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 periodic 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

Figure 4.10. a. Micailhuitontli, f. 251r. b. Huey Micailhuitl, f. 251v. Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España. Paso y Troncoso 1926.
Figure 4.11. a. Lord 9 Wind Quetzalcoatl descends from heaven with two helpers carrying the cults of the sun (Panquetzaliztli) and Xipe (Tlacaxipehualiztli) on their back. Codex Vienna, p. 48. b. Cuahuitehua and Micailhuitl followed by two wind gods. Codex Vienna, p. 27. Kingsborough 1831.
visionary aspect of the Codex Borgia’s ritual sequence within the wider context of Mesoamerican religion. In their view, the Quetzalcoatl priest must be understood as a nahual who can transform and embody different natural forces for the sake of the community’s well-being. More recently, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 431–530) further developed this idea and offered a detailed analysis of the rituals and places of the Codex Borgia’s central pages in relation to the veintenas known through colonial Nahua sources. The relationship between the vision quest and the veintena ceremony is of particular importance. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 450–451) also stressed the interdependent relationship between the officiating Quetzalcoatl priest and Cihuacoatl, the mother goddess figure who protects and guides the priest in his ritual endeavors throughout the Codex Borgia’s central scenes. In Chapter 1, I discussed the importance of priestly figures as intermediaries between the world of the living and the dead, from whom they derive their knowledge and authority. Night ceremonies can indeed be described as a journey to the world of the dead to meet the ancestors.

Jansen and Pérez Jiménez’s identification of the veintenas in the Codex Borgia partially coincides with a previous study by Milbrath (2013, ch. 2), who nevertheless believed that the ritual sequence took place during a specific period between 1496 and 1506. In contrast to the methodology espoused by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, Milbrath opted for a systematic chronological correlation largely based on a study by Aveni (1999). While I find the suggestion to anchor the Codex Borgia in historical time interesting (as further discussed in Section 6.3 of this book), the main problem with Aveni and Milbrath’s identification of chronological and astronomical events is that it is based on selected dates that appear in the pages of the Codex Borgia while ignoring at least as many other dates found in the same pages but that do not corroborate their chronology. More generally, the important issue of the genre of the manuscript, its mantic and ceremonial content, is never considered when framing astronomical and chronological interpretations of the document. In other words, was Codex Borgia painted before, after, or during the period between 1496 and 1506 that was presumably depicted in the manuscript? What was the purpose of recording past agricultural or astronomical events? How past events shape the outlook of religious pictorial manuscripts is an important question that is addressed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Here, I am mostly concerned with iconographic identifications and their significance within the corpus of religious manuscripts.

My analysis largely follows clues in the Codex Borbonicus’ veintena section to find parallels in the Codex Borgia’s central pages. There is a general similarity between the composition and placement of the ritual section in these two manuscripts. In both instances, the reader must either move around the document or turn it ninety degrees to follow the narrative. The Codex Borbonicus is a particularly large document. Each page measures roughly 40 × 40 cm. Although the Codex Borgia is the largest of the surviving pre-Hispanic codices, it is considerably smaller than the Codex Borbonicus and measures approximately 27 cm on each side. However, the section in the Codex Borgia spans both sides of the document. Thus, the sequence cannot be appreciated at a glance; rather, the reader is forced to follow the sequential unfolding on each page.

As previously mentioned, the black Quetzalcoatl priest in the Codex Borgia is accompanied throughout his journey by the mother goddess Cihuacoatl, who is represented outstretched, functioning as a framing device or temple enclosure, and found mainly in the opening and closing scenes of the ceremonial cycle. By comparison, the Codex Borbonicus’ veintena section opens and closes with the Cihuacoatl and an accompanying Xiuhtecuhtli (fire serpent) priest. In the first instance on page 23, the former is glossed as “main priest” (papa mayor), which is consistent with the major priestly role of the Cihuacoatl in the Mexica Empire. The Xiuhtecuhtli priest, by contrast, is identified as the tlatoani Motecuhzoma. At the end of the cycle on page 37, they reappear, this time identified by their divinatory powers: Cihuacoatl as “god of the omens” (dios de los agüeros) and Xiuhtecuhtli as “god of the maize kernels [used in divination] and magicians” (dios de los maizes y hechiceros). Thus, the two characters are comparable to modern Mesoamerican and Mazatec priests, whose powers and knowledge were discussed in previous chapters.

In both manuscripts (page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus and page 46 of the Codex Borgia), the New Fire ceremony is depicted towards the end of the sequence and constitutes a pivotal event in the cycle, either over a year or a period of years. In my analysis, I focus on the ceremonial trajectory that begins with Ochpaniztli, whose long and elaborate depiction in the Codex Borbonicus indicates its importance in the sequence, and ends with the New Fire on Panquetzaliztli.

On page 29 of the Codex Borbonicus (Fig. 4.12), the representation of Ochpaniztli begins on the left, with the priest of Chicomecoatl dancing in front of her assistants, who are playing different musical instruments such as conch shells and trumpets. The scene then proceeds towards a temple decorated with colorful corn cobs, which is longitudinally placed to indicate that the priest is entering it. Eventually, a character exits the temple, wearing a human skin and carrying corn cobs in their hands and a quail in their mouth. These attributes identify the character as Centeotl, the god of corn, who continues to walk towards a smaller temple, presumably the one depicted in the next page (p. 30; Fig. 4.7). A comparable scene can be found on page 43 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 4.13), which is entirely occupied by a yellow quadrangular enclosure decorated with corn cobs. A priest descends from above, through the body of Cihuacoatl and inside the temple, where a large frontal and squatting Xolotl is being sacrificed. Xolotl’s upward head may also indicate a state of trance. The skin that the god wears on their hands and feet is spotted like that of a jaguar, while their chest and trunk are shaped like a round jeweled altar (cuauhxicalli in Nahua) that contains...
their heart. Several characters surround the Xolotl altar. In the upper corners of the image, two male figures are seated on jaguar and eagle thrones (a reference to political power), while two women below carry children on their backs while grinding corn, typically female and domestic activities. In the middle section, four gods with distinctive colors (most likely in reference to the cardinal directions) kneel and pour offerings into two containers. Beneath Xolotl lies the body of a Cihuacoatl decorated with both nocturnal symbols (the gray and starred body) and corn cobs. The scene ends with the priest’s successful exit from an opening in the temple enclosure at the bottom of the scene. He is carrying corn cobs on his back, which means that he has become Centeotl. The scene in the Codex Borgia is much more complex than the one in the Codex Borbonicus, and many iconographic details cannot be fully explained. Yet, both scenes depict a ritual that takes places within a similar temple and in which the protagonist is a priest who becomes Centeotl by virtue of successfully passing through the temple.

According to the written information provided in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 30, 120–121), during Ochpaniztli, Chicomecoatl was a priest who celebrated a ritual involving the human sacrifice of a woman, who represented Toci. The sacrifice would take place at midnight in the temple, where the victim was flayed. Her skin was eventually worn by another person named Teccizquauilli. Another part of the victim’s skin, taken from the thigh, was worn by an impersonator of Centeotl. On page 29 of the Codex Borbonicus, the ritual begins with Chicomecoatl on the left and ends (or, better yet, proceeds) with a person wearing a skin exiting a temple on the right. The Codex Borgia, by contrast, makes clear that the same person who enters the temple exits it and that the sacrifice is of a god’s vicar, Xolotl, whose body animates the sacred offering altar. The latter pre-Hispanic manuscript provides an internal perspective that focuses on what happens within the temple’s enclosure, which is exactly what colonial sources omit, including the Codex Borbonicus.
Nowotny (1961, § 21b, 247) and Jansen (2002) aptly noted that the Codex Borgia offers a mystical and spiritual view of the ritual rather than the external and public aspects of the cult. In colonial sources, human sacrifice often became a placeholder for any ritual activity that was conducted away from the public eye, especially in light of the secrecy that surrounded private ceremonies conducted inside temples at night. These rituals involved a deep and personal transformation on the part of the people involved, who eventually emerged as different gods or characters due to having acquired new knowledge and power. While colonial sources speak of human sacrifice, the Codex Borgia depicts the anthropomorphizing of the temple’s altar. Xolotl, who wears a jaguar skin (much like the human skin of Centeotl in colonial sources), is a god related to the underworld and the otherworldly travels of Quetzalcoatl. Here, he functions as a surrogate for the priest, and his sacrifice is not death but rather a process of transformation.

The scene that precedes the ceremony in the maize temple on page 42 of the Codex Borgia includes other elements that refer to Ochpanitzli and its protagonists (Fig. 4.14). The main action revolves around Itzlacoliuhqui (Curved Obsidian Blade). His body is skeletonized, and he wears a conical hat and a black-and-white face covering (Anders et al. 1993, 227–231). As noted by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 504), Itzlacoliuhqui’s body in the Codex Borgia may consist of some type of dough due to its white color and red dots. Ixiptla (god impersonators) were often made of corn or other edible staples. In Sahagún’s text (1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 31), Itzlacoliuhqui partook in the ceremony of Ochpanitzli as an aspect of Centeotl, the maize god, who is born from the sacrifice of Toci. In the Codex Borgia, Itzlacoliuhqui undergoes sacrifice by heart extraction on a stone slab, as seen in the top scene. Before this, he is in a ball court, where he is stoned and beaten by four characters. After his sacrifice on a stone, he travels to another underworld.

Figure 4.13. The sacrifice of Xolotl in the maize temple. Codex Borgia, p. 43. Kingsborough 1831.
The Ceremonial Cycle

realm—a flooded sunken courtyard—and drowns. He is finally immolated on a crossroad at the bottom of the page. In this last sacrifice, which immediately precedes the ritual in the temple of maize on the following page, an offering of sticks wrapped in a white cloth is placed on top of a colored strip, which may represent the earth. I follow Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 509) in interpreting the offering as a glyphic reference to the festival of Ochpaniztli, as previously discussed (see Humboldt Fragment). In a similar manner to the Codex Borbonicus and Primeros Memoriales, the glyphic marker indicates a time of the year, even if the ceremonies depicted may not necessarily follow a predictable outlook or duration, rather displacing themselves or overlapping in a rather fluid manner. Once again, the image in the Codex Borgia is particularly complex, and many details cannot be fully accounted for. However, it is worth noting that the corresponding text by Sahagún related to the veintena ceremonies, including Ochpaniztli, are far from clear, a fact described at length above in the case of the varied descriptions of Teotleco. Characters often overlap and exchange roles so that the straightforward trajectory of the action is often difficult to follow, defying any simple progression or narrative.

In Primeros Memoriales, it was noted that the goddess Toci appeared before her putative festival of Ochpaniztli during the veintenas of Micailhuitontli and Huey Micailhuitl (ff. 251r–251v). In the Codex Borgia, it seems that a ritual preparation that involves the sacrifice of Itzlacoliuhqui as a manifestation of Centeotl is similarly noted in the period leading up to the celebration of Ochpaniztli. Indeed, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 509) identified elements of the veintenas of Micailhuitontli and Huey Micailhuitl in the Codex Borgia (p. 42), such as the importance of dough...
ixiptla in those veintenas, according to colonial sources. In the corresponding image in Primeros Memoriales, a decapitated dough figure can be seen lying on a bed of corn in the second illustration related to Huey Micailhuitl, which can be compared to Itzlacoliuhqui in the Codex Borgia (p. 42). Unlike most colonial sources, the scenes in the Codex Borgia are characterized by the central role played by the priest, at once sacrificer and sacrificed, as the prism and catalyst through which ritual action is enacted. Every ritual and successive place comes into being because it is visited and activated by the sacrificed priest.

The New Fire ceremony concludes the ceremonial cycle on page 46 of the Codex Borgia. The corresponding veintena of Panquetzaliztli is introduced by the abbreviated symbol of a blue upright banner on page 45 (Fig. 4.15), where it appears on the upper portion of the page. The banner pierces through the temple enclosure and is wrapped around a night vision serpent. The central image on this page is the tzompantli, the skull altar, on top of which stands a character with a fleshless head and a white body with red stripes, akin to Camaxtli, the god of hunting. Behind him (or stemming from him) is a tree with different colored banners. Anders et al. (1993, 239) noted the custom of placing banners atop trees during Panquetzaliztli (Durán 1971, Calendar, Fifteenth Month, Codex Telleriano-Remensis, f. 5r). Below the tzompantli, the officiating priest is seated on an altar structure in a particularly dynamic position. He appears to be bleeding (perhaps dematerializing) and turning into a sacred bundle, as indicated by the cloth that covers him. According to Tezozomoc (1997, ch. 94), the tzompantli was not an altar but rather the sacred bundle containing the body of the deceased. In particular, the source relates the solemn

Figure 4.15. Mixcoatl atop the tzompantli. Codex Borgia, p. 45. Kingsborough 1831.
burial of warriors, including a brother of Motecuhzoma, that took place after a particularly deadly and fierce battle against the Huexotzinca army, from the town in the modern state of Puebla. Once the bundles were burnt, the remains were scattered in a place called tzompantitlan near the temple of Huitzilopochtli in the Templo Mayor, where the archaeological remains of the Huey Tzompantli were recently located. A somewhat similar but complementary piece of information can be found in Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 7, ch. 12), who claimed that a noble taken captive from Huexotzinco was sacrificed in Tenochtitlan during the celebration of the New Fire at the end of the fifty-two-year cycle. Finally, a gloss on page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus, which depicts the ceremony of Panquetzaliztli, can be seen on the stairway of the temple. It reads, “Night burial of an important cacique, during which all the most important priests would gather to perform the ceremonies and rituals they were accustomed to do” (Entierro de noche que se hacía de algún gran cacique, a donde se congregaban todos los papas, con las ceremonias y ritos que en ello usaban). All these relatively disparate references indicate a connection between certain ceremonies related to the creation of sacred bundles from the remains of deified warriors and ancestors, the New Fire, and the veintena of Panquetzaliztli. Historical events, such as the battle between the Mexica and the Huexotzinca, and periodic ritual occasions are blurred and confused, perhaps because the distinction between ceremonies for the gods and human deeds was not as clear-cut as we may want it to be. Was there a common source for both Nahua and Spanish historians, who framed the same information in distinct terms that responded to distinct conceptions of time and human action?

In the Codex Borgia, the ritual of the New Fire is depicted on page 46 (Fig. 4.16) in a scene dominated by an animated...

Figure 4.16. New Fire ceremony. Codex Borgia, p. 42. Kingsborough 1831.
pot, from which the officiating priest emerges. Four colorful serpents enclose the burning pot. The Florentine Codex contains the following:

Thereupon likewise descended the fire serpent. It was just like a blazing pine firebrand. Its tongue was made of flaming red feathers. It went [as if] burning [like] a torch. And its tail was of paper, perhaps two fathoms or three fathoms long. As it came down, it was like a real serpent; it showed its tongue; it was as if it bent back and forth.

And when [the priest] had brought it to the base [of the pyramid], he proceeded carefully there to the eagle vessel. Then he went up [to the eagle vessel]: he also raised [the fire serpent] in dedication of the four directions. When he had [so] raised it in dedication, then he cast it upon the sacrificial papers; then they burnt.

And when he had come to leave it, when he went ascending to the top, then shell trumpets were blown. (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34, 147)

The Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 5r) confirms that the feast of Xiuhtecuhltli was also celebrated during Panquetzaliztli. Four priests, each carrying a large pinewood bundle, performed the ceremony by orienting themselves towards the four directions, as seen in the Codex Borgia, where the four serpents around the burner form a square. On page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus, several god impersonators carry large pinewood bundles, but only four priests dedicated to Yoaltecuhtli (the lord of the night invoked during the New Fire ceremony, according to Sahagún; Anders et al. 1991, 223) direct their torches to the turquoise hearth in the temple. The New Fire ceremony was conducted not only to mark the conclusion of a fifty-two-year count (xiuhmolpilli) but also, on a smaller scale, to celebrate the closing of a four-year cycle (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 37–38). In the Codex Borbonicus, it is clear that the New Fire ceremony was conducted during Panquetzaliztli, as also corroborated by Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34). However, the same source (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 37) relates the drilling of a new fire during Izcalli. Similarly, in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 5r), the fire god Xiuhtecuhltli’s ceremonies are described as part of Panquetzaliztli, while the god himself is depicted as the patron of Izcalli on folio 6v, where he can be seen sporting attributes of the “fire bearers.” These seemingly confusing elements indicate that the two celebrations (Panquetzaliztli and Izcalli) share overlapping features, despite occurring sixty days apart. In this light, the ceremony of the New Fire in the Codex Borgia (p. 42) can also be related to Izcalli (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 521–523).

The proposed analysis is based on a close reading of a ceremonial trajectory that begins in Ochpaniztli and culminates in Panquetzaliztli with the New Fire ceremony in both the Codices Borgia and Borbonicus. However, there are two more important rituals that take place during this long ritual sequence in the Codex Borgia that find a parallel not in a religious manuscript but rather in a historical account.

### 4.3.1. The quest

In folios 20r and 21r (Fig. 4.17 and 4.18) of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, an early colonial document from Cuauhtinchan (a town in the vicinity of Puebla), two scenes depict consecutive rituals of political accession. First, four characters with the attributes of the god of hunting, Mixcoatl (e.g., red-and-white body paint and the instruments of his trade), lie atop a tree. According to the accompanying text (Kirchoff et al. 1989, 171), the four men are tlatoque (rulers), who fasted for four days while alone in the woods. Two eagles and two jaguars, symbols of royalty, pour nourishing liquid into their mouths. As discussed by Olivier (2015a, 466–473), the objective of the ritual was to attain the status of nobility, which was finally accomplished with the perforation of the septum, the ritual represented in the following image. Novothy (1961, § 15b, 251–252) first indicated that both scenes have a parallel on page 44 of the Codex Borgia. Figure 4.19 depicts a quadrangular temple enclosure, within which stands a colorful tree that sprouts from a round solar disk on the chest of Cihuacoatl, who also displays the attributes of the rain god. On top of the tree, a character dressed as an eagle receives precious liquid from a descending bat-like figure. The eagle-person is being nourished in the same manner as the tlatoque in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. At the same time, on the lateral openings of the temple, the beaks and teeth of an eagle, a jaguar, and a bird perforate the noses of three men who appear as fire serpent nahuales. Thus, the image fuses the two successive scenes of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, the nourishment of the tlatoque on the trees, and the perforation of the septum.

The nose-piercing ceremony on page 44 of the Codex Borgia is placed exactly between the sacrifices of Itzilacololhuqui on page 42 and Xolotl on page 43, which are tentatively tied to the veintena of Ochpaniztli in the present analysis, and pages 45–46, which end the ritual cycle with the New Fire during Panquetzaliztli. Primeros Memoriales states that, “at this time [of Panquetzaliztli], abstinence was practiced for eighty days, although there was not abstaining from eating. There was eating, but no one washed himself with soap or took a steam bath; no one slept with a woman” (Sahagún et al. 1997, 64). Information from the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34) confirms that Panquetzaliztli was the culmination of eighty days of fasting that began during Ochpaniztli. Finally, a previously discussed passage in Motolinía (1971, ch. 25) states that priests known as “fire bearers” (cargadores del fuego) from Tehuacán, Teotitlán, and Coxcatlán began their preparation for Panquetzaliztli eighty days prior to the feast.

Elements of a quest are especially evident in the fasting of the aspiring tlatoque, as indicated in the image and text of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. Olivier (2008,
271–274) noted a relationship between the naked red-and-white striped body, conical hat, pierced nose, and other features of the so-called Huaxtecs (León Portilla 1965) and the ceremonies for the royal succession, when the aspiring king symbolically died and was reborn with a new identity. I propose that these specific elements do not indicate a ritual death but are rather signs of a vision quest, a journey to the world of deified ancestors from which...
aspiring rulers return with the knowledge and experience necessary for their leadership role. In the Codex Borgia, the sacrificed priest on page 43 is Itzlacoliuhqui, who begins his journey during Ochpaniztli and self-immolates during Panquetzaliztli as Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli on page 45. Although political overtones may be present in the nose-piercing ceremony on page 44 of the Codex Borgia, the protagonist is the bird nahual priest in the middle of

Figure 4.18. Nose-piercing ceremony. Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, f. 21r. Mexicain 46–58. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.
The scene who receives the precious nourishment while on top of a tree (possibly fasting), not the three characters on the sides.

As in Mazatec chants, the polyhedral figure of the priest can consecutively embody many and different characters, to the point of a confusing accumulation of identities. He is the absolute protagonist of the pages under discussion in the Codex Borgia. For example, on page 45, the Quetzalcoatl priest can be seen in the middle left of the image transforming into an eagle nahual and extracting the heart of a sacrificial victim plunged into a river. The same character, identified as Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (Seler 1904, vol. 2, 71) due to his white body with red stripes, is on top of the tzompantli structure in the middle of the scene. The dynamic posture indicates that he is alive. The same attributes, in addition to the small net that he holds in his right hand (used to carry food during hunting), connects him to Mixcoatl, the god protagonist of the veintena of Quecholli, which is celebrated right before Panquetzaliztli (Milbrath 2013, 30, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 517–519). Mixcoatl, the god of hunting, also shares attributes with the tlatoque of the fasting and nose-piercing ceremony in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (ff. 20r, 21r). Next, the priest himself appears bleeding on an altar. His body is in a dynamic posture and covered in a large white cotton cloth, which indicates that he is transforming into a sacred bundle known as tlaquimilolli in Nahuatl (Anders et al. 1993, 239). This means that the priest first made the sacrifice, then became the fruit of his own sacrifice. I propose that the priest, as the protagonist of the story, has the ability to subjectively take on the role of people, sacrificed, sacrificers, and even powerful objects in a rapid and dynamic manner, as was initially proposed for the scenes of Teotleco in the Codices Tudela (f. 22r) and Ixtlilxochitl (f. 99v), which are admittedly much simpler in their iconography and compositions.
4.3.2. Conclusions

In this chapter, I proposed approaching ritual representations in colonial and ancient manuscripts in a novel manner. First, iconographic complexity and idiosyncrasies were framed within the idea of transformation—that is, the human ability to change and take different shapes, such as animals, gods, and natural elements. This ability, which is sometimes defined as “instability” in the anthropological literature on South American shamanism (Viveiros de Castro 1994, Alberti 2007, Lagrou 2009), creates a constant interplay between different characters and corresponding ceremonial roles.

While mythological explanations pursue clear meaning, imply causality, and create a reassuring but somewhat fictitious linearity for the narrative, the focus on ritual action brings process itself to the fore. Second, I propose primarily interpreting this process as a quest, again relying on anthropological literature on Indigenous American cultures (Irwin 1994) as much as my own field work in the Mazateca. The quest implies that ritual action is not only a process but also an open one with a desired—but not a guaranteed—outcome. While a shared and common belief system may provide a road map to the destination, individuality and subjectivity play a major role in the ceremonial context. In the literature on ancient Mesoamerican religion, ritual is mostly understood as a public event whose purpose was to create and foment social cohesion. By contrast, in this book, I propose that in the case of religious manuscripts, pictography was not merely a reflection of religious beliefs but rather a means through which religious knowledge was constructed and materialized. Although the purported mysticism of the Codex Borgia’s ritual pages, as remarked by Nowotny, may ultimately seem to preclude any possible definitive interpretation, we should not refrain from asking even unanswerable questions in our own quest for meaning. The following chapter argues for a reassessment of the backbone of religious books, namely the Mesoamerican calendar, vis-à-vis its representation in colonial times.
Ritual and Historical Time

The preceding chapter proposed the identification of a ceremonial sequence in the Codex Borgia with the veintenas, relying on a critical analysis of written and pictorial sources from the early colonial period. Specifically, I argued that the erosion of the visionary aspect of veintena ceremonies had a major impact on the way in which they were represented after the conquest. Following Díaz Álvarez (2013, 2018, 2019), I argued that the normalization of the ceremonial cycle was geared towards the creation of a solar calendar akin to the one in use in Europe, conceived as separate from the tonalpohualli, whose only function became that of a zodiac, a divinatory device seemingly divorced from timekeeping. In the present chapter, I attempt to reconstruct an internal chronology of the veintena ceremonies in the Codex Borbonicus, the earliest surviving post-conquest manuscript that presents crucial ritual and historical information on the Mexica without relying on later sources. This leads to a questioning of the accepted correlation between the Christian and Mesoamerican calendars.

5.1. Historical time and the Codex Borbonicus

The Codex Borbonicus is the closest example of a pre-colonial manuscript from central Mexico that has survived. It stands out among the Mesoamerican sacred books because its provenience and dating are known, although not in detail. As first suggested by Nicholson (1988), several remarks about the swamps (chinampas) in the glosses indicate a probable southern locale in the basin of Mexico. Nicholson also remarked on the importance given to Chihuacoatl as the main priest of the ceremonies in the section dedicated to veintenas, which points to the towns of Colhuacan or Xochimilco, where the goddess was venerated as a patron deity. The manuscript also contains several dates associated with the solar year (xihuitl), specifically the consecutive years 1 Rabbit, 2 Reed, and 3 Tecpatl. According to the most accepted correlation, these dates correspond to the consecutive years of 1506, 1507, and 1508. Veintena celebrations unfolded over the course of 2 Reed (1507).

The approach to the Mesoamerican ceremonial festival cycle that I propose is flexible and requires an understanding of these celebrations in conjunction with the tonalpohualli, to such an extent that dates in the 260-day calendar could determine which rituals to undertake at any given point in the year. Therefore, it is important to look for clues in the same manuscript that connects the tonalpohualli with the solar year. In the case of the Codex Borbonicus, several authors (Quiñones Keber 1987, Graulich 1997, Anders et al. 1991, 40n6) noticed the presence of a main priest, who is identified by a gloss as papa mayor in the image of the trecena 1 Rain on page 7 (Fig. 5.1). This priest, who wears a human skin and carries corn cobs in his hands, eventually plays a major role in the ceremony of Ochpaniztli on page 29 of the veintena section, as previously discussed. As its seventh day 7 Serpent, the trecena 1 Rain includes Chicomecoatl, which is indeed the NahuaT name of the god impersonated by the priest during Ochpaniztli in the manuscript. While no other pre-Hispanic tonalamatl (Borgia, p. 67 and Vaticanus B, p. 55) depicts Chicomecoatl during its tutelary trecena, the colonial Tonalamatl Aubin (p. 7), which closely follows the Codex Borbonicus, prominently presents him as a co-regent along with the rain god Tlaloc. According to extant sources, Chicomecoatl is not the principal officiating priest or goddess of Ochpaniztli, and its prominent role in the Codex Borbonicus constitutes an exception compared to later depictions of this veintena, which is more commonly presided over by Toci or Tlazolteotl, as in the Codices Tudela (f. 21r), Telleriano-Remensis (f. 3r), and others.

DiCesare (2009, 133–134) interpreted the anomaly of Chicomecoatl’s role during Ochpaniztli in the Codex Borbonicus by referring to information reported by Durán. The Dominican friar (Durán 1971, Gods and Rites, ch. 14–15) dedicated two consecutive chapters to Chicomecoatl and Toci because, in his words, their celebrations fell one after the other. Chicomecoatl was first celebrated on September 15, while Toci supposedly fell on September 16 during the Ochpaniztli festival. Chicomecoatl (i.e., 7 Serpent) is a movable feast within the solar calendar whose specific occurrence during the harvest in September—and the related Ochpaniztli festival—would not take place every year. Durán’s information indirectly suggested that Chicomecoatl may have been chosen instead of Toci as the principal goddess because of a specific occurrence of the tonalpohualli during the year 2 Reed portrayed in the veintena section of the Codex Borbonicus.

If the trecena 1 Rain, whose seventh day is 7 Serpent, fell during the harvest festival of Ochpaniztli in September, this also means that Panquetzaliztli, which occurs eighty days after Ochpaniztli, would roughly fall during the trecena 1 Dog. Chimalpahin (1998, 7th Relación, ff. 186r–186v) stated that the New Fire ceremony for the year 2 Reed, the same one celebrated on page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus, took place on the day 4 Reed, the fourth day of the trecena 1 Dog (see also Anders et al. 1991, 39). This means that 7 Serpent (Chicomecoatl) would fall during Ochpaniztli exactly in the year of the New Fire depicted in both the trecena and veintena sections of the Codex Borbonicus. In the preceding chapter, the ritual trajectory