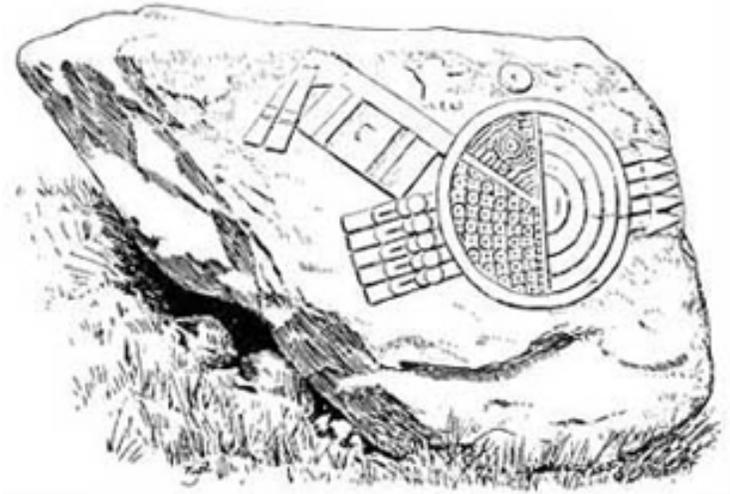


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## **Icons of Empire: Royal Presentation and the Conception of Rule in Aztec México**



**Research Year:** 2001

**Culture:** Aztec

**Chronology:** Pre-Columbian and Colonial

**Location:** México City, México

**Site:** Chapultepec Park

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## Introduction

This report covers research undertaken on two separate segments of the same project. The first portion of the project addresses Pre-Hispanic images of indigenous rulers. The second portion addresses colonial period images of the same. With FAMSI's assistance I was able to spend two months consulting specific objects in European collections. The majority of these objects were in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, and the Ethnologisches Museum, of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Museum Für Völkerkunde), in Berlin. In this report, I suggest that certain ceramic figurines, classed as Xipe figurines in the past, may actually be images of Aztec royals in their battle costume, and that colonial period artists still treated the images of nobles in the same manner as their Pre-Hispanic counterparts.

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## Preconquest images

There are very few identifiable images of Aztec rulers which remain. There are six different monuments which have images, in relief, of individuals with Aztec-style name glyphs that identify them<sup>1</sup>. There are also a number of other images which appear to represent Aztec rulers but do not have accompanying name-glyphs. As discussed at length by H.B. Nicholson (1961), Crónica X group authors Fray Diego Durán (1994) and Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc (1984) state that Aztec rulers had their portraits carved at certain points in their reigns. There is little reason to believe that these authors would have fabricated such a story. Although fragmentary, there is some physical evidence that their stories are true. Both authors relate that a number of rulers had their portraits carved upon rock outcrops in what is today Chapultepec Park in México City, and fragments of these portraits have been uncovered. These sculptures supposedly had a long history, with the tradition of carving being initiated by Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (reigned ca. 1440-1469) and continuing until the final Pre-Hispanic Aztec ruler Motecuhzoma Xocoyotl (reigned ca. 1502-1521)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These are the so-called *Dedication Stone*, *Tizoc Stone*, *Teocalli of Sacred Warfare*, *Aqueduct Relief* (all in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, México City), the Chapultepec Park sculpture of Motecuhzoma Xocoyotl (also in México City) and the *Hackmack Box* (in the Museum Für Völkerkunde, Hamburg). I would like to thank Viola König and Marie Gaida for the unstinted access granted to the MFV's collection and their genuine offers of assistance during my stay in Berlin, and I would also like to thank Herr Dialolou at the MFV for his assistance, patience, and congeniality. Thanks also go to Gerardo Gutierrez for his comments on my Spanish abstract, however, all errors in this document (Spanish, Nahuatl, and English) are solely my own.

<sup>2</sup> See Boone (1992:152-153) for a list of the various Aztec rulers' dates of reign according to the native pictorial sources.

## Textual Evidence of the Xipe Costume

Nicholson (1961:380-383) has argued that the costumes that these figures wore were variants of the costume of the Central Mexican deity called Xipe Totec, a god associated with warfare and conquest (Barnes 1997)<sup>3</sup>. As the portrait of Axayacatl is described by Alvarado Tezozomoc (1975:430) he wears a headdress of roseate spoonbill feathers, bears a shield in one hand and a sword ("*espadarte*") in the other, stands atop the skin of a jaguar ("*tigre*"), and is decorated with "pyrites of gold, blue, and silver which created luster, colors and resplendence."<sup>4</sup> Nicholson (1961:384) also points out that the second ruler to have his portrait carved at Chapultepec, Ahuitzotl, is specifically recorded as having worn the costume of Xipe. The final ruler Alvarado Tezozomoc discusses as having his portrait at Chapultepec is Motecuhzoma Xocoyotl (1975:668-670). His Xipe costume consists of a headdress of tlauhquechol feathers (roseate spoonbill), a gold nosebar and labret, emerald earplugs, jaguar skin bracelets on his right hand and ankle, a shield, and a rattle-staff.

Having some familiarity with the iconography surrounding the deity Xipe Totec, I was puzzled by these descriptions, as they do not generally correspond to its traditional representations. The most extensive descriptions of the costume of the *deity* Xipe Totec (as differentiated from the costume of his "assistants / impersonators" or *xipeme* [plural of *xipe*]) are in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's sixteenth century *Florentine Codex*. In book one (Sahagún 1970[1978]:40) he states that the costume of this deity consists of quail face painting, "rubber on his lips," a pointed *yopi*-crown, a flayed human skin, loose feathers on his head (*tzonchaiaoale*), golden ear plugs, a skirt of sapote leaves, bells, a shield with concentric circles and a rattle stick. This description, while somewhat matching his provided illustration ([Figure 1](#)) does not correspond exactly with the costume Aztec rulers are described as wearing at Chapultepec. In most respects, particularly in the *tzonchaiaoale* (or *tzonchayahualli*) this description seems to be that of the *xipeme* as depicted by Sahagún in his illustrations of the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli (the flaying of people) ([Figure 2a](#) and [Figure 2b](#)), where the balls of feathery down are clearly visible on the impersonator's head. In neither illustration does the figure wear a headdress of roseate spoonbill feathers.

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<sup>3</sup> This deity is usually uncritically called a springtime or fertility god. As Nicholson (1972) pointed out, there is little ethnohistoric evidence aside from Eduard Seler's (1899) hypothesis to support this view. In my own studies of this phenomenon (i.e. Barnes n.d.a; Barnes 1997) I have been unable to find any Pre-Hispanic evidence of a fertility component in the cult of Xipe. See also Broda 1970; Heyden 1986; and Scott 1993.

<sup>4</sup> "y con la marmajita dorada, azul y plateada, que hacia aguas y colores, que resplandecia" (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1984:430).



Figure 1: Image of Xipe in Sahagún's Florentine Codex (after Sahagún 1979:1:np)



Figure 2a: Xipeme from the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli (after Sahagún 1979:1:np)



Figure 2b: Xipeme from the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli (after Sahagún 1979:1:np)

Xipeme do not seem to have been "deity impersonators" in the strict sense of the word, particularly as this phenomenon is understood in Mesoamerica (see Hvidtfeldt 1958). In the unusual rites that occurred during the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli the flayed skins of sacrificed war prisoners are 'loaned' out to penitents by their 'owners' (the individuals who captured the prisoner). These individuals then don the skins and proceed about the city receiving alms and bestowing blessings. At the close of the day they return the skins to the temple or the owner and repeat the process the next day. This seems to have continued for the length of the "month" of Tlacaxipehualiztli.

The *xipeme* were accorded a certain amount of reverence (aside from people trying to pinch off pieces of their belly-buttons), but do not seem to have been considered

incarnations of the god Xipe Totec. Rather, they seem to have occupied a place similar to the assistants of Tlaloc, the *tlaloque*, as they are described in various sources.<sup>5</sup>

There are a few mentions of the Aztec ruler, Motecuhzoma specifically, dancing in the skin of a flayed lord in Motolinía (1950:64; Klein 1986:143). However, other than Motolinía, and López de Gómara (1943:2:261), who relied heavily on Motolinía's works, there are no other specific mentions of an Aztec lord dancing in the flayed skin.

Specific descriptions of the ruler's battle costumes are included in Book 8 of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1954[1979]:8:33). At its most basic, the costume is said to include a headdress of red spoonbill feathers with gold and quetzal feathers and a drum worn upon the back. The extended Nahuatl text in this section is somewhat ambiguous, for it contains an almost complete roster of warrior costumes following those said to have been worn by the ruler (at least 16 specific costumes are mentioned). Additionally, it does not elaborate on when and where the ruler might wear a particular costume. The first three costumes discussed are said to belong solely to the ruler. The first was set off by a red cotinga feather headdress, the second by a blue cotinga feather headdress, and the third is referred to as the "*ocelototec*" (Sahagún 1954:8:33) which can be translated as "our ocelot-lord." Totec, as a term is usually (though not exclusively) applied to Xipe (e.g. Xipe Totec), yet not one of the costumes mentioned in this section of book 8 are specifically said to be the costume of Xipe. The 'non-standard' Xipe costumes are addressed in the larger work of which this study is a portion.<sup>6</sup>

Sahagún's Spanish text (for the *Florentine Codex* is written in two columns, Castilian and Nahuatl) in this section differs somewhat from the Nahuatl in organization and in a few details. Sahagún (2000:2:747-748) begins by simply stating that the señores wore a battle costume that was decorated with "very colorful feathers."<sup>7</sup> These costumes are said to have consisted of a corselet of feathers and gold, a helmet of rich feathers with tufts of quetzal feathers in the middle, a wig of green feathers and gold, and a small drum and a carrying rack for the back, both made of gold (Sahagún 2000:2:747). The costume also includes a kilt of fine feathers, a necklace made of large stones of jade and turquoise, and a buckler with a circle of gold around its edge and center and bottom fringe made of fine green and multicolored feathers. While these details generally mirror the Nahuatl, Sahagún goes on to add that this 'standard costume' might variably include a corselet made of bright red feathers with golden shells scattered on it—all of which reached to the mid-thigh or a corselet made of green feathers and decorated with "rayos hecho de oro" (Sahagún 2000:2:747). He then states that there "were worn" (no specific subject is mentioned) other emblems and armor, including the *ocelototec*, *xiuhtotl*, and others.

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<sup>5</sup> See Klein (1980) for a discussion of Tlaloque.

<sup>6</sup> In her study of the ruler's war dress, Ursula Dyckerhoff (1993) presents a useful synopsis of the source material regarding this costume, and a discussion of its variance both in depiction and in description. Her conclusions differ somewhat from mine, yet, she was one of the first people that I have come across to suggest that there were specific categories of Xipe costumes.

<sup>7</sup> All translations, Spanish and Nahuatl, by the author unless otherwise noted.

In Book 9 of the *Florentine Codex*, there is a detailed description of the Xipe *deity* costume. The supernatural is not called Xipe, however. He is instead called Totec and Yoallauana.<sup>8</sup> This deity, described as the patron of goldsmiths, was adorned with

the skin of a captive when they had flayed him [ . . . ]. And in this manner was arrayed. They placed on his head his plumage of precious red spoonbill feathers; the precious red spoonbill feathers served as his headdress. And his gold nose crescent, and his golden ear plugs. And his rattle stick rattled as he grasped it in his right hand; when he thrust it in the ground it rattled. And he had with him his shield with a golden circle. And his sandals were red and adorned with quail feathers. Thus was the quail adornment: quail feathers were strewn on the surface. And there were three paper flags which he carried on his back, which went rustling. And his sapote leaf skirt was made of all precious feathers, those known as pointed quetzal feathers, the color of green chili, arranged-prepared in rows; everywhere there were precious feathers. And his skin collar was of gold beaten thin. And he had his sapote leaf seat (Sahagún 1976(1959):9:69-70).

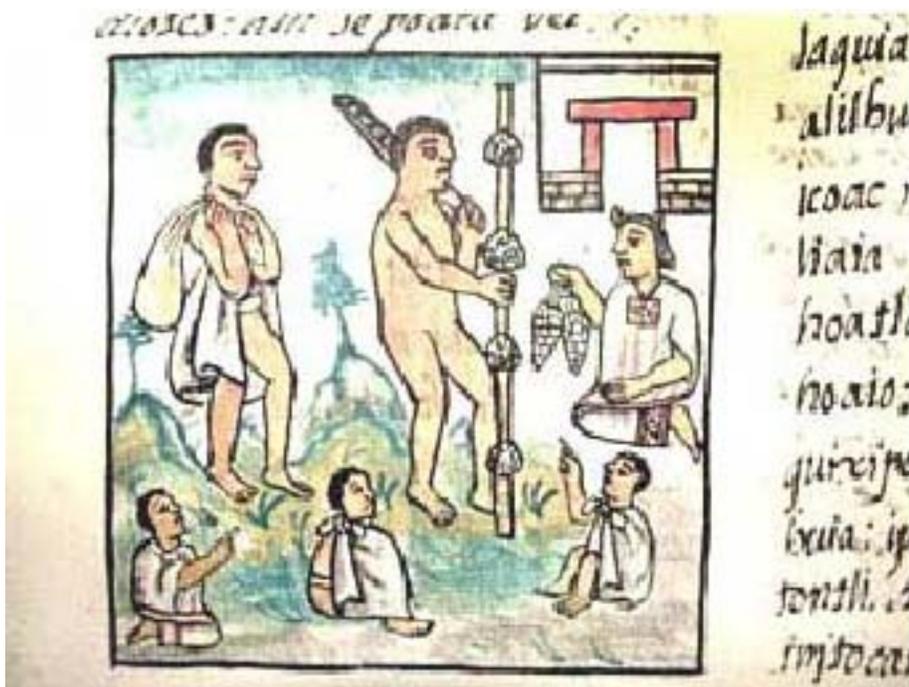


Figure 3: "Xipe" included with the description of the goldsmith's god Totec (after Sahagún 1979:2:np)

<sup>8</sup> "Our Father" and "Night Drinker" respectively, the same names used in the "Hymn of Xipe" recorded in Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* (1997:146) and *Florentine Codex* (1976[1959]:9:69-70).

This costume of Xipe as the patron of goldsmiths is practically the same as that described for the ruler. Yet, the image that Sahagún includes in this book (Figure 3, shown above) is clearly that of one of the deity impersonators who travel throughout the city collecting alms and bestowing blessings.



Figure 4: Tonalamatl Aubin - Xipe as the patron of the trecena 1 Dog bearing the tripartite shield (Tonalamatl Aubin 1981)

Where the patron of the goldsmiths bears a shield with a gold circle in the middle, most images of the deity include a shield with concentric circles.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the ruler's Xipe shield has a tripartite motif: jaguar skin, jade symbols, and concentric circles. I have elsewhere

<sup>9</sup> The Nahuatl for this golden shield, *chimalli teocuitlanahuacayo*, may be translated differently. Dyckerhoff (1993:140) prefers "the golden coastal one" as a translation, supposedly using *a(tl)-\*nahua-c*, where *nahua* means "near" (see Andrews 1975:455). *Teocuitla(tl)* is gold, but I am more inclined to believe that the root of the second morpheme derives from *anahuacayo(tl)*, or "things which are brought from neighboring places" (Molina 1992:2:6r), or "neighboring." Anderson and Dibble, in their translation, seem to be following the translation of *anahua-* as offered by Seler (1991:2:28-42), which, when applied to *-anahuacayo(tl)* could be translated as "having the nature of rings" or "bordered." Therefore, a more precise translation of *chimalli teocuitlanahuacayo* could variously be "shield of imported gold," "shield with golden borders," or "shield with golden rings," all of which seem both appropriate and likely—particularly when considering the inherent multivalency of Nahuatl thought and speech.

(1997:109) identified as the *Aubin*-type Xipe shield, as its only Pre-Hispanic color depiction is in the *Tonalamatl Aubin* (1981:14)([Figure 4](#), shown above). This same shield is carried by Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin in the *Codex Vaticanus A "Ríos"* ([Figure 5](#), shown below), where this future ruler is also wearing a Xipe costume. A similar shield, of Pre-Hispanic origin, is sculpted on the so-called Chimalli Stone ([Figure 6](#), shown below), now in Cuernavaca.



Figure 5: Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin wearing the Xipe battle costume (after Codex Vaticanus A Ríos)

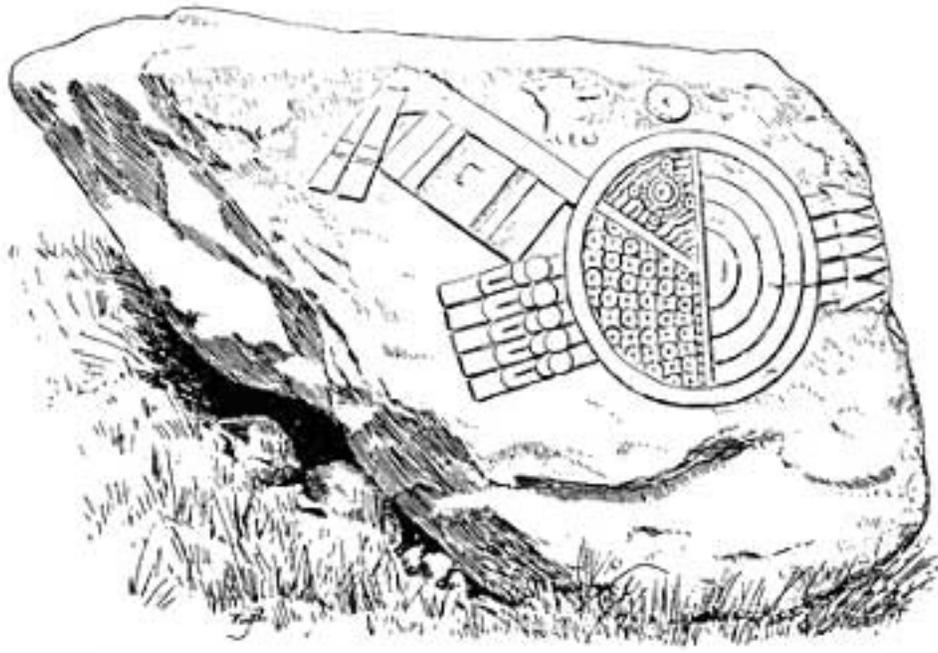


Figure 6: The Chimalli Stone (after Seler 1991:2:91)

Eduard Seler (1990:2:92) linked the creation of the Chimalli Stone to the death of Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (ca. 1470) and the accession of Axayacatl, who was one of the first Aztec rulers to be recorded as wearing the Xipe battle costume. Seler (1990:2:92-93) goes as far as to 'translate' the inscription on the Chimalli Stone as "'Axayacatl, Xipe's likeness,' or the great Xipe, began to reign in the year 'three house' on the day 'five motion.'" Umberger (1981:167) points out that the style of the sculpture falls with the middle period of the Aztec style and thus supports Seler's dating of the monument.

Seler also tried to decipher the significance of the shield's three portions, suggesting that they simply reference the shield of (and thereby the god) Xipe Totec, with the remaining two segments serving as a metaphor for *atl-tlachinolli*, the Nahuatl poetic term for warfare (particularly sacred warfare). In Seler's schema, Xipe is referenced with the concentric circles (which he calls the *anauayo*), while the wavy lines with the *chalchiuhtl* glyph represent water (*atl*) and the ocelot skin represented fire (*tlachinolli*).

Barnes (1997:43-44) has pointed out that the concentric red circles of the Xipe shield (the *tlauhteuilacachiuhtl*), probably reference the rising sun. If so, the figure of Xipe, when bearing this shield upon his arm, would be a personification of the spirits of the deceased warriors who were responsible for bearing the sun from its birth in east each day, to its zenith (Sahagún 1969:6:162-164)—in effect, an arch warrior. The golden circle which decorates the goldsmith patron's shield then also references the sun, as gold was *teocuitlatl*, divine excrement (see Klein 1993).

While Seler's identification of the *anauayo* segment of the tripartite shield does not seem to be problematic, I do not think that his *atl-tlachinolli* translation of the other segments seems likely. *Tlachinolli*, literally "something (land) burning," is more commonly represented by the headless body of a serpent, often with a fire-butterfly emanating from the scalloped flesh of the cut, or a serpent-like segmented ribbon decorated with repetitive U-shaped elements often used to represent fields in Postclassic codices.<sup>10</sup> I am unaware of any explicit example of fire being represented with an abstract ocelot/jaguar pattern in Central México.<sup>11</sup> Barnes (1997:111-112) interprets this *ocelotl*, or jaguar, segment of the shield as referencing the royal nature of its bearer. Aside from the pan-Mesoamerican association of jaguars with royalty, the Aztec tlatoani was seen as the embodiment of, or a 'place holder' for the god Tezcatlipoca (Sahagún 19XX:6:41, 44-45 ff). As Tepeyollotl, or "Heart of the Mountain," Tezcatlipoca is portrayed as a jaguar/ocelot. The placement of this jaguar skin pattern on the tripartite shield would then reference the ruler's divine inhabitanacy.

The third section of the shield bears a glyph for *chalchiuitl* (greenstone/jade) placed upon a background of wavy lines. Seler's (1992:3:47-49; 1993:4:124, 129) assertion that this is the glyph for *chalchiuhatl*, or precious fluid (i.e. blood) seems likely. That this portion of the shield references blood, reflects, among other things, the bearer's royal standing and the ideologic justification for Aztec nobility (see Klein 1987). Also, expanded ideologic concerns aside, if this segment simply stood for water (which was, after all, precious), then the three segments of the shield would represent the three main components of the cosmos, the celestial tier (with the solar reference of the concentric circles), the earthly tier (with the jaguar), and the watery or underworld realm (with the precious water glyphic collocation). Also, as pointed out by Seler (1992:3:49), the three portions of the shield also reference the three "Xipe" costumes said to have been worn by the ruler (as mentioned above). When a shield is present in the depiction of Xipe, then, it seems that the presence of the tripartite shield may reference the ruler, where the other shields with concentric circles reference different aspects of the supernatural and his cult.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I must thank Gerardo Gutierrez for reminding me of the "field" association of these U-shaped elements. See Boone (2000:50-51) for a discussion of these conventions in the codices, and Seler (1993:4:104-148) for an expansive commentary on these elements and the *atl-tlachinolli* metaphor. I prefer to see the earth as having had reptilian aspects to the Aztecs (i.e. the spiny body of the earth monster on monuments like the *Dedication Stone* and the *Tizoc Stone*), so that the segmented snake body and ribbon of fields are somewhat interchangeable (which also helps explain the ubiquitous and enigmatic Aztec "fire serpent"). A good example of this conflation can be seen on the *Teocalli of Sacred Warfare*, where the decapitated serpent body representing *tlachinolli* is shown in profile, with its segmented belly on the bottom and its back covered with these U-shapes. While peripheral to this argument, the appearance of these U-shaped elements on the preconquest *Teocalli* should remove any doubt that hoofprints left in colonial period plowed fields inspired this glyphic convention.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Miller (personal communication), has stated that this is also the case for the Maya area. While the night sun is represented as a supernatural with jaguar characteristics, this is something different than "fire."

<sup>12</sup> Such a supposition would then need to be expanded to explain the Xipe images in the *Tonalamatl Aubin*, and the *Codex Borbonicus*, where the tripartite shield is used. The most simple explanation for the shield's presence would be that the *tonalamatl* either belonged in, or was copied from an original in, the Aztec royal library. The tripartite shield borne by the jaguar warrior in the Tlacaxipehualiztli scene in the *Codex Magliabechiano* and the *Codex Tudela* (but not by the same figures in the other members of the "Magliabechiano group," see Boone 1983:[126]—nor in any other painted work) are not so easily explained.

When looking at Xipe imagery it will be helpful to contrast Nicholson's (1961:403) list of diagnostic elements for identifying the Aztec ruler's Xipe costume: (1) a flayed skin; (2) red spoonbill feather headdress (*tlauhqucholtzontli*); (3) red spoonbill feather decorated garment (*tlauhquecholeuatl*); (4) a zapote leaf skirt of quetzal feathers (*zapocueitl quetzalli*); (5) a shield with a tripartite design (*chimalli tlahuhteuilacachihqui*); (6) small back drum device (coztic teocuitlayo huehuetl or yopihuehuetl); (7) a rattle staff (*chichahuaztli*) (i.e. [Figure 5](#)), with the diagnostic costume elements of the Xipeme impersonators, which, seems to be comprised of a (1) flayed skin; (2) headdress of loose feathers (the *tzonchayahualli*); (3) zapote leaf skirt; and (4) a rattle staff ([Figure 2a](#) and [Figure 2b](#)).

Thus, the problem, when approaching representations of Xipe Totec, is to discern exactly who, or what, is being portrayed (or to decide if this ambiguity was intentional). A Xipe figure might be a representation of the god itself, a deity impersonator, an 'assistant-type' impersonator (the *xipeme*), or the ruler wearing a Xipe battle costume—or, perhaps, any combination of the above.<sup>13</sup> How would one have known, in Aztec México, whether they were gazing upon the impersonator of Xipe, or upon the ruler dressed in his battle regalia (or their painted/sculpted representations)? The lost Chapultepec sculpture would have provided a useful "baseline" image by which others could be evaluated, but as mentioned, this image is so damaged as to be practically unidentifiable. The specificity with which Alvarado-Tezozomoc and Sahagún describe the ruler's Xipe Totec costume, and the number of colonial sources that Nicholson (1961) cites as representing this costume either in prose or paint, would suggest that images of the ruler in this costume were well known in Pre-Hispanic and early colonial times, perhaps even common. While my research in this area is still ongoing, I suspect that a number of ceramic figurines thought to simply represent Xipe Totec are actually images of the ruler in his battle costume, and as such greatly expand the number and possible significance of Aztec ruler representations.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Museum Für Völkerkunde, Berlin, Figurine Collection**

In the Ethnologisches Museum, of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Museum Für Völkerkunde, hereafter the MVF), in Berlin, there is a large collection of ceramic figurines collected in the early nineteenth century (predominantly from the Uhde collection, see Gaida and Fischer 1992). Despite the fact that these figurines did not come out of controlled archaeological excavations (of which there were few during this period), they were almost all collected by a single individual, in a relatively short period of time, and in a reasonably circumscribed geographic area (mostly in the Valley of México). The breadth of the ceramic figurine collection in the

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<sup>13</sup> A variation of this question was also raised by Dyckerhoff (1993) wherein she was trying to differentiate between images of Xipe and of the ruler wearing the Xipe battle dress.

<sup>14</sup> Klein (1986) sees flayed skins as war trophies, and feels that many of the stone "Xipe" images are actually images of warriors wearing these skins (Klein: personal communication), not images of the supernatural.

MFV is quite wide, with objects numbering in the thousands for Late Postclassic Central México alone.<sup>15</sup>

After a review of the objects in the collection and their accompanying documentation I was able to identify some 120 figures or figurine fragments as fitting into a "Xipe-type." While the analysis of these figurines is ongoing, the principal diagnostic criteria for any figurine to be considered a "Xipe" was that evidence of a flayed skin be present (mostly in the inclusion of additional hands and/or feet, and the inclusion of a face-mask which included double outlines for the mouth and/or eyes), and that one or more other iconographic components of this god's costume be present (in most instances this is the inclusion of bifurcated banners, a headdress particular to images of Xipe [herein referred to as the "spring-onion" headdress], or the rattle staff and shield with concentric circles).

At this stage of analysis I have been able to group about 60 percent of the MFV figurines into two rudimentary groups: Group A, which includes figures with a relatively simple costume, consisting mostly of a flayed skin and at least one other diagnostic costume element ([Figure 7a-b](#), shown above); and Group B, which includes figures with a more elaborate costume, including the "spring onion" headdress of cut feathers—probably the *tlauhquecholtli*, with an elaborate jewel in its center ([Figure 8a-c](#)).<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>15</sup> There are a great number of "Xipe" figurines in the Uhde and other collections which are not from the late postclassic (nor from the Central Mexican Plateau). For example, in review of the Teotihuacán period figurines in the Berlin Museum I counted at least 90 figurines which are often identified as "Xipe" in various studies (see Scott 1993:46-50, for a review of the scholarship surrounding these figures and the problems in their identification). While reviewed during the course of my research, these figurines are not included in this discussion.

<sup>16</sup> A substantial portion of the figurines could not be classed into any specific group as they were either too fragmentary or were unique in their composition. It is difficult to call the headdress by its Nahuatl name, as this name depends on the color of the feathers used—something upon which, unfortunately, these figurines are mute.

Figure 7a-b: Xipe "type A" figurines (photo courtesy of the MFV, Berlin)



Figure 8a-c: Xipe "type B" figurines (photo courtesy of the MFV, Berlin)

Group A figurines very likely represent the xipeme, much as many multiple images of Tlaloc are thought to represent his assistants, the Tlaloque. The lack of, in many instances, even the loose feather headdress with these figures, and their overall simplicity (despite a relatively high degree of finish in many of the objects) seem to support this assessment.

Group B figurines are more difficult to assess. The multiplicity of costume elements that the more elaborate figures are adorned with are by no means standard, and if a classificatory division had to be made between them, it would be between those figurines that bear a shield and those that do not and between figures whose cut-feather "spring-onion" headdresses have an elaborate 'jewel' in the center of their headbands ([Figure 8a-b](#)) and those whose headdresses do not ([Figure 8c](#)).

While, again, analysis is still at an early stage, specific questions have been raised by this investigation. The foremost is a question of the role of the ruler when he is dressed in the guise of this deity. There is no systematic size discrepancy between type A and type B figurines. The vast majority average between 10 and 20cm in size. Also, the quality of manufacture and fine surface is random within each group (most seem to have been mold made). My initial impression is that these figurines served a similar purpose—probably as domestic cult figurines. The large number of fragmentary figures and "head only" figurines correspond well with 16th century descriptions of the periodic

destruction of household figurines (Sahagún 1953(1977):7:25) ([Figure 9](#), shown below). If further research bears out my suspicion that a portion of these figures actually represented the Aztec ruler in his battle costume, then the fact that they were treated in a similar manner as domestic cult figurines would say much about the popular perception of authority in Aztec society.



**Figure 9: The smashing of idols and household objects at the time of the new fire (after Sahagún 1979:1:np)**

### **Painted Images of Aztec Rulers in Colonial Documents**

The larger part of my research time was spent at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, viewing early colonial period painted manuscripts which depicted Nahua lords. This research was for the last portion of my "Icons of Empire" project which is concerned with the transition from Pre-Columbian to early colonial images of Aztec rulers. I was able to spend considerable time examining the originals of a number of documents including BNP 72 (*Genealogía de los Principes Mexicanos*); BNP 388 (*Genealogía de la familia Cano*); BNP 83 (*Codex [Lienzo?] Mexicanus*); BNP 114 (*Titres Propriete México-Tenochtitlán*); BNP 392 (*Pièce d'un procès*); BNP 152 (*Copy of the Plan Topographique de Cuitlahuac*); BNP 387 (*Matricula de Huejotzingo*); BNP 25 (*Plan Topographique de Hueyapan*), and a number of others.

The results of this portion of my research are difficult to synopsise as each document provided a particular insight into the varied landscape of early colonial representations of native nobility (both historic and 'contemporary' 16th century nobles). While a synopsis of the research conducted on each manuscript would prove too lengthy for this report and the synthesis of the data collected is ongoing in this area, I mention here only a couple of examples of documents which proved to be surprisingly useful. One of these was MSS. 73 *Confirmation des Elections de Calpan* of 1587 (BNP MS73) (Figure 10, shown below). While painted almost three generations after the conquest, by at least three different hands, the *Confirmation* provides a wealth of information regarding the visual repertoire used by Nahua artists to depict indigenous royals, both past and present. There is a surprising uniformity in the inclusion of certain iconographic elements, such as the inclusion of European-style crowns above colonial period rulers and the reversion to turquoise diadems in the pre-conquest periods addressed. There are also a great number of short glosses in this document which address the different royal titles held by members of this polity's nobility, including *tecuhtli*, *tzonpantecuhtli*, *quahuitecatl tecuhtli*, *tezcachihqui tecuhtli*, and *chichimeca tecuhtli*. The variance in these nobles' depictions, combined with their differing titles (both common and unique titles) will aid in the decipherment of not only Pre-Hispanic images of nobles, but also provide a wealth of information regarding the conception and depiction of various levels of nobility following their incorporation into Spanish colonial society.

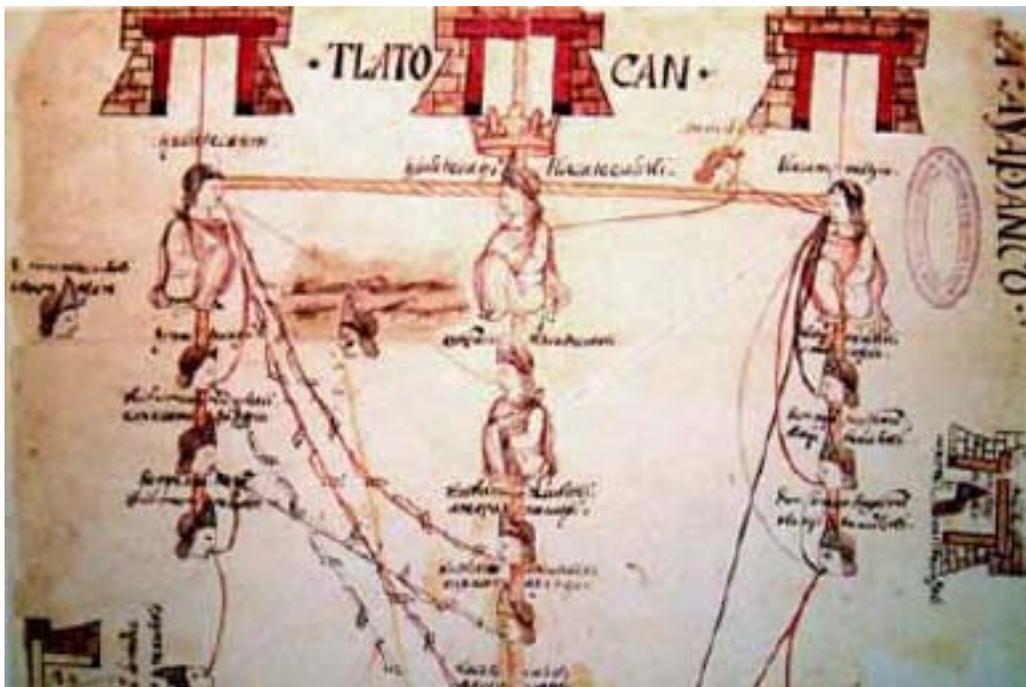


Figure 10: *Confirmation des élections de Calpan, Puebla* (detail), folio 1v (after *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, 1998:84-2, Fig.XIII)

A number of documents provided information not only pertinent to the larger part of this project, but that also tied in quite well with the figurines discussed above. In a review of the *Codex en Cruz* (Dibble 1981; [*Codex en Croix*] BNP MS15-17), I was able to clarify a number of elements not immediately discernable in the facsimile or the document's numerous copies. In his commentary on the codex, Charles Dibble states that the document is painted in black ink on amate paper, and the artist only used color when painting rulers' reed thrones with a brown/yellow wash (1981:1:4). However, I was able to discern that the artist used a grey and a brown/yellow wash in a number of places (aside from the thrones). The use of these colors was restricted in almost every case to highlighting images of rulers, particularly in highlighting aspects of their costume. For example, the standing image of Axayacatl included in the year 12 Rabbit ([Figure 11](#)), is painted in black formline and highlighted with a yellow/brown wash, while the figure depicted above him is painted with a simple black formline. Dibble (1981:24-25) feels that these figures reference the 1478 battle of Xiquipilco, and the wounds that Axayacatl suffered there at the hand of a Toluacan noble named Tlilcuetzpall[in] (Alvarado-Tezozomoc 1975:404-405).<sup>17</sup> A figure with a black-lizard (tlilcuetzpallin) name glyph is painted in the upper portion of the column. Axayacatl, painted below with his standard water-face name glyph, is shown wearing an elaborate Xipe costume. That the artist included Tlilcuetzpallin along with Axayacatl (no other individual named Tlilcuetzpallin appears in the ethnohistoric sources), corroborates Dibble's interpretation. The closest that the ethnohistoric sources come to describing Axayacatl's costume is in Alvarado-Tezozomoc's mention that Axayacatl had his *yopihuehuetl* ("Yopi-drum," Yopi being another name for Xipe, see Nicholson 1971), as well as his headdress of *tlauhquechol* feathers, and his shield (no specific type is mentioned).<sup>18</sup> Durán (1994:268) only goes so far as to mention that Axayacatl beat upon his golden drum (which we can assume was the *yopihuehuetl*). Despite the lack of a specific reference to the Xipe costume in these two related sources, the *Codex en Cruz* attests that this was the costume worn by Axayacatl at the battle of Xiquipilco. To remove any ambiguity as to who or what was being depicted, the artist included Axayacatl's standard name glyph beside him. The painter (or his patron) also felt that the details of this costume were important enough to merit the application of a yellow/brown wash (one of the few times that he did so in the document) to highlight them. The detail of the costume is remarkable—despite the diminutive size of the painted figures in the manuscript (ca. one inch high) the artist included not only the flayed skin garment, but also the Xipe rattle staff, the elaborate feathered and bejeweled headdress, and the tripartite shield discussed above.

However, while details of the costume are recognizable and clear, the motive behind their inclusion and the emphasis placed on them are not. There are a number of other

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<sup>17</sup> I am using Dibble's dates here, as many of the early chronicles differ in the dating of the events in Axayacatl's career. Dibble's chronology used in the *Codex en Cruz* has Axayacatl taking office in 1468. Most other sources date this earlier, with Clavijero (1964:274) being one of the earliest with 1464.

<sup>18</sup> There is a brief mention of Axayacatl capturing three warriors and being wounded in the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas* (Garibay K. 1979:62), and the event is also mentioned by Torquemada (1975:1:250-251). Torquemada adds a number of details, including the names of the other two soldiers captured with Tlilcuetzpallin, but does not mention Axayacatl's costume. As this is the only representation of Axayacatl and the man who wounded him, one must wonder if the *Codex en Cruz* artist and Alvarado-Tezozomoc did not consult the same source for this encounter.

visual references to Xipe in the document (either with iconographic elements of the deity's costume or the tripartite shield), but the only one clearly associated with Axayacatl's reign is a Xipe head depicted eight years earlier in another Rabbit year, 4 Rabbit, 1470.<sup>19</sup> The head, probably representing the flayed skin mask worn by Xipe impersonators, is painted above a generalized image of a temple ([Figure 12](#)). This may relate to Axayacatl's dedication of a *temalacatl* soon after taking office (4 Rabbit came two years after his accession). This type of sacrificial stone, more popularly known as the 'gladiatorial stone,' played an important role in the celebration of Tlacaxipehualiztli, the main festival of Xipe Totec. Axayacatl's interest in the cult of Xipe may have also led him to renovate the Yopico temple precinct, where the main temple of Xipe was located. As Umberger (1981:272) has pointed out, 4 Rabbit appears on a number of monuments in reference to one of the cardinal directions, usually the south.<sup>20</sup> That the temple of Xipe would be renovated during a year with a southern association would be in keeping with Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina's policies of expansion in the south and the revitalization of the imperial cult of Xipe—both of which seem to have been continued during Axayacatl's administration (see Barnes n.d.b).

From these two documents (and the examples discussed herein, which represent only a fraction of what is contained in the larger works), then, a wealth of information is provided in a number of what many might consider inconsequential details. The variance used in the depictions of rulers and nobles in the *Calpan*, and the details and selective emphasis the artist of *Codex en Cruz* illustrate very well that even after the conquest artists and their patrons were still concerned with adapting and using Pre-Hispanic signs and symbols to relate specific information regarding historic and contemporary rulers. That, as was done in the *Calpan*, the artist mingled European and indigenous signs and symbols shows that artists were adopting aspects of a new visual language, but only where the newer symbols could be equated with the old. That, as can be seen in the *Codex en Cruz*, colonial period artists still included extraordinarily specific details about specific rulers, allows us to surmise that they still knew, understood, and possibly even worked from Pre-Hispanic originals.

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<sup>19</sup> This head is identified by Dibble (1981:21-22) as Piltzintecuhtli (a deity linked to Xochipilli), based on a similarity to the headdress worn by a day-lord of the day in the *Tonalamatl Aubin*. There is not general agreement on the nature of this particular supernatural (usually the 7th of the 13 lords of the day), but in the codices this day-lord is most commonly identified as Xochipilli or Cinteotl (see Caso 1971:335-336). The headdress worn by this figure is the same that appears on the Berlin type B Xipe figures, and on a number of Xipe illustrations, most notably those in the *Codex Borbonicus*. All of these points are addressed more fully in my dissertation.

<sup>20</sup> Durán (1971:390) as pointed out by Umberger (1981:107).



Figure 11: Axayacatl and Tlilcuetzpalin at the battle of Xicuilco (after Dibble 1981:2:9)



Figure 12: Xipe head above temple in the year 4 Rabbit (after Dibble 1981:2:9)

### **Initial Conclusions and Direction of Future Research/Presentation**

When I began this phase of my research, it was not my initial intention to focus on Xipe related material to the extent that the material consulted led me to do. The realization that many small ceramic figurines may indeed be images of the ruler opens up a whole new area of study in terms of the popular nature of Aztec rulership and the possible relevance of domestic cult figurines representing (if only in a generalizing way) the ruler.

The recurrence of Xipe related elements in the representations of various rulers and their royal paraphernalia, I believe, justifies a reappraisal of this deity and his cult in terms of its imperial significance—a significance originally stressed by Broda (1970) and Nicholson (1972). Too, the consciously manipulated variances in the depictions of rulers and the added emphasis placed on their images (an emphasis found in almost every document consulted in the BNP) that continue to occur even four and five generations after the conquest, I believe, bolsters my arguments (see Barnes n.d.b) that Nahua artists (and their mestizo descendants) maintained a Pre-Columbian tradition of manipulating the signs and symbols which communicated the ideas of authority—despite the changing nature of that authority within the Spanish colonial world.

I believe that when the analysis of the data collected is complete and ready for presentation, it will motivate scholars to reconsider many of their notions regarding indigenous royalty in Mesoamerica in general, and the ruling elite of the Aztecs in particular. The information garnered from this particular stage of my research has proved itself invaluable in the study of Aztec nobility, and without the generous support of FAMSI, I would not have been able to devote the amount of time in study that the sources consulted required.

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