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An Unusual Aztec Object in Stone

Although this important piece needs to be studied more thoroughly than the present time allows, I will give you a brief analysis of the work based primarily on photographic evidence.

What we have here is a small cylindrical stone approximately 10 inches high, covered with reliefs, and once painted overall in red. A considerable amount of red remains. The bottom and possibly the top have been broken off, probably as intentional post-conquest mutilation. The stone is possibly a small votive monument ~~or even an altar for autosacrificial blood offerings~~ commemorating an astronomical event with historical implications. Its symbolic program associates it with the great temalacatls or cuauhxicallis, those monumental round stones of Tizoc and the recently discovered stone of Moctezuma I in which a scene is depicted between decorations symbolizing heaven and earth. The red paint I suspect is an underpainting of symbolic blood to imbue the object with the life force. Other more fugitive colors were possibly applied over the more permanent red ground and have since been washed away. Also many monuments appear to have been painted entirely in red with no other colors added

The style of the relief carving is, I believe, late Aztec and would indicate a date after 1507. No provenance is given, but there is possible evidence placing its origin in the Valley of Mexico and probably the capital city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. For works of similar imagery and relief technique I suggest a look at the famous Bilmek pulque vessel, the reverse side of the mask in Paztory page 231, the Dedication Stone of the Templo Mayor, and the throne-like monument called

the Temple Stone.

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The reliefs on three sides of the stone depict three persons dressed in the ceremonial costume of The god Quetzalcoatl in his manifestation as the Wind God Ehecatl. They converge on a star-like object. The object is infact not actually a star but is instead the well-known wind jewel (Ehecacozcatl), the fetish of Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl as well as Quetzalcoatl's monstrous twin Xolotl. The star shape of the jewel (made from the cross section of a conch shell) is intentional and unquestionably alludes to the planet Venus as it appears on the eastern horizon. The same wind jewel is worn on the chest of each of the three worshippers.

(Chacacoli)
The three figures carry the curved obsidian "star wand" in one hand. In their other hand they hold a tasseled incense bag and a long Maguey cactus leaf with three thorny maguey leaf tips stuck into it. The maguey leaves are used in bloodletting and pennance and represent the four days of required bloodletting and fasting which the celebrants have endured to purify themselves for the ceremony. The three figures here are probably not strictly deities but priests who are impersonating the wind gods. In a ceremonial sense they are the god they represent. The sacred apparel they wear makes them so. Here the three figures may in fact represent the north wind, the west wind and the south wind. The east wind, of course, is represented by the large wind jewel itself.

They have apparently come to celebrate the eastern rising of Venus after one of its long absences. It is a symbolic rebirth of the star and / or possibly the return of the rain bearing eastern winds that sweep the rain clouds off Mount Tlaloc down into the valley of Mexico. The bloodletting implied here is a clear echo of the blood sacrifices offered by the gods to celebrate the birth of the of greatest star of them all, the Fifth Sun at Teotihuacan.

Of the three figures, one stands above a relief of a

toad-like creature called Tlaltecuhтли, thought to be the earth god. Tlaltecuhтли's open maw here clearly represents the western horizon that swallows up the stars and sun in the evening. And it is carved on the exact opposite side of the stone from the wind jewel of the east. It is also quite possible that the three god-impersonators here are high priests of the Triple Alliance, the famous military alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tacuba. If we read the stone counterclockwise, as the Aztecs would have done, beginning with the East (the wind jewel) we first turn toward the north to see the first priest impersonator, then west to the second impersonator standing above the Tlaltecuhтли monster, then finally to the south for the third god impersonator. This third figure differs in one important way from the other two.

If we look closely, we can see that the star wand, the symbol of Quetzalcoatl's authority and power, is carried in the left hands of the northern figure and the figure on the west standing above the Tlaltecuhтли. The impersonator on the south, however, holds the star wand in his right hand, a potentially important distinction in hierarchy. For the Aztecs and other peoples of the pre-Colombian world the right hand was by far the more authoritative hand.

This round stone then tantalizingly seems to form a conceptual map of the Triple Alliance. If our determination of the directions indicated on the stone is correct, we can see while standing at the east and following the imagery counterclockwise (the direction, we have noted, observed in most Aztec rituals) that Texcoco lies to the north, Tacuba (the minor member of the alliance) lies to the west and Tenochtitlan, represented by the most authoritative figure holding the star wand in his right hand, lies to the south. This is true in actuality as any modern map of the area will show. Furthermore, if the viewer could look westward from a position under the sign of Venus, he would see that the figure possibly denoting

Tenochtitlan would be at his left under the exact area of the heavens favored by their tutelary god Huitzilopochtli which means "Hummingbird on the left." The name "Huitzilopochtli" refers to the sun in the southern heavens after the autumnal equinox and after the main harvests, and thus the annual time for military campaigns.

If a reference to the Triple Alliance is valid here, then it is entirely possible that the god impersonators are the actual rulers of the three cities. We know that each ruler (Tlatoani) bore the name of "Quetzalcoatl" as one of the titles of his office as Tlatoani and his high rank in the priestly hierarchy. Unfortunately the very areas above the heads of the three figures where name glyphs of the participants or their respective cities might have been carved have been defaced, apparently intentionally. It does appear as if some of the glyph above the head of the southern impersonator does remain, but it can not be read from the photographs (on seeing the stone in person I can see that the possible glyph is a quetzal bird, a traditional part of Quetzalcoatl's headdress).

Here then are three possible interpretations of the scene carved on our stone. Further research would, I'm sure, raise other possibilities.

1. The scene shows a ceremony in which three priestly god impersonators of Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl, who are possibly the rulers of the cities of the Triple Alliance, have come together to celebrate a particularly special heliacal rising of the planet Venus in the East. They have come to offer their blood to the rising star in repetition of the sacrifices made by the gods at the birth of the Fifth Sun at Teotihuacan. The implications of this particular event and why it was commemorated in stone are problematical and might have been better understood if the glyphs whose remains are fragmentary had been preserved.

2. The large star-shaped wind jewel is a symbol of Venus to be sure, but it also might here represent the winds of the

East just as the three god impersonators might be the winds of the north, west and south respectively. The east winds brought the rain clouds off Mount Tlaloc down into the Valley of Mexico thus ending the dry season and ushering in the season of rain. It is said that Ehecatl always swept the roads to welcome and bring forth the rain. At this time of year blood offerings thought to be precious water were offered to the Tlalokes, the rain dispensing assistants of rain god Tlaloc. It is possible that our stone records a special ceremony petitioning the winds of the east to bring the rain clouds to end the great drouth of 1506 that was so bad it caused the postponement of the all important New Fire Ceremony until a more lucky time in 1507. Also the appearance of Venus often signaled a time for war and drouths too caused wars when food became scarce.

3. There is a far-fetched but not entirely impossible interpretation that might allude to the predicted return of Quetzalcoatl in the calendar year One Reed. By one of the great coincidences in history the One Reed year happened to fall in the year 1519 of the Christian calendar, the year that Cortes landed on the east coast of Mexico. The late carving style of our stone does not rule this out. If only the bottom of our stone had remained intact, it might have born the date One Reed as do the bottoms of a number of other objects. The arrival of Cortes and the belief of the natives that he was the returned Quetzalcoatl may have been exaggerated by early colonial sources, but there is little doubt that it caused deep concern to the military leaders of the Triple Alliance. Though not armed for war, the three god impersonators on our stone do brandish the obsidian star wand like a weapon. The wand is thought to symbolize the Pleides and very likely the fire serpent, a powerful manifestation of lightning and celestial fire. The fire serpent was in fact the weapon of choice for the Aztec god of war Huitzilopochtli.

Is it possible that our stone might commemorate a ceremony

held by the rulers of the Triple Alliance to propitiate the possible malevolent influences brought about by the arrival in the East of a living embodiment of Venus and Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl, Hernan Cortes? Probably not. But surely the stone does record a special ceremony recognizing the return of the planet Venus on the eastern horizon. It is thus the same kind of cyclical Venus celebration that did indeed include the possible return of the god Quetzalcoatl some day in a One Reed year.

A couple of final observations: The shape of this stone is rather odd in the surviving list of Aztec objects. Originally it was more elongated. With the bottom missing we can only guess how long it was, but it is possible that when it was complete it may have resembled a column. This is intriguing, because the great colonial scholar Bernardino de Sahagun in his famous list of the sacred buildings of Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor, mentions as the fortieth site a place called Ilhuicatitlan.

"The fortieth building was called Hilhuicatitlan, and consisted of a thick (massive) and tall (high) column, on which the morning star (Venus) was painted. On the capital of this column another capital of Straw was erected. (perhaps a small straw house in which the god might reside) In front of this column and this star captives were sacrificed yearly when the star appeared again in the heavens."

Also, Sahagun records that during the festival of the month of Atlcahualo held at the end of the dry season to petition for rain, among the many ceremonies was one held at a place at the Templo Mayor precinct called Chililico which means "in the fire of the red pepper". Here they sacrificed a slave under the sign of Chiconahui Ehecatl ("Nine Wind") which is the birth day name for Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl. Since the god's birth, like the birth of the planet Venus, occurred in the east, the worshippers mentioned by Sahagun are almost certainly sacrificing

to the wind god of the east to bring the rain bearing east winds.

Remember that our stone bears two calendrical "Wind" dates, both of which are damaged. One of them could easily be a "Nine Wind" date. Also, since neither is enclosed in a frame or what scholars call a cartouche, the designated dates are day names and not the names of particular years. Sahagun also states that this sacrifice was performed "by the Lords (or Chieftains) only". Note Sahagun's use of the plural "Lords." These must be the rulers of the Triple Alliance and perhaps others, for we know that during another part of the Atlcahualo observances the lords of Texcoco, Tacuba, and Tenochtitlan climbed Mount Tlaloc east of the valley together to make lavish offerings and sacrifices to the rain god Tlaloc who lived inside the mountain in a kind of paradise called Tlalocan.

The name "Chililico", "in the fire of the red pepper" is almost certainly a poetic way of describing the dry season. Also, the ingestion of hot red peppers causes tears in the eyes and an instant need for water. When children were sacrificed to Tlaloc which always happened at this time, if the child cried copious tears, it was considered a good omen. The chilli's color red may also have a bearing on the color of our stone. We know as well that the Aztecs often associated the color red with the direction of East from whence came the rains.

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Note*

Now that I have seen the stone (it arrived yesterday) and have held it in my hands, it is apparent that the object was cut off at both ends. It is important to observe that it was carefully cut so as to not damage the Venus image and most of the scene with the god impersonators. This shows the same care often used by the indians when they were forced by the Spanish to destroy their monuments after the conquest. This argues for a late date for the piece - after the New Fire Ceremony of 1507. I believe that the object was a sculpture of a bloodletter, possibly a Maguey thorn (they are depicted in the hands of the celebrants) or a bone. Several objects fashioned from bone survive and many of the are carved with ritual scenes. I have an eagle bone bloodletter with a skull carved on it to represent the stars or the sun (which is also a star) in the celestial underworld.

The Aztecs often made models in stone of ritual objects. Our stone is almost certainly such a model, and it records an important ritual honoring the return of Venus on the easter horizon. The carvings in front of the heads of the two priests

are actually Quetzal birds sipping nectar from a flower depending from Quetzalcoatl's headdress as can be seen on the codex depictions of this deity.