

Mictlantecuhtli, Lord of the Dead¹

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Codex Borbonic.

Mictlán –“The region of the dead. A mythological place in the other world, and also an inhabited part of the earth, (Garibay, 1982)– is a characteristic element of Mesoamerican mythology. It is the final stage of the process of death which consists of nine infernos:

1. A tawny dog, our dog, which must help us across a wide river of blood
2. One must slip between two mountains that move toward each other
3. One must climb a mountain of obsidian
4. A place where icy winds blow, as cutting as obsidian knives
5. A place where pennants wave
6. A place of flying arrows which never miss their mark
7. A place where wild beasts feed on hearts
8. A narrow rocky passage
9. *Chignahumictlán*: where souls rest or disappear

Mictlán is ruled by a pair of gods, *Mictlantecuhtli* and *Mictlancihuatl*, the Lord and Lady of the Dead. According to the myth of the “Fifth Sun,” or ages of time, the Lord and the Lady gave the bones of those who lived during the fourth age to the god *Quetzalcóatl* who, bleeding from his

penis onto these remains created the people of fifth age, the age in which we are now living.

For the peoples of Mesoamerica, Mictlán was at one and the same time an eschatological and a geographical space. Among the *Totonacas* of Veracruz, *El Zapotal 1* was an important shrine dedicated to the worship of the two gods of the dead. Initial exploration has unearthed a monument to *Mictlantecuhtli*, a picture of which is shown here. As yet, no monument to *Mictlancihuatl* has been found. It was considered probable that a statue of her would be found close by. There are three possible explanations: a) the couple was represented androgenously in one single figure; b) the female figure remains undiscovered in a part that has not yet been explored; c) the female figure was looted. The puzzle remains unsolved.

The Lord of Death lives on in *El Zapotal 1*, surrounded by the partial ruins of a temple whose red interior walls are painted with human figures. There are clay figurines, offerings of the type we now call “smiling faces.” There are also some human bones.

For the native Mesoamerican, the particulars of death depended on the circumstances of a person’s life. For the Mexica, for example, people who

died in battle or were sacrificed went to the Eastern Paradise, The House of the Sun *Tonatiuhichan*. The souls accompanied the Sun, and their glorious battles were re-enacted among flower petals. For this reason, when the Sun rose warriors would beat their shields and shriek. But if they fought again in paradise, among the flowers, four years later they returned to earth as humming birds, and fed on honey. Caso (1988:78) describes them thus: “They are the privileged, those whom the sun has chosen as his followers, and they live a delightful life.” By contrast, in the West was the paradise known as *Cinacalco*, “The House of Corn.” Women who died in childbirth went there to occupy prominent places of honor, and at night they came down to earth in the guise of ominous creatures. They were the *cihauteteo*, god-women with skull-like heads and claws on their hands and feet.

Being killed by lightning or leprosy was considered somehow related to water, and the victims of these mishaps went to *Tlalocan*, the paradise of *Tlaloc*, which was filled with various fruits and abundant corn, beans and *chía*.

El Zapotal is in the central part of the state of Veracruz, on the coastal lowlands or leeward plains of the Gulf

¹ The photos which appear in this article were taken by Luis Barjau.

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coast in a region known as Mixtequilla.

The Mixtequilla, formerly known as *Mitlán*, is a low-lying alluvial region. The land is marshy and though in the rainy season little rain actually falls, every year the Tlalixcoyan and Blanco rivers flood. The Pre-Hispanic community therefore settled on the higher ground of the area. The population was both numerous and scattered.

What little information we have on the development of these communities is derived from the pottery and clay figurines which suggest cultural exchanges with various regions of Veracruz and the Central Plateau of Mexico.

El Zapotal reached its full maturity in the Classical age, 200-700 A.D., when it was heavily influenced by Teotihuacan, Mayan and Oaxacan culture. The ichnographical hybridization of the large clay sculptures strongly suggests a practical fusion with Oaxacan culture.

Though the famous "smiling faces" of *El Zapotal* have been found at other sites such as *Los Cerros*, *El Corvite* and *Dicha Tuerta*, *El Zapotal* was certainly the regional sanctuary and was much more prestigious.

Today's archeological site is a concentration of hillocks of different sizes along a central North-South axis. The best known are *El Gallo* and *La Gallina*. In 1971, the University of Veracruz's Institute of Anthropology initiated diggings which produced several interesting results.

A rectangular platform of beaten earth 76 meters long, 35 meters wide and 4 meters high was excavated. In a trench dug from North to South numerous clay figures were found, grouped on three different horizontal levels. The first level contained figures of women from 1 meter to 1.5 meters high. The second level had other medium sized and finely-featured small figures, along with

zoomorphic statues, among which were several wheeled jaguars. The final level revealed figures representing richly dressed people. Also, human remains were discovered at this level.

The most important discovery made at this site was unearthed during the second phase of excavation in 1972: a shrine dedicated to death. "A statue of the god *Mictlantecuihтли*, modelled in unfired clay, stands in the central part of the foundations flanked by walls in the shape of an 'L', with depictions of splendidly dressed people on both the inside and the outside (Gutiérrez, 1977: 29-30)."

That same year the profile of a stairway of nine steps was also found. At the bottom of it forty primary and

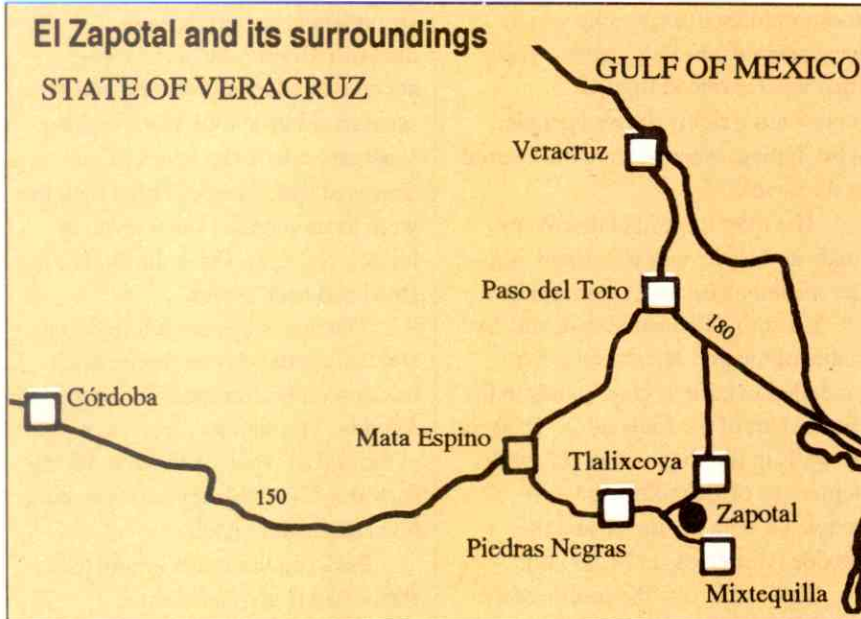
secondary type burials were discovered. Primary burials were accompanied by an offering and the secondary burial took place inside a sanctuary where the bones of the deceased were placed. These remains were located on the same level, in hillock No. 2, at which the God of the Dead had been found.

The nine steps are referred to in Nahuatl mythology as those which one descends after death to reach *Mictlán*. The stairway leads to a room at the end of which is the god, facing forward. The final step is on the same level as the altar itself.

Between the stairway and the shrine had been placed ritual offerings, clay figures of warriors and women who died in childbirth. These



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were lined up looking towards the Lord of the Dead. According to the myth, these women and warriors who died in battle shared the same rank amongst the dead.

In addition to this group there were lesser offerings at different levels, "smiling faces" and primary and secondary burials, some of which in tombs dating from earlier periods.

The magnitude of this discovery, and the importance of this Lord in the Pre-Hispanic world, justify a brief description of the principal figure, the Lord of the Dead himself.

Seen from a 3/4 angle and from a slight distance, the 1.6 meter statue of *Mictlantecuhltli* seems to still exude an imperial presence, like a frozen image of sparkling potency in the midst of the ruined sanctuary.

At closer range one sees first of all the ambiguous attitude of the figure, neither sitting down nor standing up, an attitude which, seen face on and from below, appears threatening.

Closer still, one sees that he is smiling - might one say obscenely, mockingly? - his tongue slightly

protruding like that of the central figure in the Aztec Calendar. This smile lights up the entire face. The trunk and the arms are emaciated, making the gender of the statue hard to determine. From the waist down the bones are no longer apparent, and a kind of loincloth falls between the legs. This ambiguity creates a liminal, mythical effect.

The figure stands upon a structure whose complexity suggests deliberate meaning. The presence of symbolic significances is also suggested by the painted walls. It is likely that the sanctuary once stretched out behind the god, to where the statue of his consort, *Mictlanĉhuatl*, might well have stood.

The head is flanked by two faces with large noses similar to that often found in Mayan art. Level with the headdress are two red skulls, and higher still, in the angles formed by the support for the sculpture, there are two other heads, one resembling an animal. The Lord of the Dead himself has three heads on it, possibly of bats, and under the lower jaw of the god hangs a "T"-shaped breastplate.

The powerful effect of the sculpture is enhanced by a daytime back-light accentuated by the sharpening and deepening of certain features of the head, trunk, and arms. At night a play of strategically placed lights also made major elements stand out. The figure was originally painted red, white, black, green, and blue.

Of the eighty-two skulls found in charnel house number 1 of section A, fifty-one were female, and thirty-one were male. In both genders deliberate deformations of the skull were evident. However, the female skulls showed deformations of a tabular fronto-occipital type, unique in Mesoamerica and found only in this part of Mexico, particularly in the Mixtequilla area.

The principal clay sculpture was made with a technique of rolling clay strips one above the other, and joining them together until they reached the requisite height. They were then left to dry so that they could support another section immediately above. The head and limbs were made separately and then placed on the trunk.

The Mexican concept of death appears to be derived from the esoteric thinking of the old indigenous religions. Certainly, the spectre of the Lord of the Dead, buried for so many centuries, has come down to us in many contemporary art forms

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