

The Stone of the Warriors

By
Atlee Marie Phillips

April 29, 2005
Aztec Art Seminar
Dr. Elizabeth Boone

In 1897, the *Stone of the Warriors* (Figs. 1-5) was found at the Southwest corner of the Zócalo, at the intersection of Portal de los Mercaderes and the Calle de Tlaperos, in Mexico City, D.F. In early scholarship, like that of Eduard Seler (1902-23), this sculpture is also sometimes referred to as the Centro Mercantil stone, after the building that was being dug when it was found. The large block, 1.50 x 1.25 meters at the base and 0.65 high, was once a rectangle, but is now badly damaged at the edges and corners. It also has a square hole dug out of the top surface. Based on the style of the carving in comparison to other monuments, the *Stone of the Warriors* was probably made sometime between 1468 and 1486¹ (Pasztory 1983: 147; Klein 1986: 314). The stone is named for the warriors carved along the three relatively undamaged sides, which converge on a sacrificial emblem, underneath a band of serpents.

The iconography of this sculpture is closely related to the motif of plumed serpents at Teotihuacan and bench reliefs of warriors in procession found in the ruins of Tula and at the Templo Mayor, but it is also unique among the Aztec carvings derived from architectural friezes at sites of older Mesoamerican civilizations. The *Stone of the Warriors* is not an architectural relief made up of panels, but a free-standing sculpture carved in the round. It is also one of the rare examples of a sculpture with a Tlaltecuiltli, or earth monster carved on the top, and not the bottom, surface. The placement of this earth monster is one of its most intriguing features, and has led scholars like Esther Pasztory to believe that it probably served as an altar or a throne (1983: 147). Indeed, in his work Hermann Beyer (1955) refers to the stone as the *Altar de Centro Mercantil*. As

you will see, themes surrounding the cult of warfare, royal autosacrifice, and imperial political legitimacy are found in the iconography of the *Stone of the Warriors*.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. It will include a thorough analysis of the iconography of *Stone of the Warriors*, and examine how and why the Aztecs appropriated earlier forms of Mesoamerican art—eventually creating this unique sculpture. By doing so I hope to come to a better understanding of the piece's meaning and purpose, while laying the foundation for more in depth research. The first section of this essay will explore the iconographic elements of the stone in detail, breaking down the program into four categories—the warriors and their accoutrements, the band of serpents, the grass ball of sacrifice and ruler, and the earth monster. The second will look at specific sources for the sculpture, including: earlier Aztec friezes, Toltec bench reliefs, and the art of Teotihuacan. The final section will place the arrogation of Toltec art and the creation of the *Stone of the Warriors* in the historical context of Aztec imperial legitimacy, expansion, and stability. Finally, in the conclusion I will put forth various possibilities for the stone's function and my goals for further research on this piece. For the sake of clarity, it is important to designate each of the four vertical sides with a number; the front will be referred to a side one (Fig.2) and the numbering will move clockwise around the stone.

Iconography

The Warriors

Unfortunately, only ten of the fourteen original warriors are still visible from head to foot, and almost the entire front of the monument has been destroyed. What little does remain of side one is the face of the ruler and the *zacatapayolli*, but this side will be dealt

with in the next section. The warriors on the remaining three sides march in two rows of six, which diverge on the back of the monument. Before being damaged, the stone would have had four figures on each of these three sides, but the front warrior on side two (Fig. 3) is completely gone and only the upper-half of the same figure remains on side four (Fig. 5). The four figures on sides two and four are identical. These men process one foot in front of the other with their heads in profile, but their torsos face front. The following section is a general overview of the iconography of the warriors; it will include brief discussions of possible Toltec traits, speech scrolls, headgear, jewelry and armor, and the weapons and staffs they carry.

Most of the warriors have traits associated with Toltec warriors. They wear diagonal loin-cloths which might be Aztec versions of the triangle loin-cloths traditionally found on Toltec warriors. The rest wear *maxtlatl*, or loin cloths that lay straight across the thighs. The mirrors tied at the backs of most of the figures are another element of the Toltec war costume. They do not wear the butterfly pectorals that are often seen on Toltec warriors, but neither do the figures on the warrior processions at Tula (Fig. 6). Many warriors in that Toltec frieze also wear the straight *maxtlatl* instead of the triangular one. A further examination of Toltec sources and their significance will follow.

Speech scrolls issue forth from the mouths of seven extant warriors. A speech scroll might identify a figure as a *tlatoani*, "he who speaks." A *tlatoani* was the ruler of a province or town, but in the Aztec empire there was only one true high king—the *huetlatoani*. According to Ross Hassig (1988: 28), these lords are probably *teuctlahtoh* (pl. *teuctlahtoquēh*), rulers that were subordinate to a higher *tlatoani*. However, a speech

scroll might also indicate song, prayer, or the issuing of a command, possibly identifying the figures with them as priest-warriors or captains.

The headgear of the warriors includes various kinds of feather headdresses and royal headbands. According to Seler (1902-23) and Beyer (1955), there are usually two kinds of feather headdresses worn by the warriors—the *quetzalpatzactli* and the *aztaxelli*. The *quetzalpatzactli* is shown in several variations, but basically consists of a crest of short, stiff feathers with a group of trailing quetzal plumes. Beyer (1955:23-24) points out that this headdress represented extraordinary valor and was only worn by those of the highest rank—a special adornment of the *tlatoani* of Mexico. He also has little doubt that they once provided protection and adornment for the head, but in later images, like this one from the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (Fig. 7), very large *quetzalpatzactli* were worn on the shoulders. The *aztaxelli* is the other feather decorated headdress on the *Stone of the Warriors*. It consists of a cap with a down ball on top, to which two stiff, forked feathers are attached. These *aztaxelli* resemble the headpieces worn by the rulers performing autosacrifice on the *Dedication Stone* (Fig. 8), and Seler (1902-23: 92) relates this headpiece to figures of penitence (1902-23: 143).

According to Beyer (1955: 21), the most important element of headgear found on the *Stone of the Warriors* is the royal diadem, called the *xiuhuitzoli*. Traditionally ^{is also the fire God / emblem of} associated with rulership (Beyer 1955; Seler 1902-23), this headpiece has a distinctive triangular shape that projects off the center of the forehead; it is worn over the *quetzalpatzactli* of the third warrior from the back on sides two and four (Figs. 3,5), and the second warrior from the left on the back of the monument (Fig. 5). It should be emphasized that these categories of headgear are oversimplified. The variation in styles

and the inconsistency between their distribution and other signifiers of high rank and rulership merit further study to determine their specific meaning.

The jewelry and armor worn by the warriors were not simply vanity or protective items, among the Aztecs they were signifiers of the wearer's martial and social status (Hassig 1988: 40). Only the most valiant captains wore neck bands or earplugs like the various ones seen on every figure on the *Stone of the Warriors*, and earplugs of gold and precious stones were further restricted to the nobility. Other elements of armor included armbands (*matemecatli*), greaves (*cotzehuatli*) worn over the shins, wristlets (*matzopeztli*), and sandals (*cactli*) (Hassig 1988: 90). According to Hassig (1988: 90), while the armor elements like those found on the *Stone of the Warriors* were often elaborately decorative and indicated high rank, they were actually "of little protective value." One element that did provide some protection is the leather strips that hang down from some of the wristlets; these provided minimal deflection of weapon thrusts during battle. They are also a part of a particular kind of upper-arm band called a *machoncotl*, a particular attribute of Aztec kings (Gutiérrez Solana Rickards 1983: 144). Seen on the figures at the back of the line on sides two and four of the stone, this arm band has decorated fringe and had a triangular feature that juts upward. This element is the same shape as the *xiuhuitzoli*. Most of the adornments found on the figures in this sculpture were almost never allowed for any persons but the *tlatoani* and highest nobility under the strict sumptuary laws of the Aztec Empire (Hassig 1988: 40).

Finally, any thorough discussion of the warriors must include the weapons and staffs that they carry. The weapons depicted on the *Stone of the Warriors* include: spear-throwers (*atlatl*), thrusting spear/lance (*tepoztopilli*), and shields (*yaochimalli*). An *atlail*

Spears + Arrows
are symbols
of Ancestors

is a device that hurls short spears or darts farther than they could be thrown by hand. The *atlatl* can be seen in the right hand of the far left figure on the back of the monument (Fig. 4), the spears that would be thrown with the device are in his left hand. The figure to the right of that warrior carries a thrusting lance in his left hand and a shield and flag in the other (Beyer 1955: 30-1). Six of the warriors on this sculpture hold round shields, four of them with banners that would have been adorned with personal insignia.

The last item carried by the warriors is a staff held by the last figures on sides two and four; it is topped by a triangle grouping of feathers crowned by three down balls, and the bottom of the staff dissolves into a plume of smoke. According to Seler (1902-23: 144), this object "should be interpreted as the flag of Quetzalcoatl, the flag of blood sacrifice," because when viewed from the top it would form the quincunx symbol of Venus and it resembles similar staffs found in the *Codex Nuttall* (Fig. 9). The significance of this item requires greater study. Further research is required to better understand all of the iconography of the warriors and the possible individual identities of the figures. Perhaps the different combination of signs and accoutrements indicate ethnicity, that some of the figures are merchants or priests with functions related to warfare, different warrior orders, or that the figure held a particular office in the imperial government. However, there is little doubt that the iconography of the figures is related to warfare.

The Tlatoani and Zacatapayolli

Only a small portion of the front of the *Stone of the Warriors* remains intact. There are no published photographs, but Emily Umberger made this drawing (Fig. 2). It shows the top of a *zacatapayolli*, the face of the figure that stands to the left, and some

remnants of the *aztaxelli* belonging to the figure on the right. The *zacatapayolli* is a plated grass ball, an emblem of autosacrifice like the undamaged one found on the *General Riva Palacio Stone Box* (Fig. 10). On the *Stone of the Warriors* the two agave spines (*uitztli*) can still be seen sticking out of the grass ball. These spines were the favored instrument of autosacrifice, and would be used to draw blood, most often from the ear or leg, as the two rulers do on the *Dedication Stone* (Fig. 8). The *uitztli* would then be placed in the *zacatapayolli* and burned as an offering; the presence of blood on the spines is indicated by the symbol for preciousness (*chalchiuhtl*). The butterfly wing-shaped flame with smoke rising from it can still be seen on the block; Seler (1902-23: 143) call this the fire of mortification. This flaming butterfly represents the souls of warriors fallen in battle, which are conceived as butterflies that accompany the sun on its daily journey across the sky (Taube 2000: 301).

Fortunately, what remains of the left figure's face is sufficient to identify him as the *huetlatoani* by the nose plug he wears. This figure is the only one to wear this particular piece of jewelry. In an earlier Aztec architectural relief found at the Templo Mayor (Fig. 11), the warrior to the left of the *zacatapayolli* is identifiable by both the nose plug and the smoking foot of Tetzcatlipoca, a patron god of rulers, which is a further indication of his status as *huetlatoani*. It is a safe assumption that the corresponding figure on the *Stone of the Warriors*, for which this relief is a source, would also carry this distinctive signifier of rulership if intact. The only thing that remains of the warrior to the right of the *zacatapayolli* is the *aztaxelli* which, according to Seler (1902-23), marks him as a penitent preparing to perform autosacrifice.

Aztaxelli (two white heron feathers w/ feather down) closely resembles the two *tecpatl* (knife) ornament worn on the forehead of *Cihuacoatl*. The double *tecpatl* is composed of 2 white (feathers) — associated with the goddess *Xtzipapalotl*. White heron is associated with the Aztecs at Aztlán. *Cihuacoatl* is the boldest and most powerful ancient Goddess. She was worshipped at Culhuacan.

Richard Townsend (1979: 40-42) has noted that mortification of the flesh was a recurring event in almost all Aztec religious ceremonies, and that images of rulers performing autosacrifice, like the one on the *Dedication Stone* (Fig. 8), were connected to the legitimacy of the *tlatoani*. He (1982: 134) also points out that rites of royal self-mortification were performed during accession and coronation ceremonies. Cecelia F. Klein (1986) concurs with the importance of the rituals symbolized by the *zacatapayolli* and ruler. According to her (1986: 303), evidence in the chronicles suggests that the *huetlatoani* performed ritual bloodletting in thanksgiving upon his return from a successful military campaign. This rite would have been especially important following the critical martial victory that legitimized his accession, and she thinks that it is this ceremony that is probably depicted of the warrior procession reliefs (1986: 314-17). Regardless of whether the *Stone of the Warriors* shows any particular ceremony, the iconography of the penitent ruler and the *zacatapayolli* is intimately related to the cult of warfare, the souls of fallen warriors, and the political legitimacy of the *huetlatoani*.
STONE USED IN MAJOR CEREMONIES OF TRANSITION-OF CROWNING + BURIAL

The Band of Serpents

There is a pair of undulating feathered serpents on each side of the *Stone of the Warriors*. They run in a band above the figures. Like the warriors, the two serpents on the back side diverge and what remains of the pair on the front converge with open jaws. Half of the serpents have bodies completely covered in feathers and the others are plainer, but all of them bear plumed crests and tails. These quetzal plumes trail from the tails and behind the heads of the serpents in the same manner as the headdresses of the warriors below. These Quetzalcoatl, literally "quetzal feather" (*quetzalli*) "snake" (*coatl*), are a manifestation of the Mesoamerican god of the same Nahuatl name—a god whom

Aztlā

the Aztecs associated with Venus, Teotihuacan, the Toltec royal dynasty, fertility, sacrifice, warfare, and legitimate political authority (Nicholson 2000; Quiñones Keber 1998). It also represents the fusion of the earthly and celestial realms. (Nicholson 2000:

145). The many faces and associations of Quetzalcoatl are endlessly complex. He is a major figure in many Mesoamerican cultures, and his cult crossed distances of time, space, and language. As we will see, the plumed serpent is a major iconographic motif in the art of Teotihuacan and Tula, and is found on the friezes that are the most direct sources for the stone.

Seler (1902-23: 144) first interpreted the serpents on the *Stone of the Warriors* to be "the sky of Quetzalcoatl" because they inhabit the upper-region where a sky-band would be found on similar scenes. Also, their association with Venus and the celestial realm support this theory. Beyer (1955: 17-18) specifically concurs with Seler, but not before pointing out that the serpents are not all completely covered with feathers. He puts forth that the other snakes might be mythical Xiuhcoatl "fire serpents," but these serpents do not bear any of the diagnostic characteristics of Xiuhcoatl, like the upturned snout with eye/star symbols (Taube 2000). It is more likely that the other serpent would be Mixcoatl "cloud serpent," a god associated with stars and warriors, who signified the Milky Way in serpent form. The presence of Mixcoatl would fit well with the other

iconographic themes related to warfare, death, and the souls of warriors. However, the plainer serpents do carry plumed crests and tails, so perhaps they are simply a different stylistic version of Quetzalcoatl. This issue may never be resolved. In a later analysis,

Eloise Quiñones Keber (1998: 150) interprets the Quetzalcoatl on the *Stone of the Warriors* as "a supernatural patron of warrior activities and a possible beneficiary of the

Also
The plumed
serpent

Blond
serpent?

These
may have
been painted
with symbols
on the finished stone.

Note:
Perhaps the
presence of
Quetzalcoatl and
Mixcoatl serpent
signifies "authority"

ANCESTRAL AUTHORITY

Mixcoatl is the father of Quetzalcoatl

sacrificial event alluded to [the autosacrifice below],” but this in no way disallows the celestial interpretation.

I believe that the serpents on the upper rim of the warrior stone have the same meaning as seen in the House of Eagles and the palacio Quemada at Tula. They represent Authority, i.e. The Tlaltecuhli - Ancestral Authority, Quetzal Coat - wisdom, Ximicatl - power.

The remnants of the Tlaltecuhli, “earth lord” or earth monster on the top surface

of the *Stone of the Warriors* is one of the most interesting aspects of the sculpture. Very little of the image remains between the broken edges and the square hole, probably dug out after the conquest (Pasztory 1983: 147). There are few published drawings or direct images of this side, but one photograph of the stone at an angle (Fig. 1) reveals part of a limb with a skull or fanged face that resembles those on the earth monster from the *Teocalli of Sacred War* (Fig. 12), which also faces upward. The placement of the earth monster on the *Teocalli* and the iconographic themes of the monument are similar to the *Stone of the Warriors*, and I believe that this Tlaltecuhli is most likely the kind that once graced the block.

There are many kinds of Tlaltecuhli. Elizabeth Baquedano (1998: 159-65) divides them into two categories: those which “represent mainly aspects fertility and earth deities” and another group that is primarily related to warfare and human sacrifice. She places the earth monster on the *Teocalli* in the second category; this further suggests that the one on the *Stone of the Warriors* is probably of this type. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (1997) breaks the earth lords down into four groups, and places the one from the *Teocalli* in the zoomorphic female group (C), more truly an “earth lady.” He points out that these kinds of Tlaltecuhli are often found on *cuauhxicalli*, vessels in which the hearts of sacrificial victims (usually warriors) are placed. The relationship of these themes of warfare and sacrifice to the surviving iconography of the *Stone of the Warriors*

also "Authority" - all oaths were taken with a "stone" or "stone" of the earth ceremony

is further evidence that the earth monster on the *Teocalli* is similar to the one that was once on the stone.

Earth monsters are found on many kinds of objects and monuments, but almost all of them face downward; they rest, hidden against the surface which they conceptualize. However, there are a few examples of objects and monuments, like the *Teocalli*, on which earth monsters face upwards. According to Matos Moctezuma (1997: 16), this kind of image occurs on the inside of small, fine objects related to autosacrifice, which were probably used to hold the implements of self-mortification used by the elite, and on monuments in controlled spaces, places where only priests would see them. Furthermore, Baquedano (1998: 165) agrees that the kind of Tlaltecuhltli, related to warfare and sacrifice, were only found on monuments "restricted to the members of the elite."

In general, scholars (Beyer 1955: 11; Townsend 1979: 55; Pasztory: 147) agree that when this type of earth monster is found on the top surface of a monument it represents the earth. Perhaps, when so many similar stones are round, this accounts for the almost square shape of this monument, since the earth was conceived of as stretching out in four directions. It crouches in the position of a women giving birth (Fig. 12), and spreads wide crocodilian maws full of sharp flint knives/teeth. It is an image of the devouring earth. This monster represents the earth that is appeased by royal autosacrifice; like the one found under the *zacatapayolli* on the *Dedication Stone* (Fig. 8); the earth that must be fed by warriors who die in battle and the captives they take; the earth upon which an emperor would be enthroned to represent his dominion over the land; and the earth into which the remains of the dead are interred. In other words, this kind of Tlaltecuhltli

represents the earth as the consumer, necessary for the appeasement of natural forces and the continuation of the cycle of life and death.

Sources

The Bench Relief and Architectural Frieze of the Templo Mayor

The most immediate sources for the *Stone of the Warriors* are the *Bench Relief* (Fig. 13), found in its original position in the interior of the precinct of the Eagle Warriors at the Templo Mayor site, and the *Architectural Frieze* (Fig. 11) found in pieces throughout the Main Temple. The iconographic programs of these two warrior friezes are almost identical to the *Stone of the Warriors*. They are both made up of slabs of warriors in procession, which converge on a *zacatapayolli*, and a cornice frieze of plumed serpents. Aside from the style and the addition of the earth monster, the only major difference between these reliefs and the stone is that this iconographic program was removed from its traditional place on architecture and carved on a freestanding block.

Matos Moctezuma (1988: 37) has dated the *Bench Relief* to around 1480, but it is impossible to date early Aztec sculptures that lack glyphs with precision. The carving of this relief is far cruder than that of the *Stone of the Warriors*, but much of the paint still remains. The red of the background is still strongly visible, the yellow on the skin and weapons still exists, and the blue of the clothing and headdresses can still be made out. The *Bench Relief* lacks the detail, elegant proportions, refined features, or fine carving technique of the *Stone*, but at least its figures are consistent in a way the ones on the earlier *Architectural Frieze* are not.

If this date is true then perhaps the "crude" Bench Relief is intentionally carved in style to recreate the ancestral halls of Tula's Polio's Quemada

The *Bench Relief* is extremely similar in design to the *Architectural Relief* found in fifty two panels that had been broken up and used for rebuilding the Main Temple. The

Architectural Frieze is often called the *Bench Relief* (Pasztory 1983: 144) because it is thought to have formed a bench as well, but for the sake of distinction it will be referred to as the *Architectural Frieze* in this paper. Beyer (1955: 37) has done the most thorough examination of these panels, and he places their creation during the reign of Itzcoatl

(1427-1440). A later analysis by Pasztory (1983:146) extends the possible date of the piece through the time of Motecuhzoma I (1427-1468). The warriors in this frieze wear

clothes, jewelry, and headdresses; are shown with speech scrolls; and carry

accoutrements that are cruder, and more abstracted versions of the ones on the *Stone of the Warriors* and the *Bench Relief*. For example, there are no details in the feathers or

earplugs.

Beyer (1955: 13-14) contends that the crudity of this carving in comparison to that of later warrior processions is the result of the difference in materials. The frieze was carved in rough volcanic rock, which is porous and brittle, while the stone was carved in a harder, finer stone. However, in my opinion material alone cannot account for the differences in quality between the frieze and the *Stone of the Warriors*. The panels of the frieze are not just crudely carved but the proportions, postures, and positions of the figures are inconsistent in a way that even the warriors of the *Bench Relief*, carved in the same kind of volcanic rock, are not. Two of the four figures in the frieze's right group of warriors (Fig. 11) have feet that are planted with toes facing outward, instead of appearing to walk with one foot in front of the other, and the sandals of the last figure float above the ground. Furthermore, the postures, proportions, and the positions and formation of the limbs are wildly inconsistent with the group of warriors in the left section of the frieze (Fig. 11). There is a careless quality to the design and execution of

original and
architectural styles of Teotihuacan + Tula appear in the frieze; most L. 55 perhaps these friezes are

intentionally
archaic in style
to convey ancestral
authority

these figures that goes beyond the cause of materials. It is likely that this crude style is ^{INTENTIONALLY} related to the earlier Toltec models that serve as a source for the *Architectural Frieze* and all subsequent Aztec warrior procession carvings.

Toltec Banquet Friezes

Toltec architectural carvings of warriors in procession from the Early Postclassic period (950-1150 C.E.)², like the *Banquet Frieze* found in the Burnt Palace at Tula (Fig. 6), are the foundation upon which later Aztec artworks like the *Architectural Frieze*, *Bench Relief*, and, of course, the *Stone of the Warriors* are based (Quiñones Keber 1998: 150; Pasztory: 1983: 146; Klein 1986: 300; Nicholson 1971: 132). The structural, compositional, and iconographic resemblance between Toltec and Aztec bench reliefs is striking. At Tula they do not converge on a *zacatapayolli*, but similar figures found at the Toltec-ruled Mayan city of Chichen Itza do flank a cult object (Fig. 14) (Klein 1986: 300). Nevertheless, in every case from Tula lines of richly attired males file in procession along the base of the bench underneath a cornice of undulating serpents (300). Indeed, the richly painted *Banquet Frieze* at Tula is so similar to the *Architectural Frieze* from the Templo Mayor that Toltec scholar Richard Diehl (1983: 168) has suggested that it may have been looted from Tula, but the similar iconographic themes of autosacrifice and the close resemblance in styles between the *Architectural Frieze* and other Aztec pieces makes this extremely unlikely.

While some sculptures from Tula live up to the Toltec reputation for skilled artisanship the banquet friezes do not. The figures are more disproportionate and squat, their accoutrements more crude and disjointed, than those on the *Architectural Frieze*. They are obviously mass-produced and quickly assembled, with adjacent elements

mismatched, but many sections retain brilliant red, blue, yellow, and white paint. The rather slapdash technical execution of individual elements was apparently done with an eye for over all effect instead of detail, but the final product of so many brightly colored architectural sculptures must have been incredibly impressive (Diehl 1983: 66; Nicholson 1971: 111-12). In light of the Tula prototypes, it is not surprising that early Aztec copies of Toltec friezes would also be crude in execution, but even more refined Aztec examples, like those on the *Stone of the Warriors*, are still clearly derived from Toltec models. Yet, Toltec banquet friezes and Aztec warrior processions are influenced by earlier sources—like the art of Teotihuacan.

The Art of Teotihuacan

The plumed serpents that undulate over the figures in all of the works discussed are part of an iconographic tradition that originated in the city of Teotihuacan during the Classic period (100 B.C.E.-650 C.E.)³. The feathered serpent was the most often recurring mythical creature depicted at Teotihuacan, and was still among the most common visual motifs found in Mesoamerica at the time of conquest. A creature that at once embodies the earthly and celestial realms by giving a creature of the earth attributes of a bird, it is often found on frames and borders. A space framed by the plumed serpent immediately takes on special significance, and is defined as “a sacred space invested with divine attributes” (Sugiyama 2000: 117-19). The one element that is always constant in the Toltec banquet friezes and the Aztec *Architectural Frieze*, *Bench Relief*, and the *Stone of the Warriors* is the band containing plumed serpents.

place of
"Anthony"

Historical Context

As you can see, the art of Tula and Teotihuacan were major sources for the monumental art of Tenochtitlan, like the *Stone of the Warriors*, because of the regard people of central Mexico held for Toltec civilization. The Aztecs revered the Toltecs, and considered the cities of Tula and Teotihuacan to have been major centers of Toltec civilization and prosperity—Tollans (Boone 2000: 377). In their eyes, Teotihuacan was the origin place of government and Tula a place imbued with an aura of political authority as the city of the fabled priest-king Topoltzin Quetzalcoatl. When the pre-imperial Aztec kings wished to establish their legitimacy as rulers, they married into the royal dynasty of Culhuacan, who were supposedly the direct descendents of the last Toltec kings. The rulers of Tenochtitlan were the self-proclaimed heirs of the Toltecs (Davies 1987: 28-31). They appropriated the style and forms of their art, like the bench reliefs at Tula, in order to stress this connection. At first they closely copied the archaic style and the architectural placement of Toltec carvings, but eventually they developed a more refined style and created freestanding monuments imbued with related, but new, meanings and purpose.

When looking into the state of the Aztec imperial project in the time just before and during the period when the *Stone of the Warriors* was probably made, 1468-1486, I found some provocative reasons why Aztec government might commission such a monument. The range of possible dates given for the sculpture was reached through my own comparison with the styles of other Aztec monuments, and by taking into consideration the time frames proposed by several scholars, including: Pazstory, Klein, and Umberger. I believe that the specific historical context in which the *Stone of the*

Warriors was created had a profound impact on its conception, meaning, and possible purpose. This time spans from the last years of the reign of Motecuhzoma I, through the period when Axayacatl and Tizoc ruled, until the first years of the reign of Ahuitzotl.

The decades before this period were dominated by two strong and martially successful rulers, Itzcoatl and Motecuhzoma I. Rulers who were responsible for the creation, consolidation, and expansion of the Aztec Empire. Itzcoatl (1427-1440) was largely responsible for the defeat of the Tepanec overlords based in Azcapotzalco, the formation of the Triple Alliance, the consolidation of Aztec control over former Tepanec tributaries, further expansion of this territory, and a "series of changes in the political, military, and social structures of Aztec society." These changes increasingly stressed the supreme power of the *huetlatoani* as well as the importance of warfare and sacrifice as a way of emphasizing the power of the state. Furthermore, as a result of these changes the martial abilities of an Aztec ruler would now be a critical aspect of his political legitimacy (Hassig 1988: 141-56).

As the empire expanded, periods of succession were particularly precarious, and "past military accomplishments were not always enough to guarantee the security and continuation of the Aztec Empire." The ability of the Aztecs to use force successfully was thrown into doubt, because power was so heavily reliant on the competence of the ruler. Therefore, Itzcoatl's successor, Motecuhzoma I (1440-1468), was largely chosen because of his proven military prowess. This was an excellent choice. He followed the pattern established by Itzcoatl, expanding the empire and continuing to support policies that emphasized the power of the elite, but was careful to only engage in military campaigns in which he was guaranteed success. Motecuhzoma I also used religious

events as political opportunities, where subject rulers affirmed their fealty and witnessed the wealth and power of the Aztec empire (Hassig 1988: 157-75). His successful reign lasted for almost three decades, until the earliest possible date for the creation of the *Stone of the Warriors*.

The next Aztec ruler, Axayacatl (1468-1481), was not quite as successful as his predecessor. Although he did obtain the captives necessary for his coronation ceremonies, put down a revolt fueled by the uncertainties of an untried ruler, add territory to the empire, and eventually win the civil war against Tlatelolco. Yet, he was responsible for the unequivocal Aztec defeat at the hands of the Tarascans. He also emphasized the use of religion as a political tool. (Hassig 1988:176-188) However, his reign lasted only about a decade, and was followed by the least successful Aztec monarch—Tizoc.

Tizoc (1481-1486) was probably chosen in part due to his youth. After the relatively short reign of Axayacatl, it became apparent that, because of the uncertainty and potential for political fragmentation which accompanied every period of succession, it was in the best interests of the empire's stability to limit the frequency of political turnovers by selecting young kings. This choice turned out to be a political disaster. He barely managed to take enough captives for his coronation ceremony. In the words of Hassig, "Tizoc's poor war record as king reduced the Aztecs' credibility as a military power, and there were revolts throughout the empire." As a result, Tizoc's reign was cut short after only four or five years, probably by poison administered by his subjects (Hassig 1988: 189-99). Fortunately for the Aztecs, the next ruler, Ahuitzotl (1486-1502), eventually proved to be one of the most successful rulers of the empire (Hassig 1988:

200-18); the very first years of his reign marks the end of the time period in which the *Stone of the Warriors* was probably made.

Conclusions

In my opinion, the creation of the *Stone of the Warriors*, a monument I have shown is iconographically related to warfare, rulership, autosacrifice, and political legitimacy, was a product of its historical context. It reflects the merged religious and political concerns of the powerful rulers who created, consolidated, and expanded the empire. Also, the technique and style of the carving, particularly the faces, is similar to the *Stone of Tizoc* (Fig. 15). This round stone is the earliest major monument of which a date, 1486, can be assured by glyphs. Therefore, it is likely that the *Stone of the Warriors* was carved during the later part of the proposed period of 1468-86. If this later date is accurate, then the emphasis on political legitimacy, successful warfare, and domination of the earth by the Aztec Empire would have been particularly important themes in a time of political uncertainty caused by the ineptness of Tizoc.

This paper has examined the iconography, sources, and historical context of the *Stone of the Warriors* in detail. It has also laid the foundation for the next phase of research, which will concern possible functions of the stone. These include the traditional throne or altar interpretations, as well as my own developing theory that it might have been used as a platform for mummy bundles during ruler burial rites. As discussed above, the rather unique placement of the earth monster raises all kinds of questions about how the *Stone of the Warriors* might have been used in state or religious ceremonies. Given the practical nature of the Aztec state, often combining politics with religion, it is also likely that the stone had several functions. Perhaps that is why the warrior procession

subject was removed from its traditional place in permanent architectural decoration. This research will focus more heavily on the accounts of the chroniclers, images of death rights found in the codices, and an analysis of the area where the stone was found. Through the further analysis of early Aztec sculptures, like the *Stone of the Warriors*, we can come to a better understanding of the Aztec Empire and the development of their monumental art.

¹ These dates are mine, but represent a logical compromise between the pre-1480s date that Pasztory gives and the post-1486 date that Klein puts forth. In further research I hope to come to a more precise date, but without glyphs it is impossible to ever be completely sure. Furthermore, H. B. Nicholson (1971: 116-18) has pointed out that the lack of satisfactory knowledge of Aztec sculptural development make style and technique somewhat unreliable methods of dating.

² These dates are from Michael A. Smith (1996: 29)

³ These dates are from Saburo Sugiyamo (2000: 118)