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Two Prehispanic Sculptures From Santa Catarina in Coyoacan¹

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To Jaime Abundis

The Tepanecs were skillful carvers of basalt who developed a high-level school of sculpture in their principle settlements in the Basin of Mexico: Azcapotzalco, Tlacopan, and Coyoacan. According to sixteenth-century sources, they were frequently called upon by the Mexica rulers of neighboring Tenochtitlan to create important public monuments. Unfortunately, relatively few of these have survived to the present day. This article addresses three that remain in the Coyoacan district of Mexico City.

A visit to the churches and colonial mansions of Mexico's capital often brings pleasant surprises, not only to aficionados of the colonial art of New Spain but also those interested in the plastic arts of the societies before the European conquest. For instance, an ancient *tepetlacalli* or stone coffer of the Late Postclassic (AD 1250–1521), located in the interior of the Chapel of the Cuadrante de San Francisco in Coyacan, was brought to our attention by Alberto Peralta de Legarreta (Peralta de Legarreta 2011; see also López Luján and López Austin 2010, 2011). A quadrangular prism of basalt measuring 62 cm on its sides and 25 cm in height, its side walls are covered by twelve maize cobs carved in bas-relief (Figure 1). Today this *tepetlacalli* serves as a baptismal font, a function for which it was adapted by enlarging the upper cavity and fashioning a circular drainage hole in one of the sides. In this article, we will consider two other cases in old buildings of the Santa Catarina neighborhood of Coyoacan.



Figure 1. *Tepetlacalli* or stone coffer decorated with maize cobs, used today as a baptismal font in the chapel of the Cuadrante San Francisco, in the Coyoacan district. Photo: Alfredo López Austin.

A Serpent Head

The first sculpture that we will describe can be observed in the so-called Casa de Alvarado, located at 383 Francisco Sosa Street (Figure 2). This beautiful mansion in the style of Moorish-influenced medieval Spain dates to the second decade of the

¹ This paper first appeared as “Dos esculturas prehispánicas del barrio de Santa Catarina en Coyoacán” in *Arqueología Mexicana* 24(143):18-23.



Figure 2. Facade of the Casa de Alvarado, occupied today by the Fonoteca Nacional.
Photo: Leonardo López Luján.



Figure 3. Two views of a sculpture in the form of a serpent head found in the Casa de Alvarado. Photo: Leonardo López Luján.

eighteenth century and is famous because it served, at different times, as the residence of two lovers of Mesoamerican art: the American archaeologist Zelia Nuttall and the poet Octavio Paz. It currently houses the National Sound Library and encloses within its walls one of the most pleasant gardens in the south of the capital. Here, amidst cypresses, orange trees, and oaks, reposes a small carving in basalt, measuring 21 by 23 by 45 cm, whose origin is unknown to us (Figure 3). The biologist Norma Valentín, of the Subdirectorato de Laboratorios and Academic Support of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), explains that in a schematic way it depicts the head of a venomous snake. Its characteristics pertain to the family Viperidae and possibly the genus *Crotalus*. Between the eye and the nostril there is a slight depression that could evoke the thermoreceptor orifice. The mouth is ajar and inside it can be seen long fangs—some straight and others curving backwards—as well as a protruding forked tongue.

A Ballcourt Marker

Even more interesting is the second sculpture, sheltered within the Casa de Cultura “Jesús Reyes Heróles” at 202 Francisco Sosa (Figure 4). This is a slightly later construction, dating to the end of the eighteenth century, that once housed a modest paper mill. Today it serves as an active community center for education and recreation.

Near the entrance, the visitor encounters the only sizeable carving that has been found so far in the urban nucleus of the Postclassic settlement, an exceptional *tlachtemalacatl* or ballgame marker. The renowned architect and chronicler of Coyoacan, Luis Everaert Dubernard (1992, 2007), suggests that it would have been discovered around 1750, when the foundations of the erroneously named “Palace of Cortés,” that is, of the current municipal headquarters, were built.

On the other hand, the lawyer José Lorenzo Cossío Jr. (1942) states that the piece comes from the prehispanic mound known as “El Cerrito,” which was built at the modern confluence of Ignacio Allende Street and Miguel Hidalgo Avenue in downtown Coyoacan. He refers in particular to the old house of Dr. Agustín Coronado, located at number 5 Allende, as well as the house adjoining it to the south, a premises now occupied by a bakery and a hamburger restaurant. In its surface area, Cossío estimates that “El Cerrito” would have measured twenty meters north to south by forty east to west, and eight to ten meters in height.

In this regard, it is worth noting that our colleague Juan Cervantes, of INAH’s Archeological Salvage Directorate, and his team have recently recovered rich data about this prehispanic mound:

... on the eastern edge of Plaza Hidalgo and under Calle Allende, two more buildings have been registered. One is



Figure 4. Facade of the mansion occupied by the Casa de Cultura “Jesús Reyes Heróles.” Photo: Leonardo López Luján.

a stucco platform, made with a core of stones and earth, which extends at least 30 m along the axis of the street. Another, located towards the junction with Hidalgo Avenue, is a foundation with stucco plaster that must have had at least a stepped upper body. ... It is possible that both elements formed part of a single construction that served as the base for the structure located under the Casa del Cerrito. (Cervantes et al. 2014:45, 48)

The interesting thing for our purposes is that according to Cossío some of his informants told him that they used to play on that mound at the end of the nineteenth century, “these being the same people who say that a ballgame disc and similar things were found there.” In any case, whatever the exact origin of the *tlachtemalacatl*, it is certain that it belonged to a ballcourt located in the civic-ceremonial area of Coyoacan, which consisted of several pyramidal foundations, platforms, and plazas.

As attested in a black and white photograph from the Casasola Archive, this ballgame marker was displayed around 1930 at the northern end of the Plaza Hidalgo. Ten years later, it was still in place, although now resting on a masonry pedestal, as seen in a pair of vintage images published by Cossío. As a result of the remodeling of the garden in the seventies, the sculpture followed an uncertain route, making successive stays in a room of the municipal building, a storeroom of a cleaning service, the garden of the Coyoacan Cultural Forum, a room for temporary exhibitions of the National Museum of Anthropology, and finally the garden of the Reyes Heróles center. We have been able to photograph it and draw its reliefs courtesy of Rubén Haro (Figure 7).

The *tlachtemalacatl* of Coyoacan was carved in solid basalt and measures 80 cm in maximum diameter, with an internal opening 19 cm in diameter. On both sides it has somewhat indistinct bas-reliefs that have been



Figure 5. Ballcourt marker within the Casa de Cultura “Jesús Reyes Heróles.”
Photo: Leonardo López Luján.



Figure 6. The *tlachtamalácatl* of Coyoacan in the 1930s in the Jardín Hidalgo.
Photo: Archivo Casasola, courtesy of SINAFO-INAH.

interpreted as four coyotes by Everaert Dubernard (2007) or as a dog accompanied by a butterfly according to Ramzy Barrois (2006). However, a meticulous visual examination with raking light makes it clear that it depicts an individual of male sex, prone and decapitated. He wears a triangular loincloth, textile pendants, and sandals with heel guards, as well as a tubular nosepiece made of greenstone (*chalchihuyacamitl*), wristbands, and anklets. Significantly, he wears an emblem of maize ears (*cenmaitl*) at the small of his back and seems to hold another in one of his hands.

All of these are clear indications that the sacrificed character is the maize god Centeotl himself, or one of his earthly representatives. The above is in line with the recent proposals of Eric Taladoire (2015), who relates the ballgame, rather than astral rituals, to the agricultural ceremonies of heart extraction and decapitation, as well as the symbolic complex of rain-moisture-fertility. It suffices in this brief context to evoke page 27 of the Codex Borbonicus, where Centeotl appears playing ball with Ixtlilton, Cihuacoatl, and Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, deities associated with this complex (Figure 8).

The Artists of Coyoacan

In the middle of the fifteenth century, as narrated by the historian Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc (1987), Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina summoned the famous sculptors of Coyoacan on two occasions to participate in the remodeling of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. He sent for them the first time, along with a group of Tepanec artists from Azcapotzalco, to entrust them with the making of a large stone *cuauhxicalli* that was to crown the renovated pyramid. And, as a sign of his power, he ordered them to carve on the side of that sacrificial cylinder the defeat inflicted by the Tenochcas in 1430 on the Coyohuaque and the Azcapotzalcas commanded by Maxtla. A few years later a similar scene took place, when Motecuhzoma brought back the sculptors of Coyoacan and Azcapotzalco to the imperial capital, although now accompanied by those of Tlacopan, Texcoco, Xochimilco, and Chalco. On this occasion, the mission of the artisans would be more complex because, in the words of Alvarado Tezozomoc, they would carve, “with very subtle artifice,” “the bundles of each god

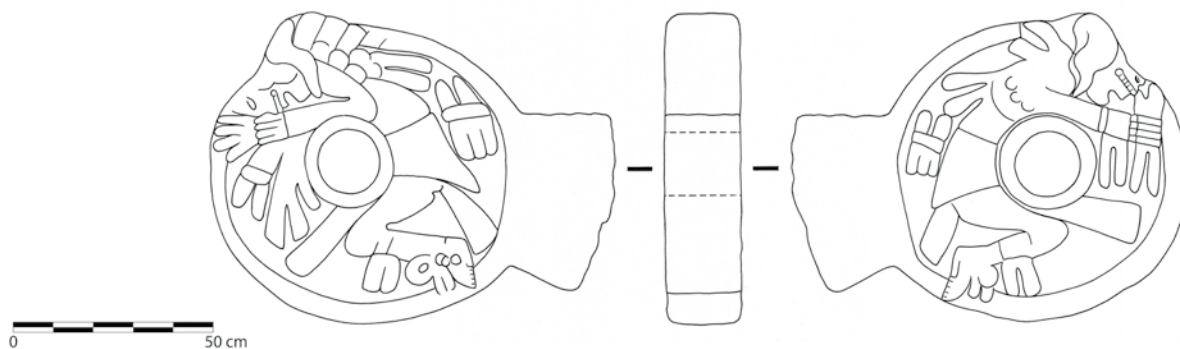


Figure 7. (Above) Two recent views of the *tlachtemalacatl* of Coyoacan (photos: Leonardo López Luján); (below) the relief carvings of the *tlachtemalacatl* depicting the decapitated maize god, Centeotl (drawing: Fernando Carrizosa Montfort and Michelle De Anda Rogel).

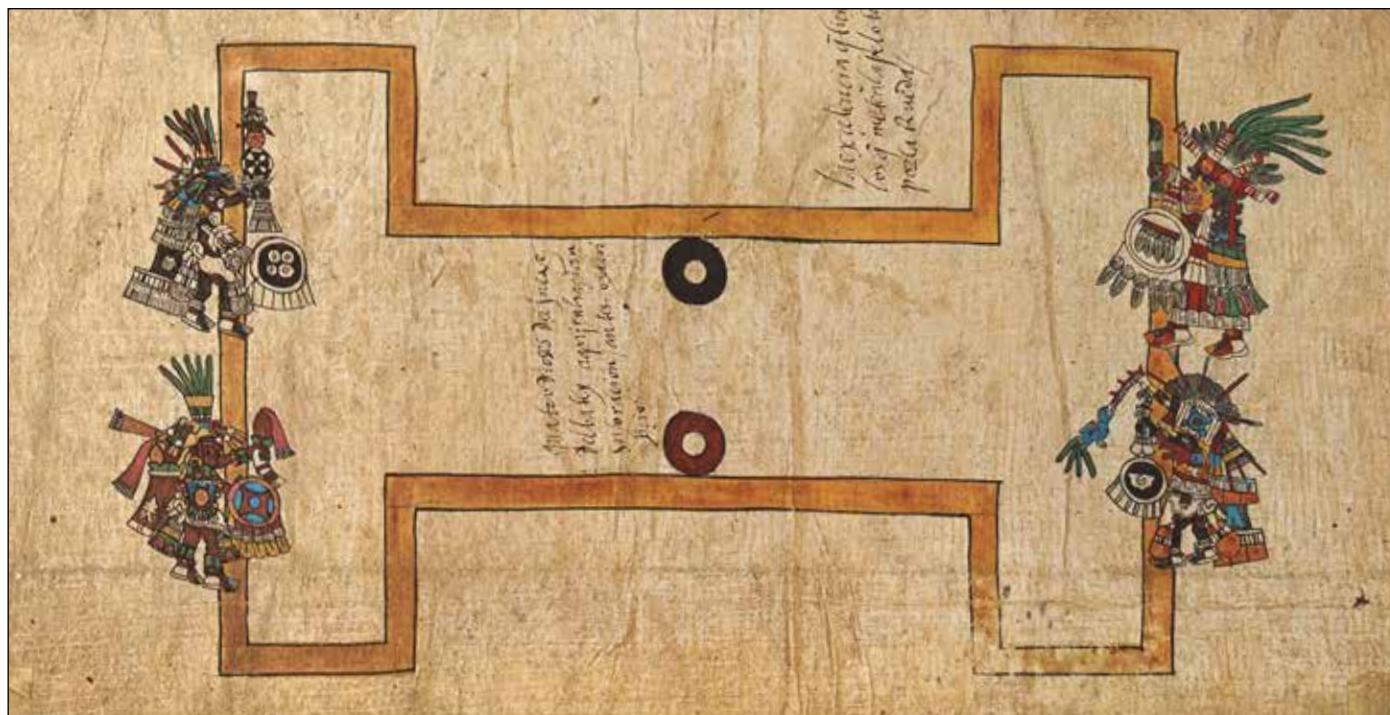


Figure 8. Centeotl, Ixtlilton, Cihuacoatl, and Ehecatl playing ball facing two ballcourt markers (Codex Borbonicus, p. 27).

subjected to Huitzilopochtli.”

The reading of these two brief passages leaves no room for doubt about the great skill of the sculptors of Coyoacan, causing us to discern in that Tepanec city a carving school of a high order and with its own characteristics, such as there were to the east of the Basin of Mexico, in Texcoco, and also to the south, in Xochimilco, Tlahuac, Chalco, and Tlalmanalco. The sculptures that we have described in this article, as well as a pair of beautiful feathered serpents that we have analyzed elsewhere (López Luján 2016, English translation forthcoming in *The PARI Journal*), are archaeological testimonies that lead us to sustain this conclusion.

Acknowledgments

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