

# The Pre-Columbian Dog

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**D**ivine animals, symbols of the sun, food and an essential part of rites and funeral ceremonies, dogs accompanied pre-Columbian Man from the time of his arrival in Mesoamerica and were an important part of his religious life and diet. Only in our time, however, do we have enough information to reconstruct a general idea of the role they played in the different cultures that flourished in Mesoamerica.

Dogs arrived in Mesoamerica with groups of hunter-gatherers about 9,000 or 10,000 years ago. We do not know if these peoples gave them a special place in their world, but a dog burial mound found in what is now the central United States dating from about 10,400 years ago indicates that they had certain importance.

The oldest evidence of dogs in Mexico are several zoomorphic figurines found in Tlapacoya, in the State of Mexico, dating from the High Cenolithic Period, about 8,000

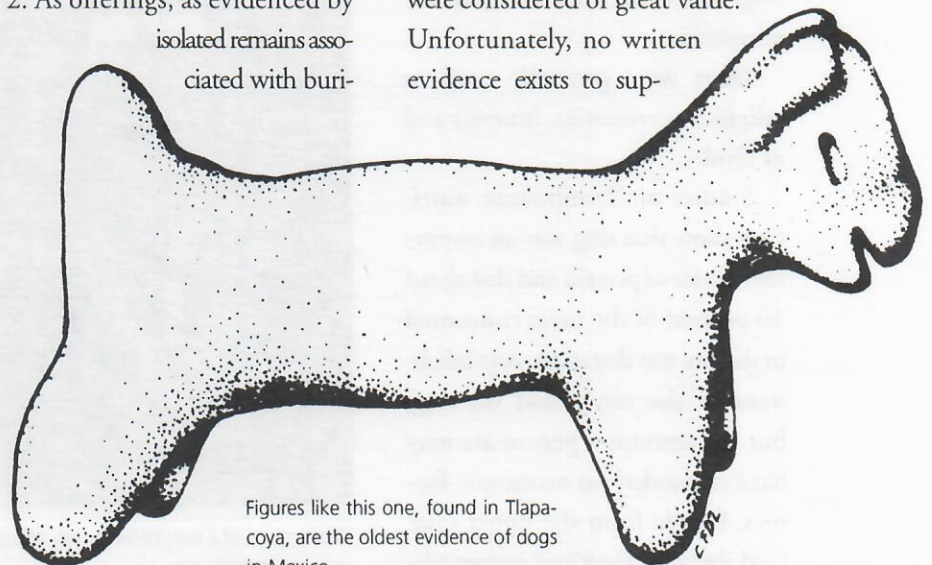
years ago. While fossilized remains of dogs have been discovered in different excavations, they are commonly discarded as “useless.” During the Formative Period (6,000 B.C. to A.D. 300), the interest of Mesoamerican peoples in dogs grew, making them an important part of their religious lives and their diet. It is interesting to note that their use varied from village to village. Apparently, the basic uses were:

1. As food, as the isolated and fragmented dog remains found in Terremotetlatenco and Tlalchinolpan show.
2. As offerings, as evidenced by isolated remains associated with bur-

als discovered in Tlatilco, Cueva de Gallo and Cuicuilco in the Valley of Mexico.

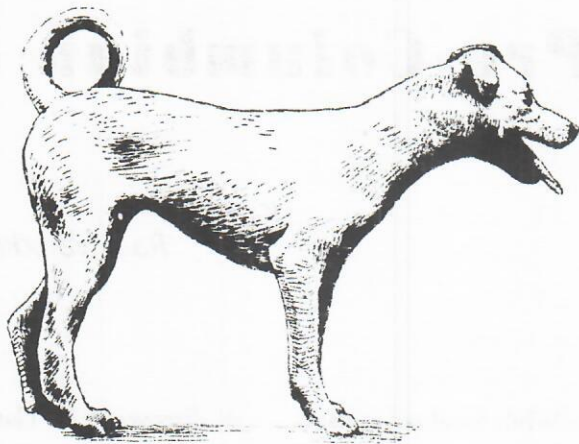
One very important piece of information about these animals is that they were all medium-sized and covered with fur. They also had a complete set of teeth, in contrast with their descendants (anyone who has ever had a Xoloitzcuintli knows that the adult dogs lack both canine teeth and premolars).

The remains tell us little about the religious practices they were used in, but it is common to find them associated with religious contexts; this leads us to believe that they were considered of great value. Unfortunately, no written evidence exists to sup-



Figures like this one, found in Tlapacoya, are the oldest evidence of dogs in Mexico.

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Representation of what dogs were like in the Formative Period (6,000 B.C. to A.D. 300).

port this idea, but almost certainly most traditions involving dogs which survived until the end of the pre-Columbian period (the sixteenth century) originated in the Formative Period or before.

The advent of the Classical Period (A.D. 300-900), the era of the splendor of Teotihuacan in central Mexico, did nothing to alter the relationship between dogs and men. Studies over the last 20 years of numerous Teotihuacan sites place dogs among the three most exploited species.

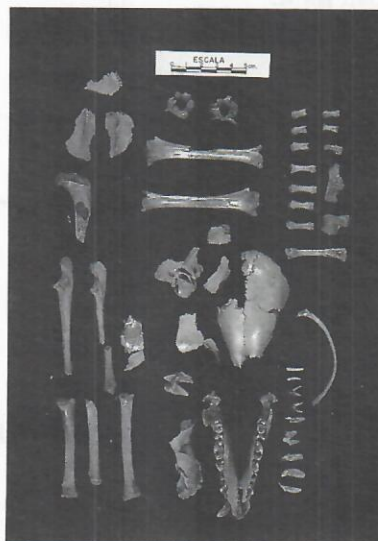
Dogs were generally used in religious ceremonies, funerals and as food.

Studies on Teotihuacan nutrition show that dog was an important source of protein and that about 10 percent of the meat consumed in the city was dog meat. Any inhabitant of the city could eat dog, but the amount a person ate may have depended on economic factors. People from the upper class used them for meat and certain reli-

gious activities, while people from lower echelons of society might use them as food. Part of the Teotihuacan population bred dogs, so they were available to those who needed them.

The use of dogs in religious activities was limited by social and economic factors.

The city's elite could use dogs freely not only as food, but also in different rites. However, no Teoti-



The remains of a five- or six-month-old dog in Terremotetlatenco.

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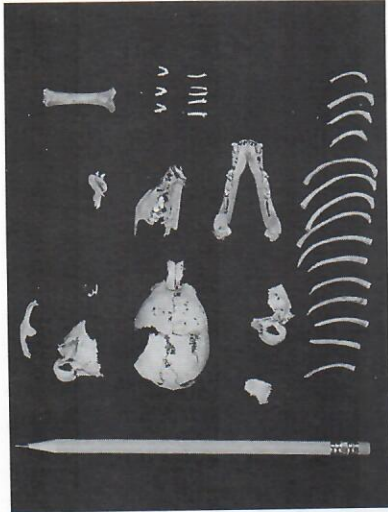
huacan human burial site has been found which includes whole dogs; apparently in Teotihuacan there was no custom of burying people with dogs.

Now, what do we know about the kind of dogs that lived in Teotihuacan? All remains studied indicate that they were of the same kind that had existed since the Formative Period.

Central Mesoamerica was invaded by groups of Chichimec nomads from the North and West in A.D. 700. One of their stopping places was Tula, where evidence shows they brought their dogs with them.

In 1980, 26 dogs were found in burial mounds at the digs that were part of the "Tula 80-82" archeological project, thus showing that even though in Teotihuacan the custom of using them in funeral ceremonies had been lost, it continued among the men who had recently arrived at Tula.

The remains included puppies and adult dogs. The most important discovery, however, was that three different species were identifiable. The most common was the typical dog with fur; in second place came the hairless dogs;



Puppies were made as offerings in Teotihuacan.

and lastly, a species which had fur, but was only 30 cm high.

The Post-Classical Period saw no change in the relationship between Man and dogs. Dogs continued to be used as food and in rituals and people continued to raise them. Tenochtitlan, for example, had a dog market where they were bought and sold.

The new species spread and became common in Mesoamerica. The Spaniards, then, found three kinds when they arrived in the Western Hemisphere: the *Itzcuintli* ("dog" in Nahuatl); the *Xoloitzcuintli* ("rare dog" in Nahuatl); and the *Talchichi* ("floor dog" in Nahuatl). The first was the "dog with fur"; the *Xoloitzcuintli* is today's Mexican hairless dog and the *Tlalchichi* was the Toltec short-legged dog with fur.

There is evidence that during certain festivities, dog was cooked and served: for example, on the first day of the ninth month (Tlaxochi-

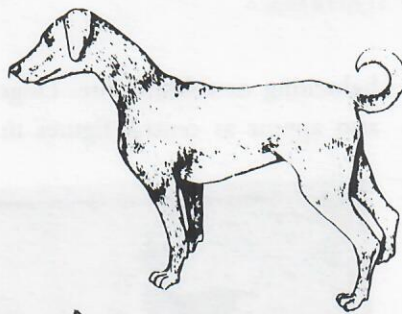
maco), honor was done to Huitzilopochtli and dogs were slaughtered to prepare the food on the eve of the celebration. Merchants held banquets during the festivities of Panquetzaliztli and served dishes made from between 20 and 40 puppies.

It was traditional to sacrifice and consume a *Xoloitzcuintli* in periods of drought. Another type of sacrifice consisted of offering greased puppies to the gods, and, in New Year's ceremonies, old women danced

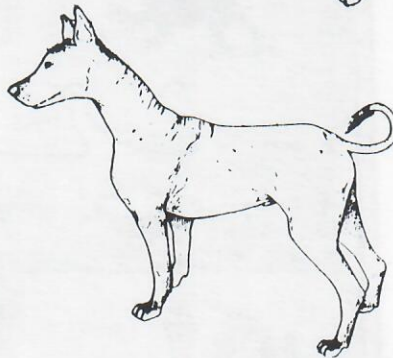
with clay puppies and sacrificed a black-backed puppy.

The old custom of burying men and dogs together derived from the idea that people who died of disease should be buried together with a bright red dog shot with an arrow through the neck or buried alive. Later, a piece of cotton cloth was tied around its neck and it was put in the burial mound.

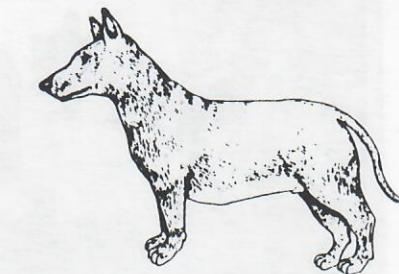
The man and dog were buried together because the dead were



A



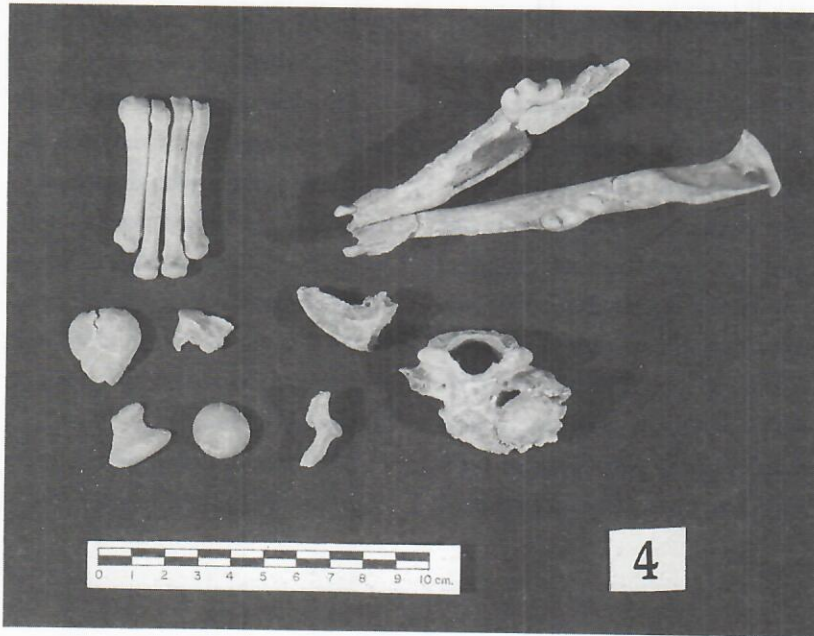
B



C



Types of dogs that existed in Tula in the eighth century (left) and the types illustrated in the *Florentine Codex* of the fifteenth century (right) A. Itzcuintli, B. Xoloitzcuintli, C. Tlalchichi.



The *Xoloitzcuintli* appeared in the Toltec Period in Central Mexico.

believed to travel to pay homage to Mictlantecutli (god of death), but first they had to cross the Chiconahuapan River, which could only be traversed on the back of a bright red dog.

Dogs were also used to heal. *Xoloitzcuintlis* were thought to cure rheumatism because their body heat lessened the pain caused by the condition. Ground dog bone mixed with food was thought to cure disease and protect the patient from evil spirits.

*Xoloitzcuintlis* standing next to the door were also thought to protect against evil spirits. Priests used the slime from dogs' eyes to see the dead and gods of the underworld, and their blood was reputed to revive the dead, bestow clairvoyance and permit communication with heaven.

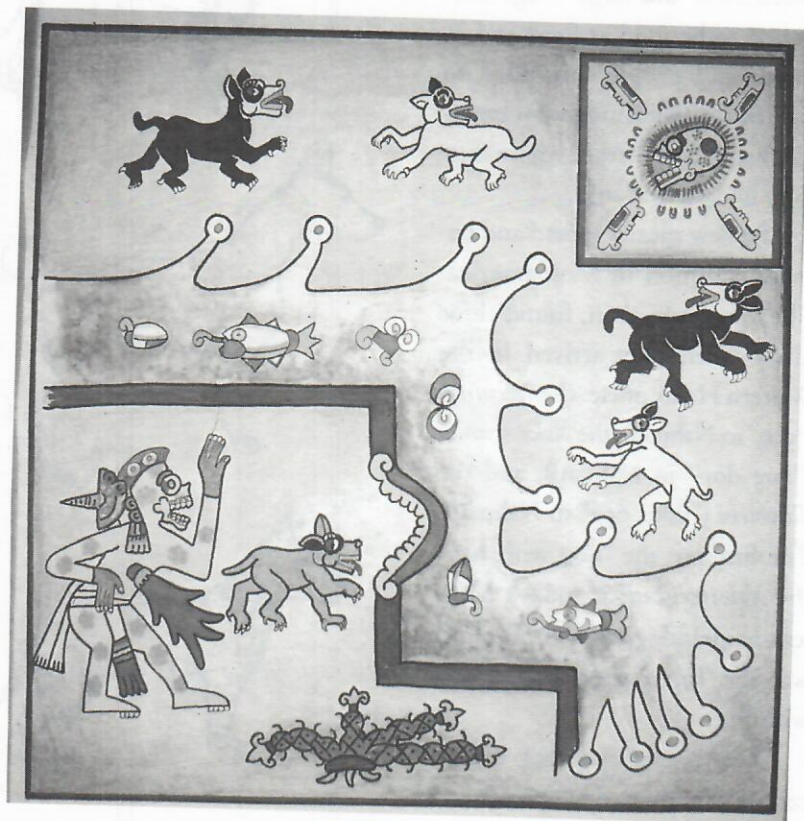
The *Itzcuintli* was the tenth sign of the days and was associated with

lightening or celestial fire. Dogs also appear as central figures in

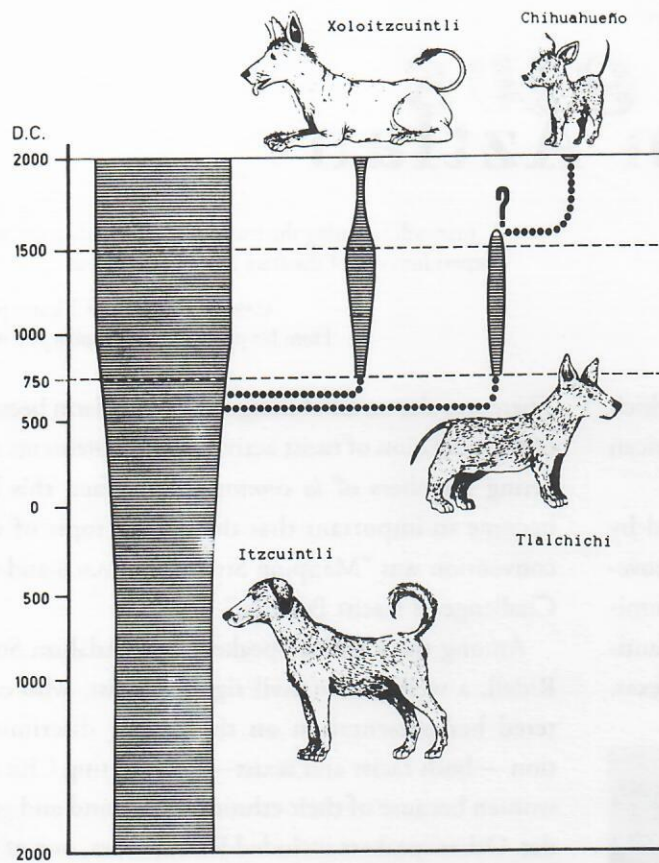
several myths. In one, the sun courts a woman and then turns her into a dog. The cosmic sun Chalchiuh-tonatiuh ended when a rain of fire swept men away, turning some into dogs.

In another myth, after the deluge, a surviving couple cooked fish and filled the sky with smoke; the gods became angry and one cut off the couple's heads and attached them to their anuses, turning them into dogs. It was also believed that human beings had been born in a cave of a woman impregnated by a dog.

The question still remains: What is left today of these three species of dog? The most fortunate has been the *Xoloitzcuintli*, which has sur-




Representation of a dead person and his dog crossing the underworld to reach *Mictlantecutli*, the god of death (upper right).



vived until today and is considered a rare, special breed. The *Itzcuintli* survived under the name of “creole dog” and is considered a “mutt.”

The *Tlalchichi* probably became extinct in the Colonial Period, but it is possible that it changed constantly over the years and became the Mexican Chihuahua.

Their utilization as food, as well as their ritual use in festivities and funeral ceremonies, are clear recognition of the role of dogs, Man’s best friends for the last 15,000 years. 

Mexican dogs of today may be the descendants of the dogs of ancient Mexico.

## On Nahuatl Wisdom

Mother and your father, as we are, as we live; our fame, our name, is nothing, since all the great ones who departed left us here. Did they by chance also throw us their hands and feet as they left? Look also to your relatives and those around you—for whom Our Lord does no good—who live in misery.

Although you be someone, born of someone, someone’s intimate, the child of lords, palace raised, noble and illustrious, you still must sustain yourself and get up for yourself.

Hark: courtesy, modesty, humanity, weeping, sobbing, the knowledge of one’s own misery is nobility, valor and glory.

Hark: No one haughty, no one vain, no one without shame or dissolute has ever reigned.

**Note:** Fragment from *Huehuetlatolli*, the sixth book of the *Florentine Codex*, published by the National University of Mexico, Mexico City, 1995, with paleography, Spanish-language version, notes and index by Salvador Díaz Cintora.

*With this fragment, Voices of Mexico inaugurates a section to bring the philosophy and literature of the pre-Hispanic peoples who inhabited what is today Mexico to English-speaking readers. The materials have been collected and translated by specialists in Mexico’s indigenous languages and cultures.*