

I have been asked by Mr. Dutch Phillips to make a few observations on a small, but important, gold repousse' ornament of Mixtec and/or possibly Aztec provenance. The piece is most likely a pectoral which was probably first embossed then backed with a coating of clay mixed with charcoal (in the manner of some Mixtec beadwork) and mounted on wood pierced for wearing on the chest. Plaques such as these, made of jade or gold, are sometimes referred to as "heirloom" pieces. The iconography here certainly supports this possible interpretation, for the personage depicted is either an ixiptla or god impersonator of Tlaloc or the god itself. From at least classic times we have ample evidence from the art of Teotihuacan to the Maya kingdoms associating the donning of traditional Tlaloc imagery by the highest of the elite, especially in relationship to war activities.

Tlaloc is a much misunderstood deity who is almost always thought of as only a rain god, no doubt because of the traditional, but now disputed translation of the god's nahuatl name as "Tlal-octli" meaning "Wine of the earth." Here on the face of this figure we see the characteristic "goggle" eyes and heavy upper lip and fanged teeth thought to have been derived from the jaguar or two profile serpent heads coming together over the mouth. Both derivations are likely, for much of the imagery and morphology of imagery in pre-colombian art is inclusive in meaning and reference, a single symbol or motif often having been derived from several sources.

This is the first time that I have ever seen an image of Tlaloc wearing a helmet of a jaguar head, although there is in the Kimbell Museum a fascinating west Mexican Mixtec ceramic vessel in the shape of a man wearing a Tlaloc mask. His right hand is raised in a threatening position as if he is about to throw the object he holds. The object is an oblong shaft painted with candy cane spirals in red and white and probably symbolizes lightning. Strapped on the figure's left wrist is a small circular "shield." The figure wears a xicolli or short sleeved shirt usually associated with priest apparel. Here we may have a warrior priest. What is important to my analysis of the gold piece is that the Kimball Tlaloc figure wears a helmet which is most likely the head of a coyote.

We know that various warrior orders of post classic central Mexico wore animal head helmets, the jaguar and the coyote helmets especially belonging to the Knights of the sun who represented the nocturnal sun and the forces of the earth, night and the underworld in balance to the helmets of eagles who represented the warriors of the celestial, diurnal sun. At least on one obvious level the gold plaque represents a warrior Tlaloc, but this is only one level. There are other important associations which ought to be considered.

Three deities of the greatest antiquity among the post classic peoples of central Mexico were Tezcatlipoca, Tlaltecuhli, and Xiuhtecuhli. Tezcatlipoca or "Mirror that Smokes" was the great god, the god who created himself and all creation. He was primordial darkness itself which existed before anything else and which at the end of time would again engulf

the world in eternal night. His most honored animal form was the jaguar, whose fierce maw symbolized the god's power to devour everything. The jaguar's spotted pelt often symbolized the night sky filled with stars. The jaguar was also closely associated with the interior of the earth, especially caves, out of whose openings the stars ascended at night and which "devoured" the sun at evening and disgorged it at dawn. Another important nocturnal manifestation of Tezcatlipoca was Yohual-Ehecatl, "The Night Wind."

Tlaltecuhltli or "Earth Lord" in the sometimes contradictory creation myths of these peoples seems to have been created next. This god was the earth itself, and it was an earth created in darkness. As the earth Tlaltecuhltli was both a creator of life and a devourer of the dead. His animal forms were most often a kind of mythical toad or crocadillian, but his nahualli (animal emanation) could be also manifested in jaguar form. It is from the Earth Lord that Tlaloc emerged. Though Tlaloc was both the bringer of sustenance and fertility and thus a god of life, he was also a death god, for he presided over the underworld paradise of Tlalocan.

Xiuhtecuhtli, "Turquoise Lord" or "Jeweled Lord" or "Shining Lord" was the third essential deity of this creative triumvirate. He was the god of fire. He came into being when Tezcatlipoca changed himself into his fetish, the flint knife, and fell from heaven to cleave the earth. From this cleft all the rest of the gods emerged into creation, but it was Xiuhtecuhtli who emerged first. Always representing the hearth, it was thus he who always stood at the center of the three levels of the universe - the surface of the earth, the underworld, and the heavens. Xiuhtecuhtli chose the direction for the sun to rise thereby determining the other directions. It was into his fire that all the gods immolated themselves at Teotihuacan to give power to the Fifth Sun of the present age. While the great Smoking Mirror represented eternity, Xiuhtecuhtli represent the warmth of life itself and thus of temporal existence. As such he was the god of time. The "xiuh" of his name is homophonic with the nahuatl word "xihuitl" which means "grass" or "year." He was worshipped as god of the year.

This god Xiuhtecuhtli could also assume the animal form of the jaguar. He might likewise manifest himself as the mythical Xiuhcoatl or "fire serpent" which represented celestial fire in the form of lightning. As lightning the Xiuhcoatl became the war weapon of choice for Tlaloc. In his jaguar form Xiuhtecuhtli was known as Tepeyollotl or "Mountain Heart," a somewhat obscure deity who seemed to represent the particular individual "soul" or animating spirit of each mountain. All mountains or promontories were considered sacred. Each man-made temple platform was a symbolic sacred mountain, and many small sculptures of Xiuhtecuhtli-Tepeyollotl were buried in offering caches at temple sights to sanctify and give "life" to such structures.

All this has pertinence for us as we examine our small gold piece, for the gods just mentioned all are manifested in this work. And we have observed the Jaguar's ancient association

with the creator gods thus with rulership. Texcatlipoca, Tlaloc and Xiuhtecuhtli are all especially the patron deities of rulers and aristocracy. We, of course, see the Jaguar head of Tezcatlipoca and the face of Tlaloc, and we have only to look at the circular gold pectoral beneath the mask of Tlaloc to see our symbol for Xiuhtecuhtli, the fire. The disk is surrounded by circular "beads" which symbolize heat, preciousness and can mean "jewel-like." The hearth, which is the home of Xiuhtecuhtli was often called the "turquoise or jewelled enclosure." Such round turquoise symbols were often sculpted on the mid-thoraxes of Tlalocoid reliefs on the undersides of major Aztec sculptures. This without doubt refers to the navel of the earth, the jeweled enclosure of Xiuhtecuhtli.

On the "headdresses" or braziers of Fire God sculptures found at Teotihuacan (which were later copied by Aztec sculptors as is evidenced by a major piece found in the 1978-82 Templo Mayor digs) there were frequently carved plain rectangles or bars and stylized "eyes." The hearth of Xiuhtecuhtli, since it opened to the underworld, partook of all the symbolism of openings. The hearth, then, could be thought of as a mouth, a navel, an anal opening, even a nostril, an ear or an eye. It is as an eye to the heavens that we may see here in our gold piece, for the angular arms surrounding the disk make it look like an eye. The prominence of the open hands also is a frequent one in Mixtec and Aztec art and has somewhat baffled scholars. The fundamental meaning is, I think, a simple one. It refers to the number five, which on the horizontal plane always denoted the "fifth direction" which is the center, the axis mundi, the eternal home of the god of fire. This disk also covers Tlaloc's heart. The fire god's hearth is always a portal to the heart of the earth. It should also be noted parenthetically that the royal attire of Aztec rulers -the xiuhtlalpilli cape and the xiuhtcopilli crown - were also the costume of the fire gods as the name "xihuh" implies. The Aztec ruler thus became a living ixiptla of the god of fire.

The stylized headdress of our golden Tlaloc shows two pairs of rectangular bars on each side of Tlaloc's face. This certainly recalls the double pair of black bars decorating the depiction of the temple of Tlaloc in the Codex Borbonicus, the closest thing we have to a post-conquest Aztec manuscript. The same black bars decorate the cheeks of female water and corn deities which were "wives" or concubines of Tlaloc. This is, as far as I know, an Aztec motif probably imported from the Huasteca when worship of the goddess Tlazolteotl was brought into Tenochtitlan. If these bars are not just highly stylized paper or feather components of Tlaloc's headdress, then we are presented with possible evidence that this piece is indeed of Aztec provenance.

Finally, the stylized forms of Tlaloc's ears more than hint at the colihui or spiral design associated with movement toward the center. The shape also refers to the spiral of the ehécailcozcatl or wind jewel of Quetzalcoatl and the shapes of smoke and breath which are always allusions to spirits. In fact the nahuatl word for spiral or curve, "colihui" is derived

from the root word "coloa" which means "ancestors." As we have seen, the three main deities honored by this plaque are the ancient patrons of not only the living rulers, but of their royal ancestors as well. This imagery conveyed undeniable power to the wearer, worn as it probably was over the individual's own heart. It is itself a model for royal legitimacy and right to rule, and it is also a symbol of life, for the three deities so honored represent the essential ingredients of which all life is composed - earth, air, fire and water. These three founding deities may here also hint at the three sacred hearth stones, the mystical symbolism of which was the source of the great Triple Alliance which lay at the heart of Aztec power in central Mexico.

One last note on the style of the piece. The design and technique probably originated in the area loosely called the Mixteca. By the time of Aztec hegemony such work represented more or less an "international" style. There are no clear-cut, pure or unique Aztec elements here with the possible exception of the double bars if they are the double bars of the Huastec-Aztec Tlaloques. And I am by no means certain of this. There is a fullness of form, a kind of heaviness of shapes that is somewhat Aztec in feeling. Aztec gold pieces are very, very rare, while Mixtec goldwork, while not common, does occasionally appear on the market. Much of the gold work recovered in Mexico city digs has been of thin sheet gold, worked in repousse' which alone cannot justify my calling this piece positively of Aztec workmanship. Even if its provenance could be traced with certainty to the Valley of Mexico, we know that Mixtec works were imported in great quantities. Suffice it to say that I cannot maintain that this gold plaque is not of Aztec workmanship. It is a very special piece anyway, and it speaks to me eloquently of the first gods, of ancestors and of royal authority, the animating forces of life in post-classic central Mexico.