

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 Ometeotl 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 headdresses 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 headdress" 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

to promote growth. The seven circles of the head band symbolize totality - the five directions on the earth's surface plus the underworld and the heavens which are always inhabited by this god. The circles themselves are symbols of preciousness and depending on the context in which they are used can stand for fire, for water, for turquoise (often associated with fire) or jade (associated with water) or similar jewels that shine. The twisted rope bands of the crown are associated with the earth, with the "ollin" design signifying "movement" or "life force."

Since with this sculpture of the fire god we have a figure that combines elements associated with water deities as well, we should consider how the Aztecs would have viewed this combination. In Aztec thought when water is in opposition to fire it stands for war, but when fire is united with water we have the elements essential for life. This fire and water concept is called "Atl-tlachinolli."

Also the small shapes on the chevrons or possible mountain shapes of the god's crown are tied and knotted bows similar to the knot of this god's loin cloth. The knotted bow is thought to be closely associated with fire and fertility.

CHICOMECOATL

Of all the Aztec deity sculptures that have survived the ravages of the conquest and of time, the most numerous are most certainly those of the goddess known as Chicomecoatl. She is often referred to as the "goddess of the temple headdress" because her headdress made of paper looks like an Aztec Temple. She is the goddess of agriculture and is responsible for all of man's foods that are raised by farming. Sometimes she is thought to be only a corn goddess because she is frequently depicted holding twin corncobs called "cemmaitl" in each hand.

The name "Chicomecoatl" is the goddess's calendar name which means "seven serpent." The number seven alludes to her supremacy in the same way that the number seven describes the power of the god of fire on all three levels of the cosmos. The word serpent describes her power as the life force. She is the quintessential mother goddess often addressed as Tonantzin "Our Mother" or Teonantzin "Mother of the Gods." In fact it is generally agreed that the feminine creative principle was expressed in one goddess who had many aspects and therefore many names. The statue that we are looking at represents the goddess as provider of agricultural products, especially corn which the Aztecs believed was literally the substance from which all humans were made.

Chicomecoatl was also considered to be a Tlaloque or an assistant of the rain god Tlaloc. In fact she was known as Tlaloc's wife or sister, and she along with countless other Tlalokes inhabited his sacred mountain called the Tonacatepetl, "Our Mountain of Sustenance" where corn originally was hoarded until Quetzalcoatl stole it and gave it to mankind. Chicomecoatl is often thought of as a more matronly aspect of the corn goddess while the goddess Xilonen represented the young maize ear or

xilotl. The young goddess is often depicted bare breasted while her more mature image wears the triangular shawl called the Quexquemiltl, but this is not always the case. Both wear the wrap-around skirt called the cueitl, and often the elder goddess has a belt in the form of a snake which may have phallic implications. The Aztec word for snake we have already noted is "coatl," and here may also refer to her calendrical name "chicomecoatl." Interestingly the double or twin ears of corn in her hands may also refer to her name, since the nahuatl word for twin or double is also "coatl."

The goddesses' "temple headdress" was made of paper when worn by her human impersonator in important religious ceremonies. It was called "Amacalli" which literally means "paper house." At the upper corners are circular motifs which represent pleated paper "shields" usually associated with heat and perhaps dryness. Similar shaped shields (chimalli) with attached cones are associated with death gods which alludes to a very important aspect of Chicomecoatl; while she is responsible for fertility, she also brings frost and drought so that she can be a killer of man's crops as well as a provider. The knotted paper bows between the round shields on both the front and back of the headdress probably symbolize heat and fertility and possibly drought and the "burning" sensation of frost as well. The twisted chords depicted with the bows are associated with the earth and fertility and are derived from the twisted sign "ollin" which is the symbol of life and movement.

The four projecting ornaments emerging from the top of the figure look like feathers, and feathers they may be. But they may be derived from the same chevron-shaped headdress elements of your fire god figure which originally may have stood for mountains emphasizing the centrality of the god in the lives of the Mexica Aztecs.

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Malka

