

# THE GODS OF THE AGAVE

Ancient Mexican manuscripts make reference to the many uses of the maguey, which provided food, soap, fiber for textiles, paper for writing, color for painting and a very sturdy material for footwear. It was also used to make religious artifacts, needle and thread for sewing, ropes and *tejamaniles*,<sup>1</sup> so that the world of Man could be differentiated from nature and made less hostile. The maguey was so important that it was part of all ceremonies, and even became a citizen in its own right. People began to use it, and it yielded enough products to make a place for itself in Mexica society. Of course the Mexicas also recognized that the maguey's aroma was ritual. The plant grew in the earth, but its most prized fruit was cooked in heaven. The fount of this basic alcohol always remained greater than the people who procured it, and who paid tribute to their own work on the assumption that the euphoria the nectar induced in the best of men had some sort of meaning that surpassed those men and linked them to the cosmos.

In somewhat ambiguous hieroglyphics, the Tonalmatláhuatl Codex tells of the Aztecs' pilgrimage that began in 1116, when a tribe left Aztlán ("the place of herons") and set out in search of an eagle perched on a nopal cactus, swallowing a serpent. Those brave—or simply obstinate—men left the islands of Mextlitlán (also known as Mezcales in the loose Confederation of Chimalhuacán)

with the idea of pursuing their vague, foolhardy adventure. This strange document, also known as the "Pilgrimage Strip," suggests that the name "Mexico" was chosen by great defeated gods who talked to the agave of their secret tragedy. The god Huitzilopochtli ordered them to find a new name. The men obeyed because they knew the gods to be a primeval force. Not without modesty or fear at the dizzying change, they consented to call themselves "Mexicas." They trudged on for long days and tiring kilometers in search of the promised symbol and finally found it, or thought they had, in what is now the capital of Mexico. No one intended to forget—yet no one remembered—that primitive god Mextli (derived from *melt*, meaning agave or pulque, and *xichtli* meaning *quiote*) who was associated with duty, law and destiny. Throughout their arduous journey, those men fed and clothed themselves with the help of the maguey cactus.

In about 1325, this deranged but upstanding tribe founded the unlikely city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. In their language, its name means "where the gods of the agave reside."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A thin board, cut up into strips, used as roofing material. [Editor's Note.]



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