Research Methodologies*, 3). It is generally believed to be a pre-conquest document, originating in Yucatan during the Late Postclassic period,

between 1200-1500, excluding one page that was “patched” with a papal bull in the late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Vail and Aveni, *Research Methodologies*, 11). John F. Chuchiak describes this post-conquest modification as perhaps “a type of syncretistic appropriation of Catholic religious power” (*Papal Bulls*, 78).

6. The Dresden Codex, another of the remaining Maya codices, can be viewed year-round in the Dresden University Library’s book vault in Dresden, Germany. I had the good fortune to view this document personally on July 30, 2018. It consists of 74 painted pages on two sides of 39 sheets of bark paper and includes four blank pages. There is speculation that this Codex may have been one of the Codices returned to Spain as part of the Royal Fifth by Cortez in 1520 (Bricker and Bricker, *Astronomy*, 6). The Dresden Codex includes a series of pages called the Venus Pages, an almanac which details the timing of the appearance of Venus in the morning and night skies.
7. The Codex Zouche-Nuttall was first shown by Alfanso Caso in 1949 to be a pre-conquest Mixtec document, originating from southern Mexico in the Oaxaca area (Nuttall, *Codex Nuttall*, ix). Its exact provenance is unknown as we have no information regarding its physical origins prior to its appearance in a monastery in Florence in 1859 (Nuttall, *Codex Nuttall*, x). It contains 47 folios, painted front and back, with a total of 86 painted pages and 8 unpainted pages (Nuttall, *Codex Nuttall*, xiii). Currently held in the British Museum, there is evidence that the cover of this document was once elaborately decorated with feathers and jewels (Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*, 23). The Codex Zouche-Nuttall contains a Mixtec genealogical history, from 838 CE to 1330 CE spanning nearly 500 years and an origin story (Nuttall, *Codex Nuttall*, xvi).

## **Review of Common Elements**

While many common elements exist across the Mesoamerican Codices, they can sometimes be difficult to recognize due to the complexity of the iconography in which they appear. Significant advanced academic study and scholarly analysis is required to make sense of the archaic and complex writing systems employed by the Mesoamerican scribes within these documents. I do not rely strictly on my own visual observations for this exercise. Instead, I lean heavily on the significant research and publication of Mesoamerican scholars and their analyses of what specific images represent and why it is understood to be so. For this analysis, I will highlight parallels found in a subset of the existing Codices, on the following six distinct topics: maize, sacred caves, deities, human sacrifice, the 260-day ritual calendar, and the Mesoamerican ballgame. The examples identified here are by no means a comprehensive list of the parallels that exist. To the contrary, many more such parallels are well known while others have yet to be “discovered” (meaning recognized, researched, documented, formally proposed/published, reviewed, and accepted based on evidence). The common elements discussed here are what I consider as some of the more straightforward or interesting parallels identified during my own research.

### **Maize**

Maize was an early primary food source associated with the development of urban centers across Mesoamerica (Carrasco, RoM, 45), even had its own deity, the Maize God (Figure 7a, b, and c). Top academics on the subject of Mesoamerica points out that one of the principle enablers of a unified Mesoamerican cosmivision was the widespread cultivation of maize which created what Alfredo Lopez Austin refers to as a “strong agricultural nucleus” (Tamoanchan, Tlalocan, 11). Guillermo Bonfil Batalla suggest a unique inter-dependency existed between the

indigenous people and maize, stating: “Corn can grow only with human intervention, since the corn cob has no mechanism to disperse its seed without human help...a child of Mesoamerican parents. Its parents, in turn, are children of corn” (México Profundo, 4). With an understanding of the importance of maize in Mesoamerica, it is not surprising that images of maize appear frequently throughout the Mesoamerican codices.



Figure 1. Maize: (a) Borgia, 53 (Díaz and Rodgers, Codex Borgia, 25); (b) Borgia, 43 (Díaz and Rodgers, Codex Borgia, 35); (c) Zouche-Nuttall 19 (Nuttall, Codex Nuttall, fol. 19)

Borgia Plate 53 (Figure 1a) contains an example of ritual bloodletting which results in the earth yielding a healthy maize stalk bearing multiple ears of maize. Marcel Mauss might describe this scene as a form of gift exchange or ‘contract sacrifice’ in which the blood gift made to the

gods establishes an obligation for the gods to repay the debt in the form of a bountiful maize harvest (The Gift, 17). Bruce Byland describes this image as one which “beautifully portrays the mythic relationship held between people and the earth” (Díaz and Rodgers, Codex Borgia, xxvii).

Maize is also prominent in Borgia Plate 43 (Figure 1b) where an image of the sun gives birth to a maize deity, a series of six deities give sustenance to or receive sustenance from offerings of maize, and a seventh deity descends with a basket of maize on his back (Boone, Cycles of Time, 202–203). The entire scene, framed within a border of brightly colored maize cobs, leaves little question about the importance of maize in this image. In the Mixtec Codex Zouche-Nuttall, folio 19 (Figure 1c) contains the image of an important female identified as Lady One Death, emerging from a cave between a pair of maize stalks, an indication of her royal birth (Williams, Zouche-Nuttall, 80–81, 89–91). Although Williams only describes these as “two plants,” the curled seeded tassels extending from the tops identify them as maize stalks, based on the similarly curled and seeded maize tassel iconography present in both Borgia images.

## **Human Sacrifice**

Human sacrifice, and specifically heart sacrifice, was practiced throughout Mesoamerica for a variety of purposes. From early post-conquest sources, we have extensive reports of the Aztec rituals involving heart sacrifice including this description from Bernal Diaz del Castillo who writes “with stone knives they sawed open their chest and drew out their palpitating hearts and offered them to the idols” (HCNS, 287). Heart sacrifice, while disturbing to our modern ways of thought, our cosmovision, was understood in ancient Mesoamerica, along with ritual bloodletting, as forms of gift exchange with the gods. Within the ancient Mesoamerican cosmovision, these actions were viewed as a necessary means to return sacred energy to the gods

in repayment for all of the things the gods provided, such as life, food, water, or the rising of the sun and it was believed the gods required frequent rejuvenation in order to sustain a cosmic balance (Carrasco, RoM, 66–67).

Rituals that included heart sacrifice included the New Fire Ceremony which took place only once every 52 years, the annual Festival for Tezcatlipoca, as well as routine monthly sacrifices, every 20 days, of captured warriors, women, or even children (Carrasco, RoM, 66,105-112). In the Mexican Codices, we find many examples of both heart sacrifice and blood, or auto, sacrifice, however, in the few surviving Maya codices, we find only one clear example of heart sacrifice in the Madrid Codex (Figure 2a) where the victim is shown laid back over a ceremonial stone (Paxton, Tayasal Origin, 97). Images from the Codices Zouche-Nuttall and Borgia (Figure 2b and c) show similar heart excisions using a flint knife, indicated by the red and white blade (Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*, 34).



*Figure 2 Heart Sacrifice: (a) Madrid 76 (Lee Jr., *Los Códices Mayas*, 122); (b) Zouche-Nuttall 81 (Nuttall, *Codex Nuttall*, fol. 81); (c) Borgia 42 (Díaz and Rodgers, *Codex Borgia*, 86).*

## Sacred Caves

Throughout Mesoamerican writings, caves are identified as sacred, as places of origin or as places from which the gods emerge (Carrasco, RoM, 58). Different versions of these stories exist, sometimes identifying a cave as the place of emergence of a deity, a polity or even an individual. The Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2 tells the origin story of the polity of Cuauhtinchan, which begins with the emergence of their Chichimec hunter-gatherer ancestors from

Chicomoztoc, the Place of Seven Caves (Figure 3a). Both the cave and the Aztec day sign 1 Crocodile, the first day in the Aztec calendar, identify this scene as marking a time and place of origin (Boone, *House of the Eagle*, 33). In the Maya Dresden Codex, the Rain God, Chac, is pictured sitting in a cave (Figure 3b) (Love, *Paris Codex*, 51). In an elaborate double page scene in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, Lady One Death, an important Mixtec ruler, emerges from a cave between maize stalks (shown previously in Figure 1c). Her emergence from a cave, the scalloped arch with spiral ends upon which she stands, symbolically identifies her as the progenitor, or primary ancestor, of the Wasp Hill dynasty (Williams, *Zouche-Nuttall*, 80–81).



*Figure 3 Sacred Caves: (a) Mapa de Cuahutinchan No. 2 (Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*, 176); (b) Dresden 30a (Love, *Paris Codex*, 51):*

## **260-day Ritual Calendars**

The 260-day ritual calendar is most vividly displayed in two strikingly similar documents. Page one of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (Figure 4a), described as the cross almanac for its Maltese Cross-like format, lays out the 260-day period, marked by twenty processions of thirteen-day periods, called trecenas, in a geometric symmetrical pattern. The Madrid Codex, created much farther to the east in the Yucatan region, contains an image of the same layout of

twenty trecenas (Figure 4b), in the same format as found in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer. Both documents include the day names of the first day of each trecena, with Aztec day signs in the Fejérváry-Mayer and with Maya glyphs in the Madrid Codex. Both documents also depict pairs of deities in each of the four cardinal directions, north, south, east, and west, and an image in the middle which identifies the fifth direction, the center.



Figure 4 260-day ritual calendars: (a) Fejérváry-Mayer, 1 (Codex Fejérváry-Mayer); (b) Madrid 75-76 (Lee Jr., *Los Códices Mayas*, 122); (c) Borgia 56 (Díaz and Rodgers, *Codex Borgia*, 22).

An abbreviated example of the 260-day ritual calendar is found in the Codex Borgia (Figure 4c) which lists in order each of the day names of the first day of the twenty trecenas. Twelve placeholder dots represent the other twelve days of each trecena. A pair of deities, the gods of life and death, are shown back to back, in what Byland describes as “the duality of existence, the joining of opposites and the inevitable relationship of life and death.” (Díaz and Rodgers, Codex Borgia, xxviii). Distinct differences appear across these documents which demonstrate they are not merely copies of one another, instead, they clearly show that the Aztec, Mixtec, and Maya all shared a common model for measuring and tracking the passage of days.

## **Deities**

### Tlaloc/Chac – God of Rain and Lightning

Bonfil Batalla asserts that a shared Mesoamerican cosmovision arises out of hundreds or even thousands of years of “contact and mutual influence” between “different peoples and in different epochs”, of which Tlaloc and Chac are a primary example (Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo*, 73–74). Tlaloc (central Mexican) and Chac (Maya) are the names for the god of rain and lightning, one of the longest continuously worshiped gods in Mesoamerica and whose worship can be traced as far back as the first century BCE (Taube, *Aztec & Maya Myths*, 52).

A review of imagery in the Aztec and Mixtec codices reveals that Tlaloc is often depicted with goggle eyes, a circular embellishment around the eye, and pointy teeth. In the Mayan Codices, Chac has a similar distinctive embellishment circling his eye and may also have pointy teeth. He sometimes holds an axe or a serpent, symbolic of his power to wield lightning (Taube, *Aztec & Maya Myths*, 52). He may also be shown with flowing water and/or the pigment blue to emphasize his association with rain and water.



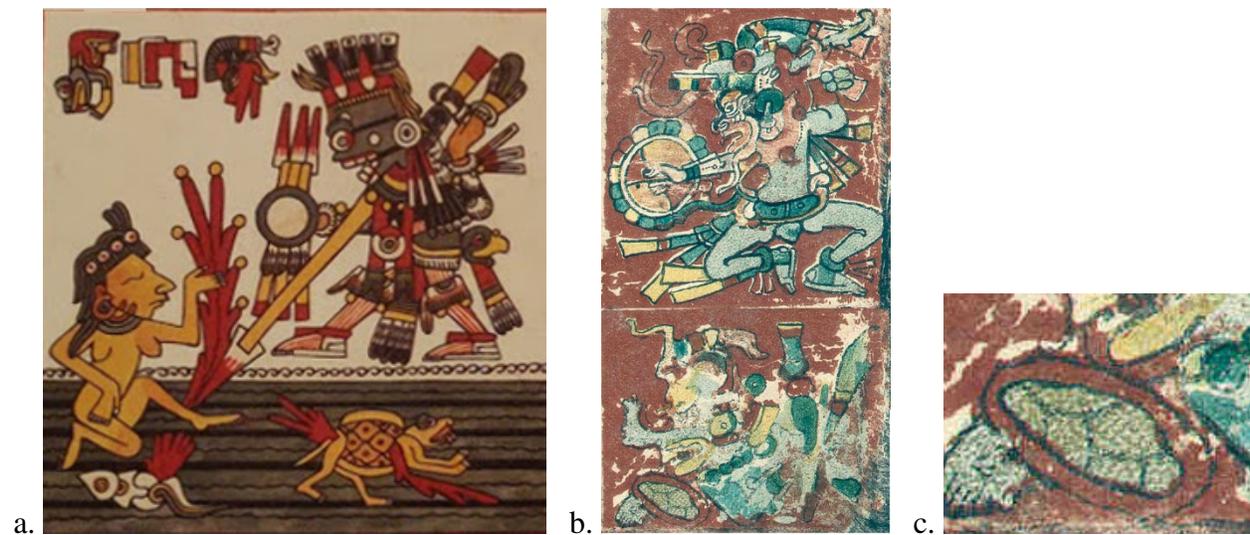
Figure 5 Tlaloc/Chac Rain Deities: (a) Borgia 75 (Díaz and Rodgers, *Codex Borgia*, 3); (b) Borgia 67 (Díaz and Rodgers, *Codex Borgia*, 11); (c) Laud 2 (Nowotny, *Tlacuilolli*, 157); (d) Borbónico 5 (Hamy and Paso y Troncoso, *Códice Borbónico*, 5); (e) Madrid 6 (Lee Jr., *Los Códices Mayas*, 87); (f) Madrid 30 (Lee Jr., *Los Códices Mayas*, 99); (g) Mexico (Grolier) Folio 4 (Alcántara, *Grolier*, fol. 4).

In the codices Borgia, Laud, and Borbónicus (Figure 5a/b/c/d), the goggle-like circle around the eye is seen and Tlaloc's teeth are oversized and pointed. In Madrid and Mexico/Grolier (Figure 5e, f, and g), the Maya Chac has a curly embellishment circling his eye and forming a similar goggle to that of his Aztec/Mixtec counterpart. The Maya Chac images in Dresden Figure 5e and f also have long pointy teeth like the Tlaloc images. In Laud (Figure 5c), Tlaloc holds a serpent staff in one hand and an axe in the other. In Borbónicus (Figure 5d), the small Tlaloc in the upper right holds a serpent staff, while in the Madrid (Figure 5f), Chac stands on the head of a celestial serpent. Water can be seen flowing from the feet of Tlaloc in Figure 5b and d, while Chac in Figure 5f pours water from a vessel. Figure 5d, e, and f show both Tlaloc/Chac and the flowing water painted in blue.

#### Venus God Spearing Sequences

A remarkably similar series of five images appear in both the Borgia and Dresden codices which are known to be related to the 584-day Venus cycle and the appearance of Venus in the sky as the morning star (Taube and Bade, *An Appearance of Xiuhtecuhtli*, 13). Parallels between the Venus lore in both the Central Mexico and Maya codices were first identified by Eduard Seler in 1898 (Nowotny, *Tlacuilolli*, 257). The stylistic differences between the two series makes them appear unrelated, however, careful analysis by multiple scholars over the past 120 years have begun to reveal the commonalities between them. Although there are many parallels between the iconography in these images (Taube and Bade, *An Appearance of Xiuhtecuhtli*, 35), for this analysis, I will discuss only specific elements in the first, third and fifth scenes, found in Borgia 53-54 and Dresden 46, 48 and 50. These display some of the clearest parallels between the two documents.

In each of the five Borgia scenes, the Mexican Venus God, Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, is shown in attacking five different targets using spears thrown with an atlatl (Taube and Bade, An Appearance of Xiuhtecuhtli, 13). The Dresden scribe splits pairs of images between two frames in middle and bottom images of each page. Within each pair of images, the Maya Venus God above wields a spear with an atlatl while the lower image shows the target being speared. I have combined the image pairs from the Dresden into a single image, removing the hieroglyphic text, for clarity in presentation here.



*Figure 6 Venus Spearing 1: (a) Borgia 53 (Díaz and Rodgers, Codex Borgia, 25); (b) Dresden 46 (Förstemann, Códice de Dresde, 46); (c) Dresden 46 turtle shell closeup*

In the first scene in Borgia (Figure 6a), the Venus god spears the water goddess (Nowotny, Tlacuilolli, 260). A shell and a turtle in the water are also bleeding, suggesting that they too have been speared. In the corresponding scene in Dresden (Figure 6b), the speared individual holds or is wearing a turtle shell (closeup in Figure 6c).



*Figure 7 Venus Spearing 3: (a) Borgia 54 (Díaz and Rodgers, Codex Borgia, 24); (b) Dresden 48 (Förstemann, Códice de Dresde, 48); (c) Dresden 48 Maize God closeup*

The third scene in Borgia (Figure 7a) shows the Venus god spearing the Maize God (Nowotny, Tlacuilolli, 260). Note the maize cobs and maize tassels on the target's head and the maize cob in his hand which identify him as the Maize God. In Dresden 48 (Figure 7b), the speared target is also identified as the Maize God (Nowotny, Tlacuilolli, 260). In Maya iconography, the Maize God (closeup in Figure 7c), commonly appears with a tall, sloped forehead which transforms into maize foliage (Bricker and Bricker, Astronomy, 112).

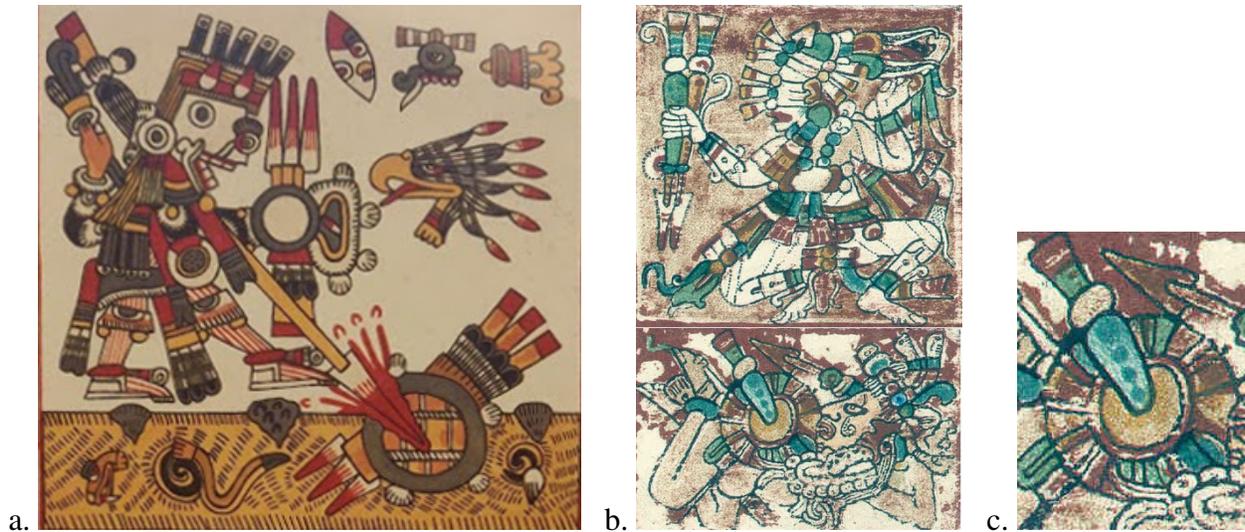


Figure 8 Venus Spearing 5: (a) Borgia 54 (Díaz and Rodgers, *Codex Borgia*, 24); (b) Dresden 50 (Förstemann, *Códice de Dresde*, 50); (c) Dresden 50 shield closeup

The fifth and final scene in Borgia shows the Venus god spearing a shield (Figure 8a). In the Dresden, the target shield with a spear tip embedded in it can be seen (Figure 8b and c). Of note in this Dresden image is the appearance of a Central Mexican deity as the attacker.

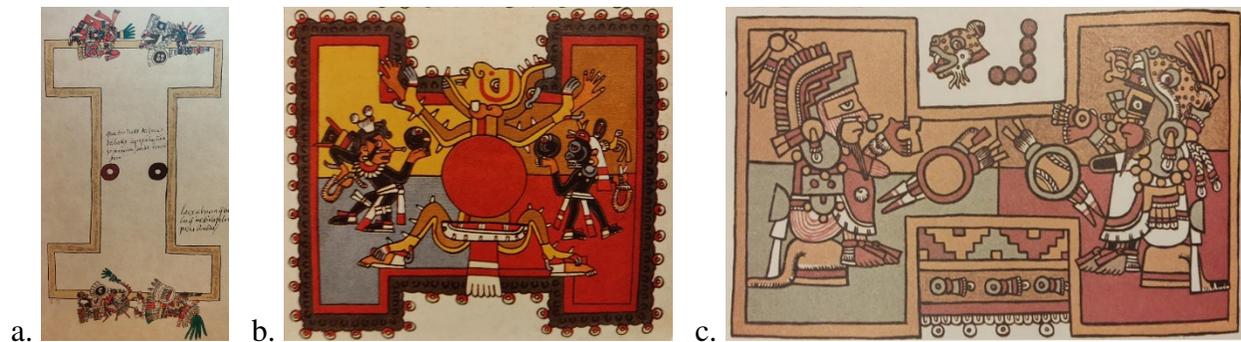
Itzlacolihqui-Ixquimilli, the Aztec god of stone, coldness and castigation is recognized by the blindfold over his eyes as well as the stone dart tip protruding from his headdress (Taube and Bade, *An Appearance of Xiuhtecuhtli*, 14–16).

Specific iconographic details which identify deities in a common way between the Aztec, Mixtec and Maya reveal a shared understanding of these deities. Furthermore, they suggest either a common origin for the deities shared between these groups or significant interaction between groups over extended periods of time which resulted in transmission of these details and eventual syncretism into a common mythology.

### **The Ball Game**

The Mesoamerican ball game is recognized as a diagnostic ethnohistoric element of all Mesoamerican cultures and played a critical role in both religion and politics. The game was

played by both commoners and nobles, youths and adults, and by both men and women (Fash and Fash, *Religion, Politics*, 31). The tribute rolls of the Codex Mendoza identify annual tributes of 16,000 rubber balls used in the game, which attests to its widespread popularity (Santley et al., *Politicization of the Ballgame*, 9). Additionally, evidence of the ballgame has been found in ceramic figurines dating back to 1000 BCE (Ekholm, *Ceramic Figurines*, 242).



*Figure 9 Ballcourts: (a) Borbonicus 25 (Hamy and Paso y Troncoso, Códice Borbónico, 25); (b) Borgia 35 (Díaz and Rodgers, Codex Borgia, 43); (c) Zouche-Nuttall Folia 80 (Nuttall, Codex Nuttall, fol. 80)*

In the Aztec and Mixtec codices, we find many examples of ballcourts, ballgames in play, or ritual ceremonies in the iconography. Ball games took place in the celestial realm played by the gods which became the archetype or divine model which was repeated on earth. The ballcourt in Codex Borbonicus (Figure 9a) is drawn with only the basic ballcourt features, a standard “I” shaped field layout and two optional circles mid court. Characters on either end of the court are elaborately dressed, suggesting ritual activities taking place rather than actual sport. In Borgia 35 (Figure 9b), two players stand on opposite sides of the ballcourt, each holding a ball. The ballcourt is drawn with a black scalloped perimeter and circles representing stars which indicate events taking place in the celestial realm (Nowotny, *Tlacuilolli*, 178). In Zouche-Nuttall 80 (Figure 9c), two lords meet in a ballcourt with shields and spears which indicate warfare between the polities (Boone, *Stories in Red and Black*, 34). Figure 9b and c display Archetype and

Repetition, where the divine model of warfare or competition between the gods on the ballcourt provides an example for humans to follow.



Figure 10 Ballgame: (a) Dresden 41 (Förstemann, *Códice de Dresde*, 41); (b) K7694 (Kerr, *MayaVase.com*); (c) Ball court at Monte Alban (McMillan); (d) Borgia 35 ball closeup

There is ample archaeological evidence of the proliferation of ballcourts in the Maya region. and many Maya codex-style vessels show ballgame imagery. A search of Justin Kerr’s online Maya Vase Database returns over five dozen vessels with various forms ballgame iconography (Kerr, *MayaVase.com*). Yet within the four surviving Maya manuscripts, only one possible example is found, on page 41 of the Dresden Codex (Figure 10a). While the typical depiction of

the ballcourt in the Central Mexican codices shows the court in a top down view, revealing a characteristic “I” shape, the typical Maya iconography presents the court from a ground-level profile view in which the levels and angles of the playing field are shown.

In the Dresden image we can see a structure with stair-like levels in between outer walls. In the middle is a black circle drawn with a spiral inside. A similar stair-like structure can be seen in a Codex-style vase (Figure 10b) along with a black ball and two ball players. These images resemble the stair-like format of the ball court at Monte Alban (Figure 10c) when viewed in profile. A close-up from the ball court image in Borgia 35 (Figure 10d) shows the ball drawn with a spiral like the ball in the Dresden image. Although the ball court iconography is quite different between the Maya and Central Mexican artists, it is clear from the images that they all played some form of the Mesoamerican ball game. A defining activity of Mesoamerican culture for 2500 years, the ballgame is recognized as a persistent nucleus of Mesoamerican identity: an example of a long dureé element.

## **Conclusion**

The common elements that appear across the Maya, Mixtec and Aztec Codices show how these three different Mesoamerican cultures shared similar concerns, ideas, calendars, and belief systems. Despite significant stylistic differences between the manuscripts originating from each of these cultures, common themes, gods, stories, and iconographic conventions reveal the existence of a shared Mesoamerican Cosmvision.

The cultivation of maize penetrated deep into the Mesoamerican identity and became part of a collective mythology with similar Maize gods. Human/Heart sacrifice appears across the codices, demonstrating that they shared certain ritual practices. Caves are consistently depicted as sacred spaces, revered places of origin or places from which gods or royalty emerge.

Calendars laid out in nearly identical formats, or with identical function, measure the passage of time in a common 260-day ritual cycle. Maize, Rain, and Venus deities share specific iconographic details which identify them, and similar mythological stories are told. Finally, the Mesoamerican ballgame, an important and defining component of Mesoamerican culture and identity, appears in both the Aztec and Mixtec codices, and possibly in the Maya Dresden Codex as well.

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