Chapter 7

Nymphs and Ritual Bathing ©

The balneological or biological section (folios 75r to 84r) is the most bizarre section of the Voynich Manuscript and has been the source of continuous speculation. It includes 202 shapely nude women referred to as nymphs, mostly cavorting in pools connected by tubes suggestive of plumbing or vascular systems (Fig. 1). The same nymphs are found in the zodiacs. The images are surrounded by text. These illustrations were examined to determine if they would reveal the intent of the artist as well as to confirm or at least be consistent with a MesoAmerica/Spanish/Aztec influence dating to the 16th century. Select images of individual nymphs are shown in Fig. 2 (numbered from 1 to 25).

Fig. 1. Bathing nymphs and plumbing examples of the Balneological Section of the Voynich Codex: (A) f.75v (Note cross); (B) f.77v; (C) f.78v.
Nymphs Figures

The nymphs illustrations are formulaic and show a very similar curvaceous, petite woman with blond hair, usually cascading (1–10, 12) but sometimes short (11, 13, 14, 19). Blonde hair was considered beautiful in Medieval Spain (Claudio da Soller, 2005). In Tetela de Ocampo, Mexico there is a 16th century painting of the blonde martyred St. Ursula. Finally, Isabella of Castile was blonde and her hairstyle resembles some of the nymphs. The nymphs are presented in three quarter or frontal view, some sexually explicit (10). None are shown with in back view suggesting that portrayal of the buttocks were objectionable; perhaps offensive to Aztec culture. One nymph sports a stole (13). Some of the nymphs have head coverings of various styles (1–12), one wears a crown.
with a cross (1). Various objects carried by some of the nymphs include a crucifix (14) various objects that appear to be a metal ring or collar (15–19), balls or fruits (20), a sphere or ball (25, 26) a stick (22), and a seedling (21), stick or knife (22), and torpedo like object (23, 24, 25).

**Crucifix.** There are three crosses in the balneological section: a cross in a crown worn by a nymph (1 and 16), a nymph holding a cross (14), and a crude isolated cross in 75v (Fig. 1A). Other putative crosses are found are found on the tops of qubbba in circle A of f.86v, see Chapter 10). We conclude that there is an undeniable Roman Catholic connection to the Voynich but it is not emphasized.

**Metal Rings.** Five of the nymphs are holding what appears to be metallic rings (15–19) in which three clearly show a nub or nob. The nob is unclear in a fourth ring (18) in which part is submerged in water. The identification of the three ring with the nob is problematic. Lincoln Taiz (article in *Chronica Horticulturae*) has suggested that the ring in 15 is a rosary and indeed this prone nymph is just beneath the nymph holding the crucifix (14). While most rosaries are beads on a string there were solid ring rosaries in Medieval Spain and perhaps Mexico but these are small (see Fig. 3A). A darker suggestion made by A.O. Tucker is that the ring is an iron collar (Fig. 3A), an instrument of subjugation or torture, and indeed in 1596 iron collars were used to strangle two sisters in Nueva Espana, Isabel de Carvajal de Andrade and Leonor de Carvajal, accused of being crypto-Jews in Mexico (www.jweekly.com/article/full/4245/rare-documents-shed-light-on-grisly-mexican-inquisition).

**Oblong Torpedo-shaped Object.** Three of the nymphs hold a complex, oblong, torpedo-shaped objects (23, 24, 25). The most detailed (23) has a red outer sheath that contains a lip or ridge on one end and two flexible string-like objects on the other that is being held by the nymph. The sheath encloses an inner portion that extends below the lip with a line of six dots from top to bottom. Our first surmise was that this object resembled an ear of maize with the dots representing kernels but this interpretation was discarded as unrealistic. The second images (24) is similar with an inner line of 9 dots, but there was no indication of a red sheath, but the lip was shown and the inner portion also extends beyond the lip. The third image (15) is less clear but shows the oblong devise facing down with the lip or ridge evident. We surmise that these three objects represent the same device and furthermore that its identification might be an important clue to understand the meaning of the manuscript. The possibility of the rings in 21, 22, 23 being iron collars as an instrument of torture led us to believe that these torpedo-like objects might be the torture device known as the pear-of-anguish (Fig. 3B) which shows a lip, and a screw which opened the sheath. This horrible device was inserted in the moth, vagina, or anus to extract confessions or inflict pain. Under this interpretation the dots could indicate the screw. Note that all the objects contain a lip and the screw extends from two of them. If the rings described above are iron collars, and if the torpedo like objects are the pear of anguish, the presence of these objects of torture suggests that their presence in the manuscript was either meant as a protest statement or a warning by the artist. The cryptic nature of the document leads us to surmise that the ring and torpedo objects were a hidden protest statement from an artist of indigenous American ancestry.
Fig. 3. Spanish religious artifacts and Inquisition torture devices: (A) ring rosary; (B) iron collar; and (C) pear-of-anguish.

Plumbing or Vascular Systems

The bizarre, eccentric, perplexing “plumbing” in the Balneological Section (Fig. 1) have had two basic interpretations: human gynecological interpretations such as fallopian tubes or ovaries (Kennedy and Churchill, 2004, p.181), or plant vascular systems (Taiz, 2011). The precise meaning will only be clarified if the manuscript can be translated. However, it seems evident that the tubes and pipes must have symbolic meanings but the precise interpretation is maddeningly obtuse. Patrizia Granziera (2005) suggests that the cult of water and fertility of the Aztecs was based on the concept that the earth is like a vessel containing water, like a womb filled with amniotic fluid. Important places of ritual celebrations were situated near rivers, springs, inside caves or on top of mountains. We suggest that the vascular systems in the balneological are consistent with the Aztec cult of water and fertility.

Ritual Bathing Allusions

The bathing nymphs portrayed in the Voynich codex suggest symbolic examples of ritual bathing. The Aztecs, in contrast to the Spanish, were devotees of daily bathing (Dibble and Anderson, 1951, Book 2 p. 130–138). There are many images of bathing in Aztec culture (Fig. 4, Chapter 16, Fig. 7B). Archeological remains of bathing pools can be found in Texcotzingo the ancient palace of Netzahualcoyotl near Texcoco as well as ancient Netzahualcoyotl baths in Chapultepec Park, Mexico City (Fig. 5). There are allusions to ritual bathing in the Tepantitia Mural at Teotihuacan) dated between 250–560 CE, in a scene under The Great Goddess where many male figures, usually with only a loin cloth, are swimming in rivers associated with a mountain (Fig. 6A). Outside the mountain are four crouching male figures with speech emanating from their mouths, each having one hand between their legs attached to the figure behind in a ritual “daisy chain” (Fig. 6B) that has a parallel to the connected bathing nymphs in Voynich. Next to the river various plants (Fig. 6C) are being tasted or examined. Clearly there are similarities between this scene and the Voynich manuscript. Susan Milbrath (2013) has identified ritual bathing in the Borgia Codex (Fig. 6D). Nudity and partial nudity is found in Aztec art (Fig. 7). There is a scene that includes nude bathing in the Casa del Dean murals (see Chapter 16, Fig. 7C.). Clearly the balneological section has images that are consistent with Aztec culture.
Fig. 4. Aztec bathing: (A) Aztec steam bath; (B) infant bathing (Sahagun).

Fig. 5. Archeological remains of Netzahualcoyotl bathing pools: (A) Netzahualcoyotl place near Texcoco; (B) Chapultepec park, Mexico City.
Fig. 6. Tepantitla mural, Teohiuacan (date): (A) Bathing; (B) Chain of crouching men; (C) Tending herbs; (D) Ritual bathing in the Borgia Codex.

Fig. 7. Aztec deity showing nudity

There are many scenes of nude bathing in Western Art. Two famous examples are paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder (Fig. 8): The Golden Age, 1530, and The Fountain of Youth, 1546 (Fig. 7). In The Golden Age (1530) nude men and women cavort in a stream while other nude couples
hold hands and dance in a ring around a tree. The artist uses many artifacts to conceal the genitals but both frontal and rear views are shown. In the fountain of youth (1546) old women enter the pool and leaving as young maidens.

Fig. 8. Nude bathing scene painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder (A) The golden Age, 1530; (B) The Fountain of Youth 1546.
We consider that the bathing images in Voynich are consistent with a Western-trained artist curvy nymph indicates that the artist was familiar and probably trained in Western art. We know that the Collegio had instructions using paintings from Belgium and Spain. The lack of any rear view of the nymphs of Voynich suggest Aztec sensibilities in regard to the human form.

In conclusion, the bathing scenes in the Voynich Codex represent a fusion of Western iconography and Aztec customs. Furthermore, this section says much about the personality of the painter that will be discussed more fully in Chapter 14.

**Literature Cited**


Kennedy, G. and R. Churchill. The Voynich Manuscript: The mysterious code that has defied interpretation for centuries .Inner Tradition, Rochester, Vermont.