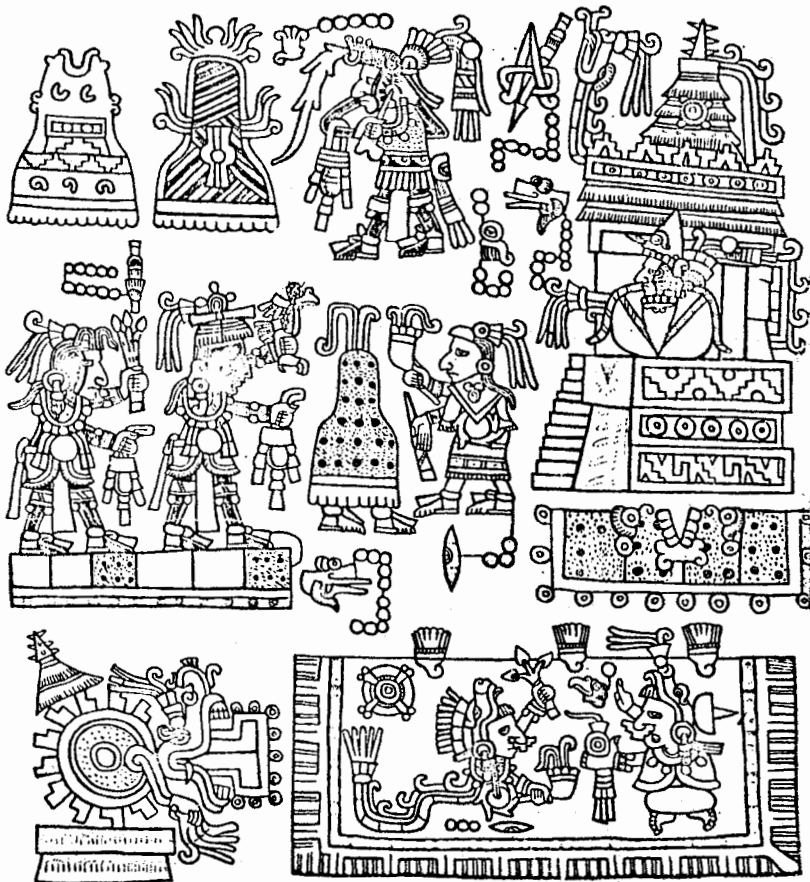


Gordon Brotherston **SACRED SAND IN MEXICAN
PICTURE-WRITING AND LATER LITERATURE**

The sand-hill on feet depicted here, page 15 of the *Codex Nuttall*, has been described by Karl Nowotny as 'der wandernde Sandberg'. The woman facing it in the picture, Lady 3-Flint, is said in the same commentary to be burning incense before it ('Sie räuchert auch vor



dem wandernden Sandberg', my italics).¹ As one of the royal Mixtec pair, she has led her people out of their prehistory ('Vorzeit') and at this crucial moment is establishing tribal rituals in the area of the temple of the Holy Bundle. Objects and events from their mythical past are here arranged and consecrated for priestly practice, in a manner similar to that shown in the Vienna and related codices. Thus, for example, we find the earth-quake mountain or volcano encountered by the ancestors of the tribe just before this scene standing again, or better, placed here in the temple area (in the top left hand corner). One of Nowotny's main concerns in his analysis of these codices has of course been to show how ancient Mexican myths were expressed in ritual and were integrated into conscious knowledge and cultural patterns: perhaps his most brilliant achievement has in fact been actually to demonstrate how codices like the *Nuttall* and the *Vienna* might in this way have functioned as temple scripture. Phenomena like the *patolli* game, the sweat-bath, the skull house, and other frequent features of Meso-American temple precincts, are catalogued and cross-referenced, so that they can be better related to prior myth, and (more narrowly in a number of tantalizing asides) to similar phenomena known to the tribes of the South West of the United States.² It is precisely the care and the leading detail of Nowotny's commentaries generally that have prompted this closer look at Lady 3-Flint's sand-hill.

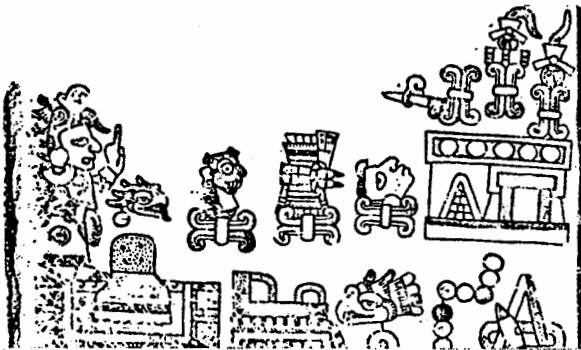
As it stands before the temple of the Holy Bundle in the *Nuttall Codex*, the hill has the fact that it is made of sand indicated by a regular series of large dots, and, more, important at this point, by a number of smaller dots placed at random between them. Incense burner in hand, Lady 3-Flint is not simply performing a ceremony 'in front of' this hill. The glyph for smoke rising is placed not just above her burner, but, symmetrically, on top of the hill as well. This indicates a closer relationship, indeed that the sand is being consecrated by her (it really being unclear what else she might be doing). This surmise is further strengthened by the ordered, non-random, pattern of the smaller dots around the large ones, in the four rectangular sections within a common retaining wall at the foot of the temple. In this state and position the sand has become ritually in-

¹ *Tlacuilolli*, Berlin 1961, p. 51 and Plate 59.

² *Tlacuilolli*, p. 260-4; on p. 43, for example, Nowotny says of the first page of the *Fejervary-Mayer Codex*: "Die Ähnlichkeit mit den Sandgemälden des Pueblo-Gebietes ist keine zufällige."

tegrated. The same consciously circular arrangement of smaller around large sand dots can be seen in one of the temple glyphs in the *Selden Codex* (p. 2).

Together, this suggests that the feet drawn underneath the Nuttall sand-hill are a sign not that it is merely errant (“wandernde”), a stray pile, but that it has arrived for this special purpose. In this case, its two feet are not different functionally from the feet which occur more than once in the *Vienna Codex*, carrying newly-quarried, unpolished stone, even a gem,³ to the site of the great constructional activities that preceded the fire-kindling rituals (the main substance of that document). One of the materials shown to be necessary for the temple ritual on p. 17 of the *Vienna Codex* is in fact sand: here it stands as an island in or under water, the smaller dots being still at

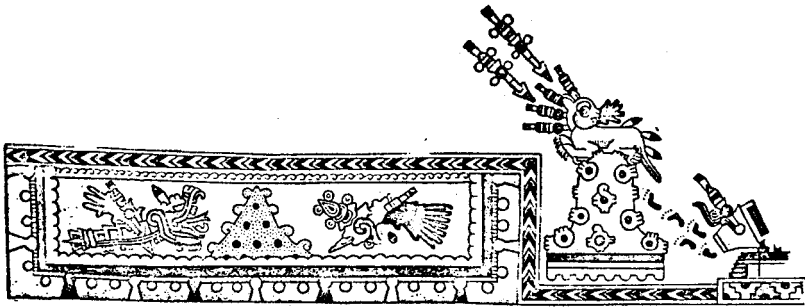


Vienna Codex, p. 17.

random. For his part, Nowotny firmly links this sand-hill with a similar island in the western section of the Fonds Mexicain *tonalpohualli* (where a path, consisting of lateral “V” signs, connects the sand with the appropriate temple), and with another island of sand in the *Porfirio Diaz Codex*.

What Nowotny does not do is connect any of these three islands with Lady 3-Flint’s sand, though the reasons for doing just this, given the similarity of design and the consistent context, appear compelling. In other words, her ritual sand might be thought of also as “water-sand”, like that of the “islands”, the feet indicating arrival from such

³ Bernal Diaz notes that the burying of jewels in temple foundations was something recorded in picture writing: “echaron en los cimientos aquellas joyas y todo lo demás, y así lo tenían por memoria en sus libros y pinturas de cosas antiguas”. (*Historia verdadera*, 1, 92.)



Fonds *Mexicain* 20, detail of Western section.

a source. Nonetheless the point should not be pushed too far; the mythic origins and the ritual associations of consecrated sand in Pre-Columbian Mexico remain largely obscure. Certainly it would be tempting to seek further links with the South West, of the kind not only Nowotny has suggested. For present purposes, however, it is enough to accept that among the Mixtecs and neighbouring tribes⁴ sand did have a ritual function, notably as “water-sand” brought to the temple precinct (the Kultplatz) to be consecrated there and laid in some kind of non-random pattern before the main building.

At least two passages in post-Conquest Nahuatl literature, written in Roman script, become clearer than they have seemed hitherto in point of detail if this reading of pre-Conquest antecedents is followed. Because of their undoubted importance both have received some attention: Huitzilopochtli’s birth as it is related in Sahagún’s sources, especially the *Florentine Codex*; and the lament for the fall of Tollan, or Tula, found in the *Cantares mexicanos manuscript* (f. 26 v.). Seler was the first to emphasize the probability that the Huitzilopochtli birth narrative in Sahagún was less a myth told for its own sake than the record of performed ritual. Indeed, he saw this text, as well as certain of the Aztec Sacred Hymns also collected by Sahagún (and ill-named *Rig Veda Americans* by Brinton, that is, those which refer to Huitzilopochtli, primarily as derivatives of ceremonies elaborated and performed before the great pyramid in Tenochtitlan only after the Aztec rise to power and the consolidation of their society

⁴ Especially Nahuatl-speaking groups, as D. Robertson has understood them to be connected in his *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the early Colonial Period* (New Haven 1959).

in the fifteenth century.⁵ *Coatepec*, the mountain of Huitzilopochtli's bellicose birth, should thus be understood as the pyramid itself, which was after all so named; and the various figures essential to the myth were actors or statues (Coyolxauhqui, for example, as her severed head) who re-presented the event during the Panquetzalitzli festival. Before approaching the god, still in Coatlicue's womb, with murderous intent, his Four Hundred half-brothers adorn themselves in the splendid paper clothes and other attire alluded to in the Hymns and depicted generally in early records of rituals in other parts of Mexico. They then move towards the mountain/pyramid, passing on the way the *tzompantitlan*, the ugly collection of skulls, a common and durable architectural feature of ancient Mexico, found also in the Mixtec codices and in archaeological fragments surviving today. Next they pass an area called the *coaxalpan*, the "snake-sand area" immediately before mounting the *apetlac*, or low terrace at the foot of the steps up the temple, a feature Seler discusses in some detail in his archaeological fragments report on the main pyramid at Mexico.⁶ What constituted the *coaxalpan*, however, which lay at the foot of Huitzilopochtli's *coatepec*, he leaves unsaid. On the evidence of the Mixtec codices, which have consecrated sand located in a quite analogous position before a given temple, at least the possibility exists that it was another such area. It should be admitted that neither Cortés nor Bernal Díaz reported seeing anything like this on first entering Tenochtitlan. On the other hand there are many things they don't mention, and both of them insist on the complexity and multiplicity of forms in the temple precinct, and the impossibility of noting them all. The reason why no archaeological trace, except possibly for otherwise inscrutable containing walls, could have survived at all long in Tenochtitlan or anywhere else, will be obvious enough.

Awareness of how vulnerable and ephemeral ceremonially laid sand must be by its very nature can be read in the famous lament for the fall of Tula, though up till now, out of this kind of formal context, the lines in question have more often than not seemed oblique or even bizarre:

⁵ See E. Seler, "Uitzilopochtli, der sprechende Kolibri", *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach- und Altertumskunde*, iv (Berlin 1923), p. 160-4.

⁶ "Die Ausgrabungen am Orte des Haupttempels in Mexico", *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, II (Berlin 1904), p. 775.

in tepetl huitomica ni ya ichocaya
axalihqueuhca nicnotlamatiya

If *tepetl* is to be read simply as "mountain", or "mountains"; and sand (*axalli*) as any sand, as has generally been the case in translations⁷ until now, then this cry is unavoidably tinged by late-Romantic despair, by fallacious pathos in a vague landscape. If however *tepetl* is sooner read as "pyramid", and *a-xalli* as the sacred "water-sand" which lay patterned before it, then the lines, losing none of their poignancy, sharpen in focus:

the pyramid fell apart	I wept
the water-sand scattered	I felt sorrow

Read thus, the lines concord altogether better with the rest of the poem. For all its other references are strikingly precise. The men who accompanied Nacxitl topiltzin in his exit from Tula and those he left behind are specified by name (Ihuitimalli, Matlaxochitl); the places they pass through are carefully listed (Cholula, Poyauhtecatl). Above all, the picture of Tula itself is principally if not wholly architectural, with its beamed temple, its serpent columns, its gates, its turquoise and serpent houses, its wood and stone, and so on. The pyramid and the patterned sand fit well both into this series, and into the tense structure of the poem. For several previous translators have put the verbs attaching to them into the present, despite the clear preterite indication of the suffix *-ca*. Only as creations already spoilt, like the beamed temple itself, can they be properly integrated into the senses of loss, minimal consolation and forlorn *loyalti* which inform the poem, each with its own tense:

The beamed temple stood at Tula
the serpent columns are there still
... ..
your people will cry for you

⁷ These include: D. G. Brinton, "A Song of Tollan", *Ancient Nahuatl Poetry*, Philadelphia 1890; W. Lehmann, "Ein Tolteken-Klagegesang", *Festschrift E. Seler*, Stuttgart 1922; L. Schulze-Jena, *Alt-aztekische Gesänge*, Stuttgart 1959, p. 130-2; M. León-Portilla, *Literaturas precolombinas de México*, México 1964, p. 121-4; A. M. Garibay K., *Poesía náhuatl*, III, Mexico 1968, p. 1-2.

If Huitzilopochtli's *coaxalpan* and Nacxiti topiltzin's *axalli* are phenomena which can be fairly linked with drawings in pre-Columbian codices, then of course the association rapidly becomes less explanatory than problematic. For to admit it means granting importance to the idea of sand that is wet, or laid, or scattered, and this has consequences in turn. To take just one example: Poyauhtecatli, the mountain passed by Nacxiti topiltzin on his way from Tula, is identified as an abode of Tlaloc's in the *Tlaloc icuic*, the 3rd of the Sacred Hymns; in the Nahuatl commentary on the last Hymn, the *iyacatecutli icuic*, a watery place where sand is spread out (*xalli itepeuhya*) is specified as nothing less than Tlalocan. In other words further possible coherences insinuate themselves, but can now hardly be known from surviving record, or at least within our present understanding of those records.

