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SACRIFICIAL VESSEL

Green Stone

Diameter 5 5/16"

Museum of the American Indian,
163405 (38)

aztec stone sculpture

DECEMBER 8, 1976 - JANUARY 30, 1977

THE CENTER FOR INTER-AMERICAN RELATIONS
680 Park Avenue

aztec stone sculpture

Literally thousands of Aztec stone sculptures exist. This is so despite the destruction of many cities in the course of the Spanish conquest, despite the building of colonial cities on top of the ruins, and despite the zeal of the clergy in smashing the heathen idols. Some of these sculptures are hardly more than blocks of volcanic stone with barely recognizable features; others are finely carved and polished statues of small size; still others are colossal stone works covered with intricate symbolic designs. Most Aztec images represent deities. Eyewitnesses at the time of the Spanish conquest and the chroniclers of the 16th century frequently described these images as horrendous idols situated in temple interiors, smeared with the blood of sacrificial victims and surrounded by costly offerings.

The Toltecs were a skillful people; all of their works were good, all were exact, all well made and admirable.

The remains of what they made and left behind are still there and can be seen, among them the works not finished, among them the serpent columns, the round columns of serpents with their heads resting on the ground, their tails and rattles in the air.

The mountain of the Toltecs can be seen there and the Toltec pyramids, the structures of stone and earth, with stucco walls. The remains of Toltec pottery also are there; cups and pots of the Toltecs can be dug from the ruins; Toltec necklaces are often dug from the earth, and marvelous bracelets, precious green stones . . .

Aztec Thought and Culture,
A Study of the Nahuatl Mind,
M. Leon-Portilla,
Copyright 1963, by the University of
Oklahoma Press

What is strange about this is that free-standing, three-dimensional stone images do not exist in quantity in Mesoamerica prior to the Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1200-1521). Does this mean that, as it has been suggested, the Aztecs were the first to establish idolatry—the worship of images? We know from the many 16th century descriptions that the Aztecs represented their supernaturals in stone, wood, gold, jade, terracotta, dough, feathers, paper, and paint. Many of these perishable crafts probably existed prior to the Postclassic period but simply have not survived. Judging by what has survived, the gods of the Classic and Early Postclassic period (A.D. 300-1200) were represented in terracotta and mural painting. Stone sculpture was apparently used mainly for architectural decora-

tion and not for free-standing deity representation.

After A.D. 1200 a new tradition of stone sculpture emerged in Central Mexico. Vast numbers of deity, human, and animal representations were carved fully in the round. These figures are usually reduced to a simple cubic or columnar mass, but bulging, convex surfaces suggest the organic shape of muscles. Collar bones, fingernails, wrinkles in the palms add life-like details. The small size, round forms, and realistic details characteristic of Aztec sculpture are quite unlike the ear-

lier stone sculptures of Teotihuacan and Tula, which were intended to be associated with buildings and tend to be architectonic, flat, and severely conceptualized (Fig. 1). Aztec stone sculptures are closest in formal appearance to the terracotta figures of Classic and Postclassic Veracruz (Fig. 2). During the Classic period deities were primarily represented in clay in Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Central Mexico. The Aztecs seem to have copied these earlier terracotta forms into stone. This appears to be the explanation of their "idolatry": that subjects that earlier



Figure 1 Atlantean figure from Tula. 15' high.



Figure 2 Classic Veracruz Clay Figure. 17 1/4" high. University Museum of Arts and Sciences, National University, Mexico City.

civilizations represented in other media, such as clay, or perhaps wood, and dough, the Aztecs converted to stone. The Aztecs made stone replicas of many ritual objects such as wooden drums, shields, rattle-staffs, and even the reeds tied into a bundle which represented 52 elapsed years (Fig. 3). Thus, in late Postclassic sculpture what is new is not necessarily the subject, or the ritual, but the medium.

Stone signifies permanence and grandeur. This systematic translation of works originating in other media into stone indicates the near obsessive desire on the part of the Aztecs to make sacred images out of the most durable available material. Such an impulse can best be explained by the historic situation

that prevailed in Central Mexico in the Postclassic period.

Between A.D. 1200 and 1521 the population of Central Mexico lived in many small city states. The different ethnic groups living in close proximity to one another shared one attitude in common: they believed that they were the unworthy successors of a great civilization that had existed before them. Some of these groups claimed descent from the Toltec civilization which collapsed by A.D. 1200. Others, newer migrants, believed that they had come to the Valley of Mexico from far away, somewhere to the northwest. The Aztecs consisted of such a group of interrelated Nahuatl-speaking tribes who claimed a mythic, far away place of origin.



Figure III Aztec Year Bundle. Stone model of a tied bundle of 52 sticks representing the 52-year cycle. Museum of Anthropology, Mexico.

One Aztec group, the Mexica, who built their city, Tenochtitlan, on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco (now Mexico City), were to emerge as the dominant political power in the 15th century. Despite intermarriage among the ruling families of the various city states, these alliances had proved unstable; feuding, frequently ending in large-scale warfare, was continuous. During the 14th century the Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco nearly created a conquest empire, but they were defeated by the combined forces of the Mexica of Tenochtitlan and the Chichimecs of Texcoco. Thereafter, Tenochtitlan became the center of Valley of Mexico military and political power and led conquering expeditions as far south as the highlands of Guatemala. The primary aim of Aztec conquest was the acquisition of tribute not territory. Despite their military victories, the Mexica never created a unified empire; they remained at least nominally members of a Triple Alliance, and many of their conquests were essentially punitive expeditions against predictably rebellious subjects. The ideology of the Postclassic city states was that of feuding principalities, jealousy preserving their ethnic and historic identity defined in large part by military enmities and alliances. Even after Tenochtitlan became the actual ruler of the Valley of Mexico, the myth of independent powers was maintained by ceremonial warfare between traditional enemies such as Tenochtitlan and Tlaxcala and by the necessity for each ruler to prove himself a hero conquering foreign territory before he could assume the throne.

Each city state had its own patron deity. These gods can be identified with one or another aspect of a major god worshipped by almost all of the Central Mexicans, but given a special and unique name, and honored in a unique festival. This patron deity often played an important role in the migration traditions

of the city. All cities had some form of migration legends which are generally believed to be mythic versions of actual peregrinations. The city states specialized in certain crafts and activities, such as building, trade, or warfare, which created a high degree of mutual intercourse among the various centers. This exchange could be voluntary or coerced; when the Mexica conquered Chalco, a city famous for its architects and builders, they commanded them to build a causeway to Tenochtitlan.

The chronicles of the 16th century, written by Spanish observers from information supplied by the Aztecs, emphasize the cultural distinctness of each group. But, if the Aztecs were only known from archaeological excavations, we might think that their empire was relatively homogeneous and extended over a large area. The same type of architecture and sculpture, the same supernatural beings are found at most centers. Some stylistic differences exist in stone sculpture, but with the exception of a few highly distinct styles, such as the style of Tenochtitlan, Chalco, or Castillo de Teayo, the great majority of Aztec sculptures cannot be attributed to any particular group or center. The insistence of the city states on their ethnic uniqueness is suspicious under these circumstances for it suggests that historic myth probably functioned as a way of distinguishing each group from its otherwise rather similar neighbors.

Besides providing allegedly unique origins for the city states, the various Aztec migration myths also served to point out the great gap that was felt to exist between the Postclassic cultures and the civilizations of the past. The ruins of two nearby cities, Teotihuacan (200 B.C.-A.D. 700) and Tula (A.D. 900-1200), with their impressive pyramids and colossal sculptures were attributed to the "Toltecs" a semi-legendary

people whose civilization was thought of as a Golden Age of art and morality. Teotihuacan, especially, was a sacred shrine because it was believed to have been built by the gods and to have served as the final burial place of the ancient kings. The name Teotihuacan means in Nahuatl "the place of the gods" because the Aztecs believed that the last creation of the world had taken place at that impressive site (Fig. 4). Motecuhzoma II went to the ruins at frequent intervals to perform sacrifices in honor of the gods and the ancients. The grandeur of these past civilizations, evident in their material remains and legendary histories, is at the root of the historic consciousness of the Postclassic period. It cast a giant shadow over the Aztecs who could not help feeling small and inferior by contrast. Their migration myths indicate the group's sense of distance from the ancient Toltecs; some groups describe themselves as nomads who

once lived in caves (the conceptual opposite of the city-dwelling Toltecs), who on their migration generally stop either at Tula or at Teotihuacan and learn agriculture or the laws of government, i.e., the rudiments of civilization, while others claim actual Toltec descent, and begin their migrations at Tula. These myths therefore function as explanations of the cultural contrast evident between the great ruins of the past and the less impressive achievements of the Postclassic present.

In the face of these great, silent monuments, the Aztecs never lost a feeling of being spiritual usurpers and the secret fear that their makers had first right to the land, to which, as legitimate heirs, they might one day return. In so far as these monuments—even more than the legends' absolute proof of the superiority of the past—were made of stone, stone as a medium was more significant to the Postclassic peoples than to any of their predecessors

less in awe of their past. In the relatively insecure political climate of small city states competing for power, permanence became a greatly desired value. The separatist ideology of the city states hindered the creation of a unified empire which might have had the resources to create monuments that would rival those of the ancient Toltecs. When the Mexica became a powerful tribute-empire in the Valley of Mexico, one of their aims was the erection of colossal stone statues more magnificent and elaborate than any surviving Toltec works.

Motecuhzoma I (A.D. 1440-1469) initiated the custom of carving a portrait of the ruler of Tenochtitlan on the cliffs of Chapultepec. Tezozomoc, the 16th century writer of *Cronica Mexicana*, describes a conversation between Motecuhzoma and his advisor Tlacaelel which supposedly took place when the two men went to look at the finished work. Tlacaelel said to the ruler that he was pleased with the portrait and mentioned that in the old days a statue had been made of Quetzalcoatl, the Toltec god and ruler, but as it had been made of wood it had disappeared and been forgotten. Motecuhzoma replied by asking Tlacaelel who would have lasted longer, he or Quetzalcoatl, had the image of that god been carved not in wood but in stone like his. As this legend indicates, the Mexica rulers sought to leave an even more permanent legacy of their rule than did the Toltecs by carving more art works in stone than in wood.

As a result of their need to explain their relationship to the makers of past monuments, the Aztecs did not only develop a strong historic consciousness but can be said to have been obsessed with the juxtaposition of the past and present. The Mexica's reaction to the ancients had an ambivalent character: they were convinced that the ancients had been culturally superior, but must have been politically or militarily inferior since their

civilization had collapsed; conversely, while they admitted to being culturally inferior, as a successful military power, they saw themselves as superior. Ultimately, they sought to emulate the achievements of the past while infusing it with the vitality of the present. This dual attitude explains the erection of twin pyramid temples as the central shrines at many Aztec cities. Twin pyramids were generally dedicated to two gods who symbolized the balanced opposition of old and new, past and present, such as the patron deity of a city, generally a new warrior god, and an old fertility or dynastic god. The Aztecs themselves referred to the deities as "old" or "new". They usually placed the patron, war, and sky deities in the "new" category, and the water, earth, fertility deities in the "old" category. It is often believed that this represents a historical reality, that the Classic civilizations of Mexico worshipped fertility deities while the Postclassic peoples introduced the military cults. But this is very dubious, since both military and fertility themes are equally frequent in the arts of the Classic period.

The ideology of both the Classic and Postclassic peoples of Mexico focused on two major areas: the realm of nature and the pursuit of subsistence activities such as agriculture and crafts, of some importance to everyone in society, and cosmic and dynastic history and military exploits, more specifically the concerns of the ruling elite. In so far as it has been possible to identify the supernatural beings of the Classic period in the absence of contemporary texts, it is evident that these two aspects were already fully present at that time. Because of the existence of native codices and 16th century accounts, however, Postclassic ideology is much easier to reconstruct.

In the Postclassic period, all aspects of nature were personified by gods and spirits. The yearly agricultural cycle—the preparation

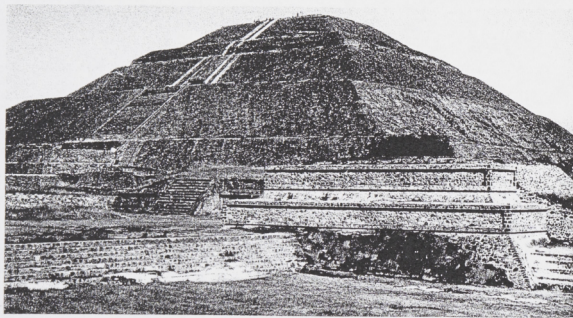


Figure IV. Teotihuacan Pyramid of the Sun.

of the fields, sowing, coming of the rains, first fruits, and harvest—was associated with a continuous series of rituals performed in the fields, at springs, caves, and mountaintops, at family shrines and in all the major and minor temples. Besides a basic association with agricultural activities, the nature gods were also the patrons of many crafts, such as salt-making, mat-making, pottery, basketry, and textiles. These nature gods included the gods of the sun, moon, wind, rain, thunder, earth, and vegetation, such as Tonatiuh, Tlaloc, Ehecatl, Chalchiuhtlicue, Xochiquetzal, Centeotl, Macuilxochitl, and Xochipilli. Most of these deities were either believed to reside in the earth or had a life cycle in which they traversed the earth and the heavens. The earth was metaphorically seen as female, the home of all the fertility mother goddesses. The nature gods, though visualized in anthropomorphic form, were usually not the protagonists of major mythic cycles or legends. They were mainly venerated through ritual and communal feasting and the myths in which they do appear are usually explanations of natural events.

Since their worship was the most popular, the fertility deities had by far the greatest number of images. These spirits were represented in wood, dough, paper, and stone, but were generally of a modest size. Given the high degree of occupational specialization during the Postclassic period (metalwork was in the hands of two guilds, one of whom did casting, the other hammering and repousse), it is likely that a number of separate stone carving guilds may have supplied the necessary images for the different socio-economic groups. Moreover, some images, such as the Goddess with the Temple Headdress representations are so numerous and similar to one another that the question arises whether they might not have been mass produced and

perhaps even sold at the markets—next to the *metates* (grinding stones for maize).

Characteristics of the representation of Aztec nature gods in stone include frontality, bilateral symmetry, compact body forms, and inert postures. These figures are generally passive, their arms are calmly folded over their knees or rest flat on the lap. With the exception of the rain god Tlaloc and the wind god Ehecatl, these deities are primarily anthropomorphic and lack monstrous or grotesque symbolic attributes. Tlaloc and Ehecatl are represented in more forceful, asymmetrical postures, but their features have no death or sacrifice connotations. The symbolic traits that identify the nature deities are remarkably constant: the ribbon and tassels of the water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue, the beak of Ehecatl, the goggles and fangs of Tlaloc. The forces of nature were personified by calm, largely benevolent deities, whose images radiate a sense of confidence in calm face of the natural order.

Although the ruling classes also venerated the gods of nature and agricultural fertility and performed the appropriate rituals, their primary cults were concerned with the culture heroes who linked their ethnic and dynastic history with the larger cosmic cycles. The interpretation and preservation of the cosmic order was one of the duties of the ruling elite—the aristocracy, warrior-knights, merchants, priests, and elite artists. The gods they worshipped were personifications of power and creativity. Most of the culture-bringing deities of the Aztecs were male gods living or originating in the sky. Foremost among them were the male creator deities, such as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, who were credited with a single and unique act of creation in the world, in contrast to the continuous, cyclical pattern of renewal under the aegis of the nature deities. These male creator

gods are described as the sons of an original male-female creator couple, but the creator couple is passive; the act of creation is performed by the sons. The invention or introduction of cultural improvements, such as fire, the calendar, various arts and crafts, and ritual warfare, are generally attributed to the male creator gods. Several are described as originally human, legendary kings or priests (sometimes Toltec), who were subsequently deified. The patron deities of cities and ethnic groups—Huitzilopochtli of the Mexica or Mixcoatl of the Chichimecs—were deities with a legendary, semi-human history, as were the patron gods of the dynastic ruler (Tezcatlipoca), the priesthood (Quetzalcoatl), and traders (Yacatecuhtli). The male culture-bringing deities are extraordinarily complex, often inconsistent figures associated with a wide variety of mythic cycles and usurping the aspects of several nature gods.

Most of the gods of the ruling class were associated with war and sacrifice. Warfare, necessary for the acquisition of tribute and political prestige, was a major occupation of the governing elite and one of the avenues of economic and social mobility for the other classes. On the religious level, warfare was justified by the need for human sacrifices. Blood sacrifice, unnatural or cultural death, was the primary means used to control and influence the supernatural in man's favor. Sacrifices were performed for the nature deities as well, but the gods of war and sacrifice, as a cultural institution, were the patron and male creator deities. As the gods of nature and the agricultural cycle were associated with the solar year, the growing season, and continuous cyclic concepts of time, the male patron and creator gods were related to discontinuous, historic, and catastrophic time—the world ages and the 52-year time cycle. The Aztecs believed that they were living in

the fifth and last creation of the world which was destined for eventual destruction. The agents of destruction were the forces of nature: fiery rain, flood, jaguars, wind, earthquake, and volcanic eruptions. This destruction would occur at the end of a 52-year cycle and could only be prevented by propitiatory and lavish support of the gods. Every 52 years, after it became evident that the world was not going to collapse, the Aztecs celebrated the continuation of the world in a New Fire Ceremony dedicated to the most essential culture bringer, Xiuhtecuhtli, the fire god. The old fires were extinguished and new fire was struck on the chest of a sacrificial victim. Old pots, household artifacts, and even deity images were discarded and new ones were put in their place.

Important deities such as Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli, and Mixcoatl, whose deeds and histories fill volumes in the chronicles of the 16th century, are generally not to be found among the great quantity of Aztec stone sculptures. The Spanish turned to upper-class wise men to explain the Aztec way of life, which results in a disproportionate emphasis on the dynastic and patron gods in the 16th century sources. Since these deities were venerated almost exclusively by the elite classes and had no popular cults, they were probably represented by fewer images. As many of these images would have been in the major temples, they, more than any other cult idols probably suffered from the destruction of the Spanish. The surviving cult images and objects made for the governing elite generally consisted of complex and highly individual works of art, such as architectural decoration, colossal statues, miniatures in precious stones and metals, feather mosaic, and painted books. These works were made on commission and reflect the political power, theological subtlety, and aesthetic sensibility of both

the patrons and the leading artistic workshops. The major subjects represented include the patron deities, rulers and warriors, sacrifice, and the powers of destruction. Skulls, skeletons, human hearts and hands, serpents with bared fangs, hands ending in bird claws, and streams of blood evoke the one unifying theme of these works—death and destruction. The rulers, warriors, and gods are generally shown in active postures; they are seen drawing blood, conquering prisoners or raising their hands in threatening gestures. Most figures are covered with intricate low relief or painted designs of symbolic significance which are executed with great attention to detail and precision. Many of these symbolic designs in sculpture are derived from the most sophisticated tradition in the visual arts, that of manuscript illustration. Although certain standard combinations of motifs exist, each work has a unique selection of emblems and motifs and was made to express a specific concept.

Two low-relief designs, generally juxtaposed as opposites, symbolize the destructive and creative forces in Aztec elite art, the earth monster and the sun disk. The earth monster is a composite toad-saurian creature represented with its legs apart like a parturient woman, bedecked with skulls, its voracious mouth open, ready to devour all. This creature, which personifies all the destructive powers of nature is generally represented on the bottom of boxes, figures, or sacrificial vessels. The sun disk, by contrast to the bestial image of the earth, is an abstract, geometric symbol, which consists of concentric circles and triangular rays, surrounding that quintessentially intellectual formulation, a glyph and number (4 *ollin* or "Movement", the date

of the future destruction of the world). The sun disk is generally represented on the top of top half of monuments and on the inside of sacrificial vessels. When the sun is personified, he is represented as a fully armed warrior. The contrast is between the sun, the symbol of light and the creative intellect and the earth, the symbol of darkness and animal nature. The aim of the sacrificial ritual was to regulate the diurnal and seasonal alternation of light and dark and to put off, as long as possible, the inevitable catastrophic confrontation.

All of the terrifying subject matter in Aztecart is to be found on objects made for the cults and temples of the ruling class. The fatalistic and pessimistic world view, said to be typical of the Aztecs, may have been primarily characteristic of the upper class. Even the Mexica, despite all the evidence of their own accomplishments, could not overcome their feeling of cultural inferiority in relation to the great civilizations of the past and consequently also doubted their ability to keep the cosmic order from collapsing. Much of the poetry composed by the rulers and aristocracy expresses a feeling of imminent doom which no human achievement will survive. The anxiety of the Aztec ruling class was ultimately justified and their world totally perished in the course of the Spanish conquest.

What survived, in great numbers, are the unpretentious stone images of the nature gods of the agricultural cults. The way of life of the lower classes has continued, with few changes, under Spanish rule, and the old gods are still venerated under the names of Christian saints.

Esther Pasztory

media and function

Aztec deity images, or the material habitations of the gods, range in size from the miniature to the colossal and were usually made in clay, stone, wood, dough, or less frequently of gold, silver, and jade. Originally, they were brightly painted, dressed in clothes, adorned with folded papers, feathers, flowers, jewels, and other decorations. Incense, sacrifices, and prayers were offered to them at various times during the day and before any major undertaking. Treated as though they were alive, the figures were bathed, offered food and drink, and had their own servants.

Deity representations were set up in the open air or in sacred shelters. The ancient Mexican countryside was literally dotted with shrines and temples housing hundreds of images. Each household had its own images set up on an altar. Mountaintops, springs, cross-

roads, sacred trees, cultivated fields, were all spots that warranted the propitiation of the gods. Images were made or commissioned in fulfillment of vows, for sacred feasts, and at crucial times in the agricultural cycle. Merchants carried the images of their gods with them on long distance trips and set them up where they stopped to sleep. Temples were despoiled and the deity images taken captive in military conquests.

Some images were meant to be permanent, others were temporary. Many were ritually thrown out at the time of the New Fire Ceremony and new ones were put in their place. Human beings became living deity images when they impersonated the gods in special rituals in which they were to be sacrificed.

N.G.

1. FEMALE DEITY WITH CHILD

Red Clay

Height 4"

American Museum of Natural History,
005.160

Clay models and figurines are the oldest art forms in the Valley of Mexico, with examples dating back to the second millennium B.C. Aztec examples were modeled and molded of a hard red ware or a soft cream clay. Common forms were deities, warriors, temple-pyramids, and musical instruments. Mass produced in great quantity, they probably served varied and multiple purposes: as modest domestic idols, personal guardians, ceremonial paraphernalia, and offerings.

This female figurine, a common Aztec type, is usually identified as Xochiquetzal, the goddess of flowers, love, and spring. Characteristic are the divided headdress and the child she holds who appears to be a miniature version of herself. This figurine, like many of its kind, is actually a rattle. Holes under the arms may have been for suspension.

