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The Importance of Astrology Within Mesoamerican Society

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The Importance of Astrology Within Mesoamerican Society

All throughout history, humanity was always fascinated with the sky, and this fascination reached far beyond cultural barriers. The sky and the celestial bodies within it holds great significance in many cultures all across the globe, and it manifests in many different ways. Some societies would look towards the sky for direction, while others based their cultural practices off of what they saw up in the sky. Following this pattern, Mesoamerican societies were also greatly influenced by the sky since it had a direct influence on their calendar systems. While Mesoamerican societies used both the 365-day calendar and the 260-day calendar, the 365-day calendar was utilized in agricultural practices such as predicting when to plant crops as well as when to harvest them, while the 260-day calendar was used for more ritualistic practices like predicting an individual's fate or their marriage compatibility. The combination of their fascination with the sky and the Tonalpohualli, which is the Nahuatl word for the 260-day calendar, culminated in their divination practices. Within Mesoamerica, astrology in conjunction with the Tonalpohualli was used to predict the fates and temperaments of the people who are born in their society, and these divination practices as well as those who practice it inhabit the heart of their communities.

When discussing divination practices within Mesoamerica, one must first have a thorough grasp of the Tonalpohualli before going more into depth about divination in that society. A source that explains how the Tonalpohualli works in detail is book 4 of the Florentine Codex. Within "Judicial Astrology or Divination Arts" it reads, "Here begins [the account of] the characters of each day, which they counted by trecenas. They counted thirteen days in every week, making a cycle of two hundred and sixty days, after which they returned to the beginning" (Richter and

Houtrouw 1r). When the codex refers to “trecenas” it is referring to the thirteen-day period that made up the week. Within that “trecena” the first character day would be the focus of that week, after that thirteen-day period, another character would have their own “trecena”. There are 20 characters in total, so in turn there are 20 “trecenas” within the Tonalpohualli. The 20 characters of the Tonalpohualli translated into English are, alligator, wind, house, lizard, serpent, death, deer, rabbit, water, dog, monkey, grass, reed, jaguar, eagle, vulture, movement, flint, rain, and flower. To further elaborate on how this calendar system works, a scholar named Elizabeth H. Boone wrote this on the Tonalpohualli, “The count of thirteen numbers and the count of twenty day signs ran concurrently, assigning both a number and a sign to each day (Table 1). As one day ended and another began, both cycles advanced by one” (Boone 16).^[1] When Boone refers to the signs, she is talking about the 20 character days. This information indicates that the 13 number count and the 20-day characters do not work by themselves, but rather, they work together to make up the ritual calendar. The 20-day characters by themselves would not be significant enough to make a sophisticated calendar system, so the inclusion of the 13 number count helps separate periods of time from one another. So, based on the information from these two sources, the first “trecena” would start on one-crocodile, the second “trecena” within that year would start on the day one-jaguar, the third “trecena” would start on one-deer, and so on. These character names along with the 13 number count were important because it was the way that the Nahua fortune-tellers or tonalpouhqui would know if that individual was fated for fortune or misfortune, or whether they would be compatible with other people who were born on different days. In addition, each of these characters also have a deity that is associated with them. Each deity influences the temperament of each of the 20-day signs. For example the deity Xochipilli or Tonacatecutitli is

associated with the day sign alligator, and the deity Quetzalcoatl or Ehecatl is associated with the day sign wind, and so on. Therefore, these deities are essential in the divination practices of Mesoamerica.

The Tonalpohualli was the basis of the divination practices within Mesoamerica. A clear example of this influence on divination practices is the books that these ancient scholars referenced when engaging in their practices. Boone's book *Cycles of time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate* has a detailed explanation of the divination practices within Mesoamerican society. In that book, she states, "Accumulated knowledge of the calendar and of the mantic influences and festivals attached to different units of time was preserved in the painted book called tonalamatl in Nahuatl" (Boone 18). This shows that the Tonalpohualli is very important within their divination practices. This knowledge was so important that they had to record it down in several books that would help future apprentices learn the trade of divination. With the help of these books, one generation of scholars can easily pass on their knowledge to the next. Likewise, these books were tools that they could easily reference in their divination practices. There were many divination books or tonalamatls in circulation during that time, but some of the ones that survive to this day are the Codex Borgia and the Dresden Codex. The Codex Borgia revolved around the Tonalpohualli. This book shows the relationship between the 20 characters and their individual deities that are correlated with those days. In contrast, the Dresden Codex is mainly about Venus and the planet's rotation around the earth that those ancient scholars observed. A further example of this information is discussed in the commentary about the Codex Borgia. In that commentary, a scholar named Bruce E. Byland writes:

For priests to be able to fulfill all these complex roles they had to have immense knowledge. Part of that knowledge was acquired in formal schools called *calmecac*. More was learned on the job as junior priests working with older, more experienced priests. Among the things required of priests was the ability to read books and interpret the information contained in them.^[2]

Even though there were many different types of priests during ancient Mesoamerica, the specific ones that Byland refers to is the *tonalpouhqui*. They are the priests who specialize in the divination of the fates of their fellow man. The way that these priests differ from other types of priests of their time is that these *tonalpouhqui* fulfilled the role of soothsayers. Additionally, this information of the ritualistic calendar was so important to this practice that apprentices would have to study under more experienced *tonalpouhquis* in order to have a better grasp of both the *Tonalpohualli* and the divination practices that revolve around that ritualistic calendar. When taking in both these sources of information into consideration, it would be likely that the book that they would have learned under the apprenticeship of those priests would have been one of the *tonalamatls* that Boone mentioned in the second chapter of her book.

The divinations that the *tonalpouhqui* performed impacted a massive part of the lives of the people who lived within Mesoamerica. Boone said this on the topic:

Although each day had a place in both the *tonalpohualli* and the *xihuitl*, it was the 260-day *tonalpohualli* that spoke most directly to the Aztec people. The gods, events, and other elements it carried as augural messages governed the way people conducted their affairs and even determined what kind of people they were likely to become. (17)

To clarify, when Boone mentions the *xihuitl*, she is referring to the 365-day calendar that ran alongside the ritualistic 260-day calendar. An example of both the significance of the ritualistic

calendar and the divination practices within Mesoamerica is that they would use the same day names that they use in the Tonalpohualli to describe the days of the solar calendar. Likewise, the reverence of divination is not limited to the ritualistic calendar that they used, but it also had a huge impact on how their lives would lead. They believed that the trecenas that they were born under had a significant impact on the trajectory of their lives. It would affect both the temperament that the new child would have, and it would affect the fate of said child. They revered those days and took heed to baptize their babies on a day that would be the most likely to give them a good future and temperament. A good example of this reference to the ritualistic calendar is in the Florentine Codex. A passage within the fourth book of the Florentine Codex reads, "Ocelotl, and on the bad luck that was the lot of all those who were born under it, whether they were men or women, if they did not remedy this with their own good diligence. Most of those who were born under this sign were slaves" (Richter and Houtrouw 4r). This passage is referring to the fate of the people who were born under the second trecena of the year that is ruled over by the ocelotl (Jaguar). The original writer of this passage is writing this particular section of this text with a lot of passion. During the time that this passage was written, much of the different nations within Mesoamerica were occupied by the Spanish conquistadors. So, figures like the original writer of the Florentine Codex could not publicly believe in their old traditions since it was seen as blasphemous by the Catholics who were in power. Even though the writer tries to deny the legitimacy of this ritual calendar in the beginning of the fourth book of the Florentine Codex, the vivid descriptions of each of trecenas and their attributes contradicts his earlier claims. This shows that the people within Mesoamerica still revered these day signs even during Spanish occupation. The lasting impact of these traditions signify the importance that they had in

Mesoamerican culture. The day signs had an immense influence on how they would conduct themselves. If they happened to be fated to have a bad future like the individuals that were born or baptized on the trecena of the Jaguar, then they would take the utmost care to not end up like those who were fated for misfortune. If the day that the child was born on was unfavorable, then they would baptize their child on a day that would bring the child more luck.

Thanks to the divinations that the Nahua fortune-tellers or tonalpouhqui made, they were often well regarded in their community and were considered to be middle class according to some scholars. They would use divination texts like the Codex Borgia to decide a person's fate. One scholar that considered them to be middle class is Frederic Hicks. In his article "The Middle Class in Ancient Central Mexico" he argues that there is a middle class within ancient Mesoamerican societies. Within that article he wrote, "Those households that had the necessary resources presumably sought out the diviners, midwives, and others who were reputed to be the best; those who served an upper-class clientele must have received greater compensation than those who did not and probably can be regarded as middle class" (Hicks 418). Here, Hicks makes a distinction between the tonalpouhqui who served the nobles or the upperclass of society and those who only served the general population. According to him, only those who served people of influence within their society could be considered middle class, and those tonalpouhqui would then gain a good reputation within their community. In contrast, one scholar had a differing opinion about their role in society. Ivan Šprajc believed that they held a much more influential role in society. In his article "Astronomy and its role in Ancient Mesoamerica" he states, Mesoamerican astronomy had a complex social rôle. According to a number of sources, the most sophisticated astronomical knowledge was possessed by the priestly class closely associated with

the ruling elite. Both early colonial documents and Maya hieroglyphic texts suggest that the Mesoamerican rulers were deeply concerned with what was occurring in the sky (Aveni 2001). (Šprajc 92)

Here, Šprajc proposes that the tonalpouhqui's influence is not only limited to the relationship that they have to the nobility that they serve, but they are in fact influential people in of themselves. His analysis reveals that they too must be among the elite in Mesoamerican society to gain all of this knowledge of astrology and the Tonalpohualli. This was a very specialized profession within Mesoamerica, so there would be a lot of investment made when learning this practice within apprentices. Combining these two perspectives, the tonalpouhqui could still be considered middle class while maintaining a huge influence within their society.

The main way that divination affected cultural celebrations was that the tonalpouhqui would predict the ideal days to have their celebrations or rituals, so it would fall on a day that would give the people within Mesoamerica luck. There were two types of rituals within Mesoamerica. There are the fixed rituals that revolve around the 365-day calendar or the Xihuitl. The second type of rituals are the ones based on the favorable days of the ritualistic calendar. Boone says this on the subject, "Eloise Quiñones Keber (1995:154) points out that the rituals conducted according to the tonalpohualli tend to be personal and local, which is true especially for the offerings and sacrifices made by individuals desiring good outcomes for their fortunes" (18). This means that those rituals that are influenced by this calendar are much more intimate to the people than the large festivals or fasts of the Xihuitl. Likewise, even in the cultural celebration of these tonalpohuilli, there is still some aspect of divination within these practices. So, The day that these intimate rituals would fall on would be affected by the combination of the day sign, the

number count, and the deity that is associated with that sign. For example, if an individual wanted a particular good attribute for their future, then they would choose a day and related deity that would be associated with that attribute that they would want to have. So, the day that the ritual would fall upon would be very important to this ancient culture.

Overall, astrology had a huge impact on life within ancient Mesoamerica. The ritual calendar would affect every aspect of their lives. This calendar would be the basis of the divination practices within this society. The day that a child was born on had a huge influence on the life that they would lead. If they were unlucky and were born on an unfavorable day, then they would eventually be met with a bad fate. However, if they were to be born on a lucky day, then they were more likely to be successful in life. Likewise, the people making these divinations are also influential people among Mesoamerican society. They are the only ones who could read a person's fate, since it is a highly specialized field. Lastly, astrology also had an impact on the rituals that the people of the time would partake in. The reason why this area of research is important is because this astrological influence had a widespread influence on Mesoamerican culture. Without having a thorough understanding of divination and the ritual calendar, then a crucial piece of the puzzle would be lost in the understanding of this culture.

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^[1] From chapter 2, "Time, the Ritual Calendar, and Divination" of *Cycles of time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate* 2007

^[2] No page numbers, the e-book of the Codex Borgia was used