



The "Uictli" or Digging Stick

The Aztecs had their work cut out for them when they established their city, Tenochtitlan, in the middle of a swampy island in the salty waters of Lake Texcoco. As they drained the land of water and began to build raised cultivation plots called chinampas, agriculture quickly established itself as one of the most important aspects of the Aztec economy.

Later on, these industrious people came to rule over many kingdoms and geographical areas with different climates and terrain. The dominated kingdoms regularly paid a tribute from their agricultural revenue to the Aztecs.



Tlaloc is working in a kneeling position on his cultivation plot. You can see the corn kernels going into the hole produced by the Uictli. Also featured are earth-related animals like the snake and the jaguar. Codex Borghese

Mesoamerican people tended to their plots all year round. To them, the field that they worked in was not an inanimate place but a live entity that had the power to nurture or destroy the crops planted there. It had to agree to host the seedlings sown by the farmer, to accept water, and to allow the plants to grow.

Among the various types of implements used for Mesoamerican agricultural work, one very famous 'family' of tools stands out in both sixteenth century texts and codices: that of the **Uictli** or digging stick.

During this article you will find out how these implements did not serve merely to dig into the ground or to tear at roots. At certain moments during the yearly agricultural cycle they became sacred to the Aztecs, who believed they were capable of both thought and decisions.

Spiritually and practically, the Uictli (also known as Coa) was vital for the planting of corn and other crops throughout the lands controlled by the Aztecs, and beyond. Read on to find out more...

Uictli Fact File

The Uictli family:

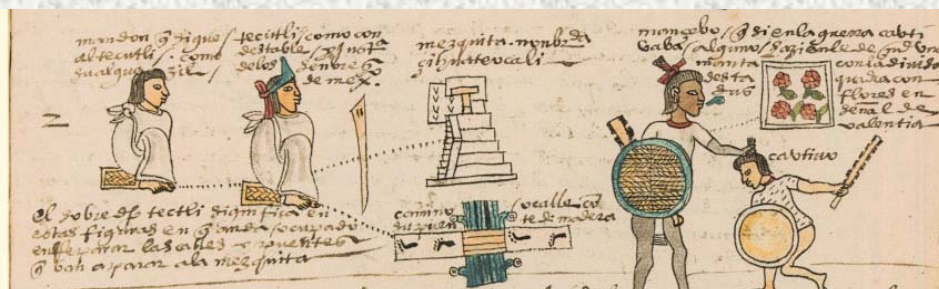
1. Uitzoxtli - a sharp digging staff of uniform width and length, with a sharp tip.
2. Bladed Uictli or Coa - digging stick whose blade flares out towards the bottom, forming a triangle shape with a sharp tip.
3. Uictli Axoquen - zoomorphic digging stick of two separate pieces tied together by cords. The top of the handle ends in a carved animal head. The bottom ends in the same triangular blade as the Bladed Uictli.
4. Foot Uictli - this digging stick's blade is not unlike that of the Bladed Uictli. It could be more pronounced because it was used as a foot platform on which to push downwards into the earth.



Above, marriage negotiations. Codex Tudela. Below left, reparations are considered by an official. Codex Mendoza.

Non-agricultural uses of the Uictli

As you can see in some of the codex fragments on this page, the Uictli was not always used for digging a hole on a farmer's land. Its importance as a symbol can be seen in the picture above, from the Codex Tudela. A young man and woman are undergoing a negotiation of marriage to be decided by their elders. They are commoners, or Macehualtin in Náhuatl. We can tell the



man's occupation in agriculture by the implements that surround him. Among them are an axe, a head harness designed to permit him to take heavy weights on his back, and a Bladed Uictli, his digging tool.

The Uictli was also used for construction and reparation.

The image to the left, again from the Codex Mendoza, shows a foreman and a high official planning public works. A temple and a bridge are in need of reparation. This is possible to deduce from the cloth that is hanging out of the temple top and the Uictli placed in between the official and the projects that are being considered.

Uictin (plural of Uictli) were used not only in the preparation of land but in stone carving and feather working as well.

The Uictli and tribute:

In both pre-Hispanic and colonial codices, the Bladed Uictli featured in two ways. Its presence on paper symbolised the tributary worker and the work done in tribute .

The Codex Osuna links both the Uictli to colonial tribute and to labour enforced by the Spanish. In the bottom left, we can see Nahua men working on a private field with their Uictin. The Spaniard outside is giving them orders. The scroll sign coming out of his mouth means he is speaking. The picture to the right, also from the Codex Osuna, shows us the image of a Nahua



man and his Uictli. He has a flag drawn above his head. It is the pre-Hispanic sign for the number twenty. The words 'labourers' and 'Monday' can also be distinguished. It seems likely that this was a list recording number of compulsory workers on a project, reading something like: 'Monday, twenty labourers'



Above and left, labourers and their Uictin. Codex Osuna.

The Bladed Uictli or Coa

"A hard, well honed pole of wood that was meant for digging in order to sow maize" Ruíz de Alarcón

The Bladed Uictli or Coa was the most highly represented digging tool in Mexican codices and 16th century texts. Unlike other implements in the digging family, the Bladed Uictli was, and still is in some parts of Mexico, used for making planting holes, weeding, unearthing vegetables, digging, shovelling and spreading soil, beating the earth flat, and making seed beds.

In Pre-Hispanic times, it was not only put to work in the fields but in construction and hydraulic works. Surprisingly, the Bladed Uictli had a function in craftwork too, in stone and feather working.



The investigator Kirchoff claims that the Bladed Uictli's design was unique to Mesoamerica. It was made out of hard materials such as oak and mesquite, known for their ability to withstand great blows. Some Uictlin were made from one piece of wood but there were others that combined a wooden shaft and a metal blade of copper. In both cases the blade was flat and it widened near the tip and suddenly drew inwards, forming a kind of triangle, curved on one side and straight on the other.

Depending on the task, the Bladed Uictli could be used standing up, kneeling down, or sitting. The shaft must be taken with both hands, the left below the right, pushing downwards. When digging, the instrument stood parallel to the body.

Left, a man tends to his crops with his Bladed Uictli. Florentine Codex. Below, Aztecs holding Uitzoxtli. Codex Huamantla.

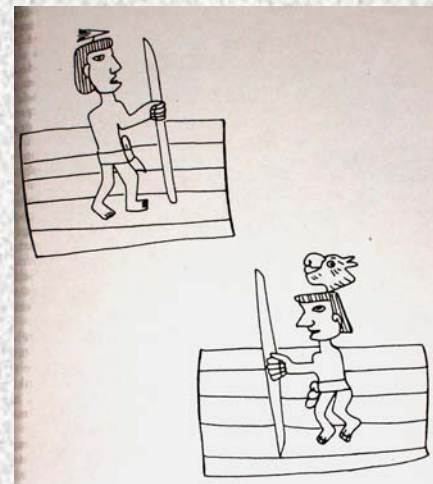
Uitzoxtli or Digging Staff "The toasted stick" Torquemada

This was a planting staff whose tips were sharpened and hardened by fire or encased by metal. Some investigators link this instrument's use to other sticks that were used by gatherers to rip roots from the earth and to beat plants.

Called Uitzoxtli, this sharp tool was defined by the 16th century linguist, Friar Molina, as a "pointed oak pole for pulling up grasses and opening the earth". Oak was chosen for its extremely hard texture and its ability to withstand the process of hardening through fire. The Uitzoxtli varied from 1 to 3 metres in length, depending on the height and sex of the user. In other parts of the Americas the tip was replaced with even stone or metal.

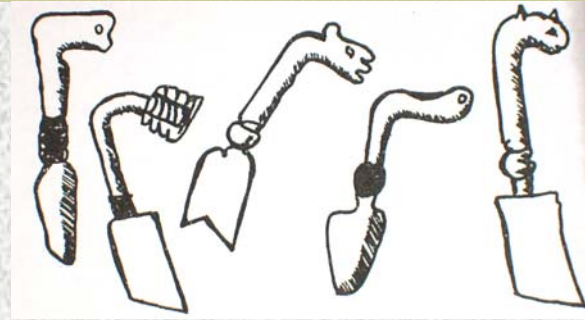
Uitzoxtlin (plural of Uitzoxtli) were used principally to break the ground and make the hole in which seeds would be deposited. However, they did have other uses as levers used to break up the earth and expose the roots of herbs and tubercles. This is why they have been classed by investigators as digging instruments instead of piercing materials.

These staffs were not unique to Mesoamerica. They have been used in Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, the Antilles and Central America. In contemporary Mexico the pure wood Uitzoxtli is still used although, since the conquest, the use of the iron tip has been great. Through representations in 16th century codices we know that for making holes, the Uitzoxtli was grasped with both hands, one near the other, the body erect and parallel to the pole. By tilting it backwards, the Uitzoxtli would lever up the earth.



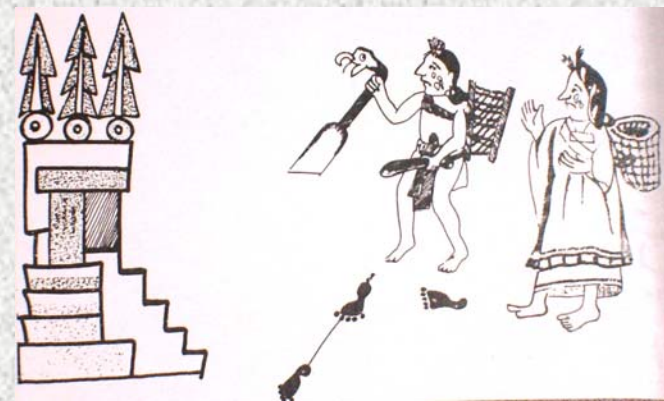
Uictli Axoquen or Zoomorphic Coa "Axoquen: a certain bird of white feathers" Molina

The Uictli Axoquen is an interesting tool because, while it is similar to the Bladed Uictli in shape, it incorporated a non-functional feature: the top of the handle represented the head of an animal. Shorter than a man's full height, The Uictli Axoquen was composed of two pieces of wood tied together with a cord of fibre.



Outside its profane role in the fields, little is known about the use of the Uictli Axoquen. Were the animal heads at the top of the handle meant to invoke the aid of celestial forces in the agricultural cycle?

A codex representation of the Uictli Axoquen can be found in the Toltec - Chichimec History. A man is depicted holding the Uictli Axoquen in one hand whilst brandishing a type of truncheon or mallet in another. He is wearing a cargo rack (cacaxtle) on his back and his wife wears a basket. They are emigrating from Cholula to Cuauhtinchan during the pre-Hispanic period.



For the colonial period, Friar Diego de Durán mentions that he has seen people working the land with 'coas of iron...that have on their shafts...some faces of monkeys; others of dogs and others of devils...they are so common that there is not an Indian without one.'

Above, the Uictli Axoquen in various shapes and forms of animals. Codex Huexotzinco. Left, two migrating Cholulas on their way to Cuauhtinchan. Historia Tolteca Chichimeca.

The Foot Uictli or Foot Coa

"A large Coa used with the foot" Diccionario Castellano Otomí



The Foot Uictli, represented to the left in the Florentine Codex, was used to "sink into the ground...with the strength of hands and feet..." (Torquemada).

In a Castilian-Otomí dictionary, it was referred to as a "large Coa that is used with the foot". According to the investigator, Teresa Rojas Rabiela, this was an implement called, by both Friars Sahagún and Durán, a spade or tlateconi in Náhuatl.

The Foot Uictli was very similar to the Bladed Uictli, the major difference being that the Foot Uictli was made from one piece of wood and its spatula at the bottom was perhaps more pronounced, offering a foot hold. It was used by placing both hands on the

shaft and pushing the foot down onto the shoulder of the blade. This was probably the implement most likely to have been often used in the heavy digging of soil.



Above, the Foot Uictli . Florentine Codex. Right, a Foot Uictli or a Bladed Uictli. Codex Vaticanus B.

Aztec Seed Sowing Incantations

This ritual was set in a farmer's field, or milpa, at the beginning of the rainy season, just before the first drops of water were expected to fall out of the sky. The ground was prepared by the farmer to receive the first grains of corn that would hopefully grow into full-grown plants which would nurture his family for the year to come.

The following set of three incantations has been taken from Ruiz de Alarcon's Treatise.... He recorded this ceremony because it was an all important part of the seed sowing process. By holding this ceremony, the farmer intended to create harmony and willingness among all the elements that would take part in the cultivation of maize. The main characters in the incantation:

The Farmer - he was the person who made the incantations.

The Digging Stick/Uictli - during the seed planting incantations, the Uictli was called 'priest', One Water.

The Earth - was referred to as a feminine character. She was a 'mirror with a smoking surface'.

The Corn Seeds - used in the planting ceremony. The farmer used a metaphoric name for the seeds he was sowing. Corn kernels, for example, were called *Tlamacazqui Tlazohipilli Chicomecoatl*, or 'the priest Tlazohipilli, Seven Snake'. Chicomecoatl was also a goddess related to fertility and agriculture.

The Rain - also referred to simply as 'priests'. These priests were the Tlaloque, helpers of the rain god Tlaloc, and they represented clouds and rain.

The Harvest Basket - or Tonacachicuihuatl, in which the precious corn was carried to the field for planting.

A translation from Náhuatl (left hand column) and explanation (right hand column) of three incantations used before sowing maize. By Michael Coe and Gordon Whittaker*.

1. Come on, priest, his tonal is One Water (digging stick). Indeed it is already that the priests (clouds) have arrived.

Now I have come to carry away the priest Tlazohipilli, Seven Snake (the maize).

Let us go. Right here is sustenance basket (the harvest basket). She will cause you to follow the road (the corn will be carried in the basket). Indeed, already for all this time your mother (the farmer's wife) has been guarding you. The priests, her older brothers (the clouds), have come.

2. Come priest, his tonal is One Water (digging stick). Indeed here we will put the priest Seven Snake (the maize), beneath the ground.

3. Let it be soon! Come, Mirror whose surface just lies smoking hither. Indeed, I will set you down Tlazohipilli, Seven Snake (maize). Indeed, here is the good place where he will be sitting. Indeed, already the priests have arrived (the clouds).

Saying this, the farmer makes the correct holes in the field with his Uictli, and he sows the maize.

1. In the granary, the farmer summons his digging stick. He wants to persuade his implements and the maize to be co-operative as well make his preparations for the planting.

He informs his digging stick that the rainy season is at hand and that it is time to get the maize seeds. The farmer abruptly turns and, without addressing it by its name, invites the maize to go with him, pointing to the presence of the harvest basket and telling it that the basket will carry it. He reminds the maize that his wife has been taking care of it but that now the rainy season has arrived it must be planted. The speaker's reference to his wife's protection of the maize is a rhetorical ploy to induce feelings of obligation in the maize so it will produce more abundantly.

2. Once in the field, the farmer summons the digging stick again. This time he wants to secure its co-operation and plant the maize.

He tells it that it will plant the maize. By presenting the planting as a co-operative matter, the speaker induces the digging stick to a more willing and effective action.

3. Now, the ground must be prepared. The farmer addresses it, getting it into a receptive frame of mind. He informs the land that he is going to entrust it with the maize, stating that it is a good place where the maize is going to be placed. He ends by explaining that it will rain shortly. The prediction of rain with which the incantation ends, besides promising the land the blessing of rain, is a bit of word magic designed to bring about the effective arrival of the rain.

Sources:

Durán, Fray Diego de, *The Aztecs: the history of the Indies of New Spain*, Notes by Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas, Orion Press, 1964, New York, USA.

Matos Moctezuma, Eduardo, *The Great Temple of the Aztecs: treasure of Tenochtitlan*, Thames and Hudson, 1988, Mexico City, Mexico.

Phillips, Charles, and David M. Jones, *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Aztec and Maya: the history, legend, myth and culture of the ancient native peoples of Mexico and Central America*, Lorenz, 2004, London, UK.

Rojas Rabiela, Teresa, and William T Sanders, *Historia de la agricultura época prehispánica siglo XVI*, Pp129 - 230, Colección Biblioteca INAH, 1983, Mexico City, Mexico.

Ross, Kurt, *Codex Mendoza: Aztec Manuscript*, Miller Graphics, 1978, London, UK.

Romero Contreras, Tonahtiu, *Rituales y actividades materiales en la antigua agricultura indígena*, <http://redalye.uaemex.mx/redalye/pdf/104/10411103.pdf>, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, Mexico.

*Ruiz de Alarcón, Hernando, *Aztec sorcerers in seventeenth century Mexico: the treatise on superstitions notes and translation by Michael D. Coe and Gordon Whittaker*, Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, State University of New York at Albany, 1982, New York, USA.

Codices:

Codex Borgia, Codex Huamantla, Codex Mendoza, Codex Osuna, Codex Tudela, Florentine Codex, Matrícula de Huexotzinco.

