A000-Mex-Aztec-Corn-Human—1200 CE

**Case No.: 10**

**Accession No.**

**Formal Label:** Mex-Aztec-Corn-Human—1200 CE

**Display Description:**



Corn, Plate 27 of the Codex Borgia

“Human Corn” —means “people are food.” Food for what? For everything, really. In traditional Aztec thought, humans are food for the gods and food for the Earth.

A saying that survives among some indigenous tribes today in the Aztec region, “We eat the Earth, and the Earth eats us.” The Earth was said to have been created from the ever-hungry primordial monster-goddess Cipactli when Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, transformed into great serpents, squeezed her in half and created the land and the sky from her remains. In exchange for housing and feeding us, She eats us when we die. When we eat of the land, we literally eat death and begin racking up a debt to Cipactli (later honored with the name Tlaltecuhtli, the Earth Lord) for Her bounty (Carrasco 1995).

**LC Classification:**  F1219.3.R38

**Date or Time Horizon: 1200 CE**

**Geographical Area:**

**Map:**

**GPS coordinates:**

**Cultural Affiliation: Aztec**

**Media:**

**Dimensions:**

**Weight:**

**Condition:**

**Provenance:**

**Discussion:**

Cipactli/Tlaltecuhtli isn’t the only deity depicted as eating people. Most famously, Tonatiuh the Sun received the heart sacrifice as food and drink, and Tlacaelel likened Nahua soldiers to tasty warm tortillas, hot from the griddle, destined for the table of the gods. Numerous prayers and songs, some recorded by Sahagun in Book 6 of the Florentine Codex, describe the sacrificed warrior entering the jaws of Tlaltecuhtli, and praise his blessed state as he goes to feed the cosmos.

Other prayers and *huehuetlatolli* (moral speeches) explicitly describe humans as corn. During the [festival month of Tititl](http://www.amoxtli.org/cuezali/festivals.html), young plants and young children were stretched to encourage them to grow tall and healthy — and for the same purpose. Youthful warriors were likened to the corn god Centeotl, and the strong linkage between corn/crop and war imagery in Aztec religion has long fascinated and puzzled scholars. (See works by David Carrasco and Kay Almere Read, for example.) Over and over again, we see the idea of “being food” as a central part of the Aztec conception of what it means to be human.

**The Implications of “Human Corn”** We’re subject to birth and death, it’s merely part of our nature. It also means we’re not the center of the universe — if the Earth is a garden, we’re a crop planted in it, not the gardener. It also means humility. Humans are just a part of the greater whole, sometimes likened to a household in traditional Nahua thought. No part is indispensable, from plants to animals, from humans to gods. Every being has its part to play, and that should be honored and acknowledged, but in its proper measure. Perhaps instead of whispering to ourselves, “Remember, thou art mortal!” as the Romans did, we should think, “Remember, thou art *corn!*” when we’re tempted to hubris.

Finally, it also imparts a certain amount of meaning and purpose to *miquiztli* (death). When we die, we nourish life and we pay the debt we owe to the Earth for sustaining us. Depending on your understanding of the gods and how the universe works, this can be interpreted in many, many ways as best suits your metaphysical and theological perspective. Whether interpreted poetically, mystically, or literally, the idea of “human corn” still holds valuable meaning in a modern setting.

**References:**

Carrasco, Davíd. 1995. “Cosmic Jaws: We Eat the Gods and the Gods Eat Us,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (63(3): 429-463.