

24 October 1999

Dear Malka,

As requested, here are some thoughts on the two Aztec sculptures.

The first piece is a seated figure of a deity that is almost certainly Xiutecuhtli, the god of fire. The style of the work does seem to be from the central plateau of Mexico rather than from the east, gulf coast. The face of the god is youngish rather than old which may mean that this is a more youthful aspect of the fire god, Ixcozauhqui or the "Yellowfaced one" who represents a new blazing fire. The old fire god who represented ashes and the glowing embers of a nearly exhausted fire was known Huehuetotl, "Old, old God." The other well-known name Xiutecuhtli, "Turquoise Lord" is thought to refer to the blue flame at the center of the fire.

This god is shown here seated with his hands on his knees, a posture sometimes associated with female deities in the act of giving birth. That this figure is male can be seen by the maxtlatl or loin cloth that he wears. Not only is this god the god of fire; he also is the god of time and the year. He determines the moment of conception and thus determines the calendar date of one's birth and so his fate as determined by the sacred calendar.

Both he and his feminine counterpart are actually two deities in one known as the god Omteotl or "Two God." They represent the promordial male-female creative force in the universe and occupy the highest of the thirteen levels of the heavens. The fire god also always occupies all three levels of the cosmos - the underworld, the surface of the earth, and the heavens, and he is always at the center of these three levels. Because of his centrality in the lives of the people, the apparel and insignia of the fire god were worn by Aztec kings. The turquoise crown of Moctezuma as shown in the codices was the same "Xiuhcopilli" frequently worn by the god of fire.

This sculpture has some interesting iconography not often seen on images of the fire god, namely the crown of trapezoidal pieces which is far more often seen on the headresses of Tlaloc and his consort Chicomecoatl. Scholars are not in agreement as to what these shapes refer. Some think they are feathers. I personally believe that they are derived from shapes of stylized mountains. A circle of mountains crowning the deity would emphasize the fire god's centrality, and this would work equally well to define the centrality of Tlaloc, Chicomecoatl and other essential fertility gods wearing such a crown. Also the side flaps (probably made of paper) falling from the crown and covering the ears and the back are unusual and slightly recall the paper "temple headress" of Chicomecoatl known as an "amacalli."

A more common costume feature for fire gods is the pleated paper fan worn at the back called the "amacuexpalli." It is associated with heat, perhaps the warmth of the sun's rays needed