that has been both historically and archaeologically corroborated in the Inca Empire (McEwan and Guchte 1992). Another case of overlap and possibly confusion between death and altered states is accession rituals, which were often described as being akin to funerals (see below for further discussion). As seen earlier, travel to and from the world of the ancestors is a key aspect of knowledge acquisition in Mazatec ceremonies. Nightly rituals are deeply transformative experiences, and although they are perhaps existentially similar to death, they are not to be mistaken for physical death, let alone human sacrifice.

As studied by López Luján (2005), perhaps the most ubiquitous aspect of the archaeology of the Templo Mayor are the offerings—large caches of carefully placed objects that should be understood as a type of gift and which often included human remains (sacrificed or not). Offerings and sacrifices have often been said to have a similar underlying logic: giving to receive. In this context, the surrender of precious items or even life is intended to restore balance by giving what is due (Köhler 2001). In line with this book’s main arguments, I propose that offering and sacrifice can also be understood as an open gesture or a quest—a process in which participants partake and are fully aware of the outcome’s indeterminacy (Neurath 2010, 93).

Indeed, sacrifice as offering allows for the possibility that an offer can be refused and a plea to the gods can remain unanswered. This view aims to question cosmological interpretations that rationalize human behavior and seeks to understand ceremony as an open-ended process that can generate meaning, not simply reflect a preconceived notion of reality or truth.

4.2. Emblematic and narrative representations of the veintenas

The festivals of the yearly calendar can be grouped according to their style and iconography (Kubler and Gibson 1951, 37–41). For example, the Codex Borbonicus depicts full-fledged ritual scenes, including priests, gods, and temple structures. Other manuscripts, such as the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (see Section 7.1), only represent the tutelary god or patron of the veintena, who, as remarked by Quiñones Keber (1995, 136), should be more accurately understood as a godly impersonator. The Codex Tudela alternates ceremonial scenes and godly depictions in its representation of the veintenas. Another type of veintena representation consists of rather emblematic and glyph-like images that appear within larger scenes as a sort of temporal markers. In colonial manuscripts, this type of representation can be found in tributary accounts, such as the Codex Mendoza, Matricula de Tributos, and the Humboldt Fragment (Fig. 4.5), that depict the four tribute periods of the Aztec Empire: Tlacaxipehualiztli, Ochpaniztli, Etzalcualiztli, and Tlacaxipehualiztli (Long 1942, Barlow 1943). Tlacaxipehualiztli is represented by the conical hat of Xipe Totec, the tutelary god of the ceremony; Ochpaniztli is depicted as the broom of Tlazolteotl, the main goddess of this celebration; Panquetzaliztli, which means “the raising of banners,” is identified by an upright banner; and Etzalcualiztli, a festival dedicated to Tlaloc, is depicted as the head of the rain god.

The Codex Borbonicus employs emblematic markers within the larger narrative of the veintenas. As extensively recognized in the literature (Paso y Troncoso 1898, 165–179, Couch 1985, 70–82, Anders et al. 1991, 214–215, Graulich 2008), the twelfth festival of the year, Ochpaniztli, is given a larger and more elaborate treatment than any other celebration in the cycle. It extends over several pages and overlaps with the subsequent veintenas. On pages 29–32, the priest of Chicomecoatl plays a central role, differently from most later sources, which assign the festival of Ochpaniztli to Toci or Tlazolteotl. For example,
in the Codex Tudela (f. 21r; Fig. 4.6), the goddess is dressed in white cotton and accompanied by a richly adorned attendant carrying weapons. The corresponding scene in the Codex Borbonicus centers around a frontal depiction of a brightly colored Chicomecoatl, who stands atop a temple and is surrounded by numerous attendants (Fig. 4.7). However, in the lower portion of the page, the mother goddess Tlazolteotl, who is dressed in white and holding a broom, appears in a rather diminutive position and does not seem to be participating in ceremonial activities. Anders et al. (1991, 208) described the presence of the tutelary goddess as a temporal marker.
The same situation recurs on page 34 (Fig. 4.8), which depicts the celebration of Panquetzaliztli. In this case, the main ritual is the New Fire, which is not conducted yearly but rather every four years or, in the case of the year 2 Reed (1507), every fifty-two years. A symbolic representation of the veintena of Panquetzaliztli, an upright white-and-blue banner, is shown at the upper part of the page on a temple with Huitzilopochtli, to which Panquetzaliztli is normally dedicated, at its foot. The tlacuilo resorted to the same strategy of placing a glyph to mark a specific ceremony on pages 23 and 37 (Fig. 4.9), on which Izcalli is indicated by an offering of white paper cutouts. Xilomaniztli (the Offering of Tender Maize) is succinctly symbolized by a blue basket filled with colorful corn cobs on page 23, while Etzalcualiztli, the feast of the bean porridge, is represented by a pot full of beans on page 26. Finally, the feast of Titil is identified by its characteristic white bundle on page 36. The different manners of the veintena depictions in the Codex Borbonicus closely reflect an understanding of annual ceremonies that could be adapted to fluctuating calendrical, astronomical, or agricultural events rather than being tied to fixed chronological constrictions.

While several scholars have noted the Codex Borbonicus’ narrative depiction of the veintenas as an outlier among surviving manuscripts (Couch 1985, XII, DiCesare 2009, 11–13, 123–125, Díaz Álvarez 2018, 159–162) because of its uneven distribution of celebrations throughout its pages,
it is important to bear in mind that the Codex Borbonicus is virtually a pre-contact manuscript in style, format, and painting materials. Therefore, it is a more reliable and authoritative source on pre-Hispanic ceremonies and their representations than any other later document. Manuscripts such as those in the previously discussed Magliabechiano Group (Tudela, Magliabechiano, and Ixtlilxochitl) were drafted as late as fifty years after the last presumed public celebrations of any veintena. Moreover, they were not even independently produced and heavily relied on one other (see Chapter 7). The Codex Borbonicus is unique in its traditional and virtually unadulterated Indigenous outlook, format, and style. Later standardization, which derived from a concerted production developed within the friars’ schools, should not be taken as a rule but rather as a colonial depiction of Indigenous culture and calendar and a product of their time.

Primeros Memoriales (paragraph 2A, ff. 251r–251v) offers another example comparable to the Codex Borbonicus. Its veintena illustrations were compiled in the Nahua town of Tepeapulco in the modern state of Hidalgo between 1558 and 1561 (Sahagún et al. 1997, 4). In the document, the mother goddess Tlazolteotl or Ixcuina is featured in the ceremonies of Micailhuitontli and Huey Micailhuitl (Small and Great Feast of the Dead; Fig. 4.10) that precede Ochpaniztli. Similarly to the Codex Borbonicus (p. 30), she can be seen wearing a white dress and holding a small broom.

As remarked by Jiménez Moreno (1974, 44), her presence in both scenes is not easily explained. In light of the Codex Borbonicus’ depiction of Ochpaniztli, which extended over several pages and veintenas, it can be hypothesized that, in Primeros Memoriales, a period of observances in
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The synthetic depiction of the veintenas is the only one documented in pre-Hispanic and post-contact Aztec sculpture (Fig. 5.7; Nicholson 2002, 65–72, Díaz Álvarez 2018, 156–159). Therefore, early colonial images and sculptures attest that the representation of gods, goddesses, or some of their characteristic attributes as a kind of period marker was common and was not an exception in the representation of the veintenas. During seminar discussions at Leiden University, Prof. Maarten Jansen raised the possibility that several abbreviated representations of the twenty-day celebrations also appear in the pre-Hispanic Mixtec Codex Vienna (see also Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2018, 357–360). On page 48 (Fig. 4.11a), a well-known image represents the descent of Lord 9 Wind Quetzalcoatl from heaven. First, he sits in the sky and takes orders from older and larger priests, surrounded by several small objects. Eventually, he descends from the sky on a cotton rope, accompanied by two male figures whose dress identifies them as eagle and yahui (fire serpent) nahuales. Their role seems to be that of bringing to earth two temples, previously seen in heaven, by carrying them on their back. On the left, the jaguar character carries a temple that contains a mask of Xipe Totec, which possibly indicates Tlacaxipehualiztli. On the right, the temple carried by the fire serpent contains a sun disk, which could correspond to Panquetzaliztli. Eventually, both temples are placed on the ground (perhaps an indication that the cult has been established), along with another structure.
depicted within a black square; this may indicate Tlillan (the Place of Darkness), which is a temple usually presided over by Cihuacoatl. Later, on page 27 (Fig. 4.11b), the narrative includes two symbols on top of a volute within a larger scene that represents the creation of agriculture (Furst 1978a, 198, Monaghan 1990). In Mixtec codices, volutes indicate both a celebration and an offering, concepts expressed by the Mixtec word huico (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2018, 357). On top of the volutes stand a tree and a mummy bundle, which could correspond to Cuahuitehua, and Micaillhuitontli or Huey Micaillhuitl among the Nahua. The name of the former celebration means “raising of poles or trees” in Nahuatl, while that of the latter refers to celebrations of the dead. After these two symbols, more signs refer to the seasons and years. First, there is half an A-O year sign with a single dot, then two depictions of the wind god. This strengthens the hypothesis that yearly celebrations and seasons are indicated. The line ends with a broken corn plant, followed by a rising sun and a small representation of a manuscript, complete with dots and a day sign. The narrative is evidently very abbreviated but seems to suggest that initial, unsuccessful attempts at agriculture could only be corrected through the use of the calendar to track the movement of the sun and the seasons. Several other possible veintena markers appear throughout the Codex Vienna (see, for example, pages 22 and 15), suggesting that seasonal celebrations and related ritual activities played a role in the mythical accounts of creation of the Mixteca.

The varied length and emphasis given to the veintenas and their pictorial expressions indicate that the ceremonies unfolded rather fluidly and were punctuated by single periodic markers. What follows in this chapter is a different and renewed approach to the possible representation of the festival cycle in the ancient sacred books based on the considerations expressed so far.

4.3. The veintenas in the Codex Borgia

The central pages of the Codex Borgia (pp. 29–46) have attracted the attention of scholars since Seler’s (1904) seminal study. According to the German scholar (Seler 1904, vol. 2, 1–75), this section of the manuscript depicts a journey into the underworld of the Venus star, incarnated as a Quetzalcoatl priest who flies through and performs several ceremonies in a long sequence of scenes. According to Seler’s astral interpretation, the protagonist’s travel mimics the planet’s movement and its periodical disappearance and reemergence in the sky. While Seler’s interpretation has been rejected, the central role played by the Quetzalcoatl priest as the main, recurring character in the unfolding narrative generally remains accepted (see Boone 2007, 176–178).

Nowotny (1961, § 21b) was the first to provide a systematic critique of Seler’s interpretation. He proposed that the sequence on pages 29–46 of the Codex Borgia constituted a series of temple structures and related rituals that belonged to a specific ceremonial center. Although he did not offer any possible identifications of the center, he suggested a connection with Tenochtitlan’s sacred precinct, whose temples provided the stage for the eighteen yearly feasts of the veintenas. Nowotny further noted that the date clusters that irregularly appear in the sequence are indeed yearly occurrences over the span of a four-year period; in other words, they correspond to the veintenas of the solar year, a point developed in Section 3.2 of this book. Nowotny’s suggestion that the central pages were a sequential presentation of rituals and their settings is an important point of departure for the present analysis.

Anders et al. (1993, 49–69, 175–190) offered another important contribution to this study by establishing the