

The Heroic Birth of Huitzilopochtli

The goddess Coatlicue ("Serpent Skirt") was doing penance and sweeping at Coatepec ("Serpent Hill") when she saw a ball of feathers float down from the sky. She took the feathers and placed them inside her shirt. When she finished sweeping, Coatlicue went to remove the feathers, but they were gone. In fact, they had impregnated the goddess. Her children, the Centzon Huitznahua ("The Four Hundred Southerners") became aware of her pregnancy:

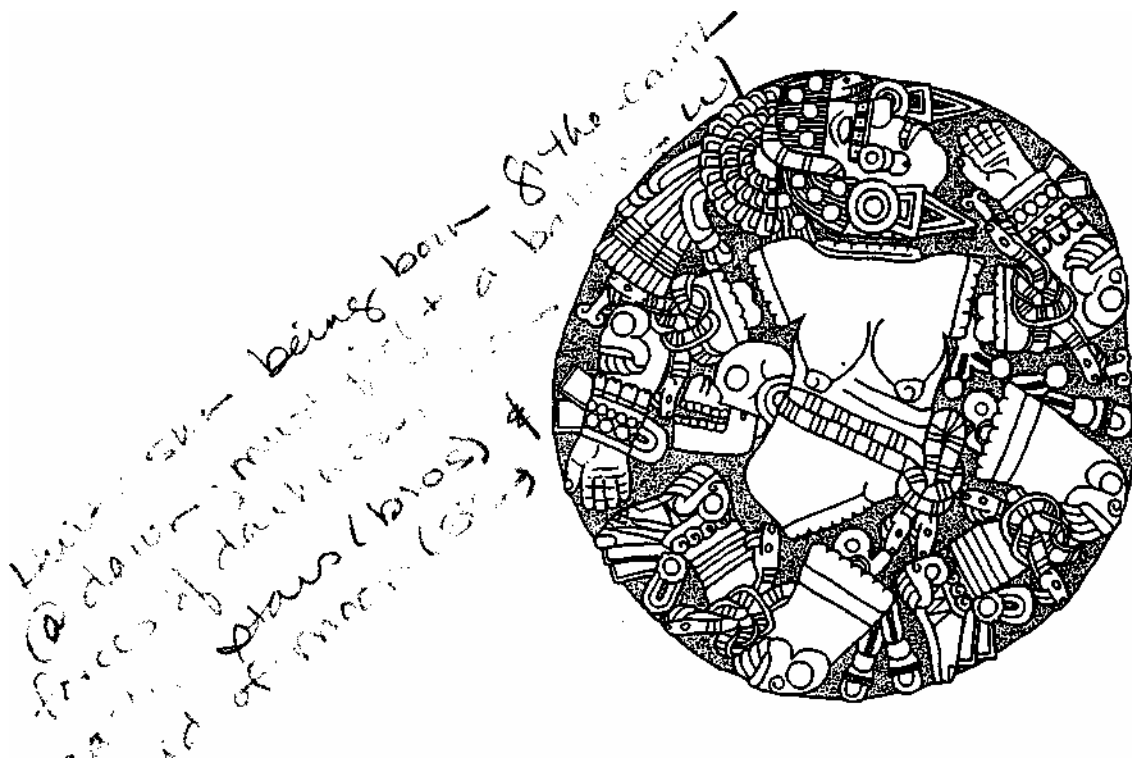
And when the Centzon Huitznahua saw that their mother was already with child, they were very wrathful. They said, "Who brought this about? Who hath made her heavy with child? She hath dishonored and shamed us!"

And their elder sister, Coyolxauhqui, said to them, "My elder brothers, she hath affronted us; we must slay our mother, the wicked one who is already with child..."

And when Coatlicue learned of this, she was sorely afraid and deeply saddened. And her child, who was in her womb, comforted her. He spoke and said to her: "Have no fear; already I know [what I must do]."⁶

Coyolxauhqui and her siblings dressed for war and climbed the hill of Coatepec toward Coatlicue. Just as they reached the summit, Coatlicue gave birth to Huitzilopochtli. The newborn god was fully mature and ready for battle with his shield, darts, war paint, and Xiuhcoatl (fire serpent weapon).

Then with it [the Xiuhcoatl] he pierced Coyolxauhqui, and then he quickly struck off her head. It came to rest there on the slope of Coatepec. And her body went falling below; it went crashing in pieces; in various places her arms, her legs, and her body kept falling.⁷



*figure 9.1 Drawing of large stone disk showing
Coyolxauhqui's
dismembered body
(Diameter: 3.25 m. Drawing by Emily
Umberger; reproduced with permission)*

Huitzilopochtli then chased the Centzon Huitznahua and killed most of them.

This mythological event was commemorated on a large carved stone, which depicts Coyolxauhqui's dismembered body (figure 9.1). The Coyolxauhqui stone was part of a buried offering placed in front of the stairway to Huitzilopochtli's shrine on the Templo Mayor. The pyramid itself was referred to as Coatepec, and the human sacrifices that occurred on its summit reenacted Huitzilopochtli's victory over Coyolxauhqui.