

OCTLI. See Pulque.

OFFERINGS. Buried offerings are the material expressions of rites of sacrifice, or oblation. They are the tangible result of individual or collective acts of a symbolic character that are repeated according to invariable rules and that achieve effects that are, at least in part, of an extra-empirical nature. In specific terms, offerings are donations made by the faithful with the purpose of establishing a communication and exchange with the supernatural. In this reciprocal process, the believer gives something to a divine being in the hope of currying its favor and obtaining a greater benefit in return. With offerings and sacrifices, one propitiates or “pays for” all types of divine favors, including rain, plentiful harvests, good health, and military success.

Unfortunately, the majority of Mesoamerican rites of oblation are not archaeologically discernible, because nearly all the offerings consisted of foodstuffs and other perishable items that were left out in the open (“exposed offerings”). According to sixteenth-century historical sources, the most common offerings were tamales, tortillas, turkey and iguana meat, seeds, pulque, cacao, human and quail blood, aromatic resins, tobacco, flowers, feathers, rubber, and bark paper. At the end of the ceremonies, these types of offerings were usually abandoned, burned, consumed by those making the offerings, or simply discarded after having been left to decompose.

In sharp contrast, there were other, far less common rites of oblation that resulted in the interment of gifts (“buried offerings”), which remained protected for posterity. Generally, these types of offerings were prepared on special occasions in life and society: the construction, renovation, consecration, and closure of important buildings; the inauguration and reutilization of important sculptural monuments; the end of great cycles of time; the rites of passage of sovereigns and other distinguished persons; military victories; economic and social crises; and natural catastrophes. On these occasions, not only perishable objects but also an enormous variety of raw materials, biological organisms, and manufactured items were buried. Much of this material has survived until the present and informs us about the technology, economy, politics, and religion of past societies.

During archaeological excavations, it is crucial to keep a detailed record of the buried offerings along with their contexts, in order to avoid confusing them with other deposits that were buried intentionally, such as refuse dumps, storage spaces, and graves. For example, the association of human skeletal remains and ceramic vessels can be problematic if a meticulous analysis is not done. It could be the result of a funerary rite in which an indi-

vidual was buried together with the objects necessary for living in the afterlife; alternatively, it could be the vestiges of a dedicatory rite in which a new building was given essence by interring a sacrificial victim with various ceramic vessels.

As a consequence of two centuries of archaeological investigations throughout Mesoamerica, we now have an impressive corpus of buried offerings. This rich assortment often permits us to recognize the traditions of oblation practiced in a city, a group of cities, a region, or an area, in addition to the principal transformations that occurred through four millennia of Mesoamerican history. The oldest buried offerings date to the Early Formative period (2500–1200 BCE) and generally consist of anthropomorphic figurines and ceramic vessels deposited in the construction fill of the village dwellings. In the Middle Formative (1200–400 BCE), a radical change occurred when chieftain societies constructed the first civic-ceremonial centers. A sharp increase is perceivable in the quantity and quality of gifts offered to the supernatural. However, the richest and most complex offerings are found in the urban centers of the great states of the Classic (200–900 CE) and Postclassic (900–1521 CE) periods.

In spite of great differences in time and space, common patterns of oblation were shared by many Mesoamerican societies. In one clear example the places where offerings are deposited are always associated with liminal (“threshold”) areas where it was possible to establish communication with the supernatural. These places include unusual geographical features (mountaintops, caves, springs, cenotes, whirlpools), elements organizing urban space (plazas, avenues, aqueducts), religious edifices (temples, shrines, ballcourts), monumental sculpture (stelae, altars, benches), and habitations (palaces, urban residences, rural dwellings).

Another recurrent pattern is seen in the position of the offerings with respect to architecture: they usually were buried in the center, in the corners, and along the principal axes of buildings. They also were commonly deposited at the entrance, the center, and the head of rooms, as well as the foot of stairways and the apex of pyramids. The position of the offerings also depended on the moment in which the oblation occurred: construction offerings were incorporated directly into the foundations or the nucleus of a building and covered with tons of filler material; inauguration offerings were deposited in vessels created just before the consecration of the monument; offerings made while the building was functioning were introduced into cavities dug into the floor, and sealed with a stone slab or a patch of stucco; and closure offerings were placed on floors, stairways, or altars, and then buried by new construction.

Gifts could be left in direct contact with distinct archi-

tectural elements or could be protected inside urns, stone boxes, or chambers. Generally, the offerings included materials of all types, nearly always evoking powerful symbolism: minerals (rock crystal, quartz, green stones, cinabar, stalactites/stalagmites), plants (flowers, seeds, spines), animals, and human beings. They also contained semi-precious and finished objects of ceramic, stone, metal, shell, bone, textile, wood, and other materials. Ornaments, vessels, divine images, and instruments of sacrifice and autosacrifice were quite common.

In the majority of cases, the gifts were not deposited haphazardly; rather, the faithful followed a strict ritual order prescribed by liturgy. Therefore, Mesoamerican offerings were true symbolic complexes that communicated a message through principles of spatial distribution. For example, objects were arranged horizontally according to imaginary axial lines; they were assembled in groups whose numbers related to the cosmos (4, 5, 7, 9, 13, 20, 52); and they were connected vertically, forming layers of the same type of material. The results were cosmograms that reproduced in miniature a section or totality of the universe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baudez, Claude. *Una historia de la religión de los antiguos mayas*. Mexico City, in press.
- Becker, Marshall Joseph. "Caches as Burials; Burials as Caches: The Meaning of Ritual Deposits among the Classic Period Lowland Maya." In *Recent Studies in Pre-Columbian Archaeology*, edited by N. J. Saunders and O. de Montmoulin, pp. 117–142. Oxford, 1988.
- Calligéris, Catherine. "Fonction et signification des dépôts de fondation mayas, dans les Basses Terres, à la période Classique." Dissertation, Université de Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne.
- Coe, William R. "Caches and Offertory Practices of the Maya Lowlands." In *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, edited by Robert Wauchope, vol. 2, pp. 462–468. Austin, 1965.
- Coggins, Clemency C. *Artifacts from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichén Itzá, Yucatán*. Cambridge, 1992.
- Drucker, Philip, Robert F. Heizer, and Robert J. Squier. *Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955*. Washington, D.C., 1959.
- López Luján, Leonardo. *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan*. Translated by Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano. Niwot, Colo., 1994.
- Mock, Shirley Boteler, ed. *The Sowing and the Dawning: Termination, Dedication, and Transformation in the Archaeological and Ethnographic Record of Mesoamerica*. Albuquerque, 1998.
- Nagao, Debra. *Mexica Buried Offerings: A Historical and Contextual Analysis*. Oxford, 1985.
- Rattray, Evelyn Childs. *The Teotihuacan Burials and Offerings: A Commentary and Inventory*. Nashville, 1992.

LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN

Translated from Spanish by Scott Sessions

OLD GODS. Old age was one of the most important stages in the life of a Mesoamerican. The individual arrived at old age upon completing fifty-two years and became eligible for a series of honors, considerations, and

privileges. Among the last was the right to become inebriated on pulque, a fermented beverage believed to have a "cold" nature. The elderly were greatly admired and revered because they had accumulated authority, wisdom, and the capacity for transmitting their knowledge; however, they were also feared for their internal "fire." In fact, according to sixteenth-century Nahua concepts, the elderly had received the influences of the fifty-two possible combinations of the four year bearers (House, Rabbit, Reed, Flint Knife) and their thirteen numerical coefficients. As a consequence, their *tonalli* and *teyolia* (the animistic entities lodged in the head and the heart) had been invigorated to the extreme with powerful energy of a hot nature. Therefore, the elderly were called *chichahuac* and *pipinqui*, terms that mean "strong, robust," a clear allusion to their unusual animistic strength. It was said that grandparents possessed a divine heart and were thus considered *yolteteo*, equal to artists, inventors, savants, and diviners.

Within Mesoamerican mythology, old age found its greatest expression in the figure of the primordial pair: a woman and a man, toothless, with wrinkled faces and hunched bodies. In the Nahua world, they were known as Oxomoco and Cipactonal. According to some accounts, they had been sent by the gods to the earth's surface to spin, weave, and cultivate the fields. They created the calendar, gave origin to humanity, and instituted the arts of divination and healing. Oxomoco had the butterfly as her principal attribute and was directly related to the goddess Itzpapalotl ("Obsidian Butterfly"); Cipactonal was distinguished by the glyph *cipactli* ("earth monster")—that is, by the sign of the first day in the calendar. Among the Maya, Xpiyacoc and Xmucane played an analogous mythical role. It was said that, by means of divination, this elderly couple had pointed out to the gods the way in which they should create humanity; in addition, Xmucane ground the maize that would serve as the raw material for human beings.

These and other primordial pairs are not the only divinities in the Mesoamerican pantheon who possessed the traits of old age. In fact, there is an extensive list of deities of advanced age, including Xiuhtecuhtli-Huehuetēotl ("Lord of the Year," "The Old God"), a numen of fire and its transforming power. Without a doubt, the cult dedicated to Xiuhtecuhtli-Huehuetēotl is one of the oldest and most significant of the pre-Hispanic world. His origins can be found in the Middle Formative period (1200–400 BCE), and Joralemon has identified God I of the Olmecs as his most remote antecedent. However, the first images of the Old Fire God as a seated old man supporting a brazier on his hunched back were produced in the Formative site of Cuicuilco (Federal District, Mexico). Later, in Teotihuacan (state of México), sculptures of

THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA
OF
MESOAMERICAN
CULTURES

THE CIVILIZATIONS OF MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA



DAVÍD CARRASCO

Editor in Chief

VOLUME 2

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2001