

Funeral Rites in Pre-Hispanic Mexico

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Mictlantecuhtli, Lord of Death.



Infant buried in a crouched position.

Since the dawn of time people have been obsessed with death. Society has found a remarkable range of responses to the biological fact of the end of life. Studies have produced a vast literature on the topic, in areas as varied as anthropology, sociology, psychology, biology, philosophy, and others, revealing the continued fascination with death in modern society.

Since time immemorial, funeral rites and customs bear witness to the belief that man survives the experience of death, corresponding to each culture's world vision. These perceptions, reflected in funeral rituals and systems, reveal to us the ideological viewpoints and social lives of human groups in the past. Archaeological research, together with written texts and ethnographic information, amplify and detail this knowledge, and also underscore the complexity of the cultural patterns expressed in funeral practices.

Evidence exists on the death rituals performed since prehistoric times. Neanderthals, and later the peoples of the Upper Paleolithic, buried their dead with food, ornaments,

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and implements, which implies their belief that human beings had another existence in store for them after their death, and that their needs would be similar to those during their lives. This social behavior took on highly elaborate expressions over time; we find, for example, in approximately 3000 BC, a tradition of funerary architecture that, having developed from basic sarcophagi and simple tombs, culminated in the building of the Egyptian pyramids, the Taj Mahal, and Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square. Death and the disposal of the dead bodies is doubtless a matter of profound interest for cultures all around the world.

BURIALS IN MESOAMERICA

Some archaeological data on the treatment given to the dead among pre-Hispanic peoples in Mesoamerica show that burials and cremations were characteristic rituals in the region. The burial of the dead has a long history in Mesoamerica and it was the most widespread practice; even cremated bodies were buried afterward. Different funeral processes can be distinguished, according to how the body was prepared for its burial: its position, orientation, and offerings and other component parts of the ritual.

The oldest burials found in this area correspond to the pre-agricultural peoples who had not yet settled in permanent villages; they date from 6500 to 2500 BC and are located in the caves of Coxcatlán and Texcal (Valsequillo) in the state of Puebla. Subsequently, among the peoples living during the formative or pre-classic eras (1500BC to AD100) burials took place out in open land and often below the floors of living areas. The dead person was placed in underground cavities, sometimes without any attention paid to their position and without a specific orientation; generally they were stretched out flat and, less frequently, curled up in a crouching position. During this period, offerings were often added: crockery, stone, or bone implements, anthropomorphic figurines, obsidian knives, and other such objects, generally depending on the status, age, sex, and occupation of the deceased.

In Tlatilco and Cuicuilco, and in many other sites outside the Valley of Mexico, burial sites have been found in "truncated cone formations," bell-shaped underground excavations that were probably originally used as a granary or storeroom, of varying sizes and some of which were inter-connected, and then reused as tombs. In Tlapacoya, State of Mexico, by this time tombs already appear with stone walls and slab roofs, and in which the dead person was placed along with many offerings. Tombs were also built in the Olmec area, demarcated with carved stones and slabs, giving an idea of the complexity of the funeral ceremony.

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Wrapping a body in a shroud. Florentine Codex (fragment).

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Burial of people who were sacrificed.

as in “radial” burials, where bodies are arranged in a circle with their feet meeting in the middle, as found in Chupícuaro, Guanajuato. Another indication of sacrifices can be found in the body parts being used as offerings, evidence of which appears to have been found in the Coxcatlán cave in Puebla, where multiple burials showed signs of skeletal parts having been removed and placed into baskets, as well as the incineration and intentional breakages of some bones. Such human sacrifice was found in agricultural communities; it formed part of their elaborate religious system and was an essential expression of the Mesoamerican world view.

During the classic era (AD100-900), a period noted for the growth of urban centers, magnificent tombs were used for the funerals of important individuals, as can be observed in the funerary monuments at Mitla and Monte Albán, in Oaxaca, or the famous burial chamber in the Temple of Inscriptions in Palenque, Chiapas. This was contemporary to the city of Teotihuacan’s funerary complex, which deserves special mention.

DEATH IN TEOTIHUACAN

Mortuary practices in Teotihuacan between AD100 and AD650 showed a greater level of systemization and ritualization. As a large, multi-ethnic city, evidence has been found of various funerary customs. Apart from the local inhabitants, there were neighborhoods of people of different origins who developed their own funerary rites; for example in the Tlailotlacan neighborhood,

where the presence of Oaxacan culture is clear, tombs were found similar to those in Monte Albán.

However, in the neighborhoods with residents from Teotihuacan, such as Ventilla, composed largely of artisans, burials were made underneath the floors of rooms, in cavities where the dead body was placed, and wrapped up in a crouching position, facing eastward toward Tlalocan, the place of abundance and joy. This type of burial was the same for both men and women; adolescents and children were buried in a crouching position on their backs; and newborns—of which there were many, due to the high infant mortality rate—were placed in a crouched position in a wide bowl or in large pieces of earthenware, sometimes covered by another vessel as protection, always underneath the floors of rooms and patios and, in some cases, linked to domestic altars.

Cremated remains have also been found, albeit less frequently, within a ceremonial complex, sometimes including remnants of the textiles in which the body had been wrapped, and occasionally forming part of a collective burial. Apart from the usual

offerings, small pieces of mica or decorated slate were also left, as well as ochre and red pigments; the traces of fire clearly indicate a ritual has taken place.

Recent discoveries have confirmed the frequent practice of human sacrifice, including the decapitation and dismemberment of the corpse as well as the use of body parts as offerings, either for individual burial or as part of a religious ceremony. In the Temple of the Feathered Serpent a large burial complex was found with the remains of over 100 bodies, the product of a mass sacrifice made when construction began on the building. Men and women with their hands tied behind their backs were placed in rows in the excavations for the façades. Inside the building 20 more individuals were buried. The males were dressed in elaborate attire, with large ornamental breastplates with human jaws of canids, or simulating these with parts of shells and linked by spearheads. The Pyramid of the Moon was found to contain human skeletons, skulls, and the bones of various animal species (snakes, pumas, jaguars, eagles) and a large number of obsidian objects, shells, and other materials. Studies of these bones showed that the sacrificed individuals were not from Teotihuacán, but came from various regions of Mesoamerica. This striking use of human sacrifice is related to the demonstration of political power and the military hegemony of the Teotihuacan rulers.

FUNERAL RITES IN THE POSTCLASSIC

After the fall of Teotihuacán (AD900–1521), funeral practices show the elaborate religious framework that governed the lives of Mesoamerican peoples. Although cremation and the use of funeral vessels or urns became more prevalent, burials remained



Skulls of the decapitated.

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Cremation of the bundled remains. Florentine Codex (fragment).



Burial of an adult male.



Burial chamber.

most common. In Cholula, for example, the standard burial practice was to place the dead person in a sitting position facing north, the cardinal point that represented the dwelling of the god of death, Mictlantecuhtli, the destination for the dead.

Sixteenth-century chroniclers had a clearer picture of indigenous peoples' ideas about death at the time of the conquest; their accounts can be correlated to archeological observations. On the whole, the dead were destined for Mictlán, and those who died due to causes related to the rain god, Tláloc (from lightning strikes, drownings, gout, dropsy) went to Tlalocan. Warriors killed in combat went to the House of the Sun, while sacrificed prisoners of war and women who died during their first childbirth, and babes in arms who died were headed for Chichihualcuauhco, the place of the *árbol nodriza*, the nursemaid tree, where they would be fed while they waited for the moment to return to the world.

Chronicles and codices also refer to how bodies were prepared for burial. According to Bernardino de Sahagún, "they tucked up the legs, and then the corpse was bundled with cloths and paper vestments, and tied up tightly," and Francisco Xavier Clavijero indicates that after this preparation, the body was seated on a stool; various codices contain graphic descriptions of this custom.

One of the most interesting aspects of human burials during the post-classical period is the finding of skeletal parts that sometimes show clear signs of cuts at the end of some large bones, made by instruments used to dismember the body. This can only be explained in the context of human sacrifice that, as we have mentioned above, has been identified with the development of Mesoamerican culture since ancient times. At

this particular point, it was practiced vigorously as part of religious rituals, not only as a means of gaining favor with the gods, but also for the dominant groups to enjoy prestige and power to consolidate their authority and ensure their political hegemony.

Archaeological evidence of human sacrifice includes elements of decapitation, dismemberment of bodies, partial exposure to fire, the placing of body parts, mainly heads, within vessels, and the close link to religious ceremonial rituals (altars). Various archeological sites such as Cholula, Teopanzolco, Tlatelolco, or the Templo Mayor have revealed information that again coincides with the descriptions given in the written accounts.

THE LEGACY OF A WORLD VIEW

Funeral practices among pre-Hispanic peoples show a strong influence of religious thought and the meaning of death in indigenous society. This has contributed to how concepts and ideas have been shaped in modern-day Mexico, and in many ways also survives within the formal framework of Christian ritual. The rich pre-Hispanic iconography on death seems to reveal Mexicans' taste for representing death-related images: the abundant skulls and skeletons in folk art, the *pan de muerto* bread made for the Day of the Dead, and even the humorous poems in which public figures of the day appear among the dead, plus the respectful and spiritual union with the deceased, as expressed in the Day of the Dead offerings.

Today Mexico is identified with its unique cultural vision of death and its traditional customs connected to the dead. New elements have been dynamically integrated in reaction to the powerful forces of globalization, without the essence of the ancestral customs being lost. Awareness of this process is strengthened by activities organized by educational institutions and cultural bodies to mark the Day of the Dead, reflecting the continued relevance of an ancient culture. ■■

Arturo Romano



Burial in a prone, extended position, face up. Tlatilco, State of Mexico.

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