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The Masked God of Fire

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THE EXCAVATIONS OF THE TEMPLO MAYOR of Mexico Tenochtitlan have been a rich source of archaeological information, not only in the form of data about the temple as a whole but also in the discovery of individual artifacts. The artifacts, whose full importance can only be appreciated in context, can themselves provide much valuable data. On 26 August 1981 a stone sculpture seventy-seven centimeters high was found near Temple C (the Red Temple) in the north zone (Trench H, Square 52) (Fig. 1). The sculpture is an image of the god of fire and was found face down under a floor. The figure is carved on all its surfaces, even on the underside, and has a fractured nose. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, then general coordinator of the Proyecto Templo Mayor and now the director of research, believes that the image was buried between the sixth and seventh construction periods of the great pyramid (the Coatepec) and thus would have ceased to be worshiped around A.D. 1502.

Several days after the find I had an opportunity to see the sculpture and discuss the unusual combination of iconographic elements of the god with Matos Moctezuma. At that time I made a tentative interpretation, which serves as the point of departure for the present study of the figure.¹

Some time earlier I had begun to seek a method that would enable me to work with certainty and rigor within the area of iconographic research. In a study dated 1979 I outlined some current analytical procedures as a first step in the organization and selection of the techniques to be proposed. I did not go much further than this in that first article, and to a great extent I am now testing those procedures in this study of the figure of the

Translated by Patricia Netherly.

¹ I am grateful to Isabel Gutiérrez, the archaeologist in charge of this section of the excavation, for early sketches of the figure, and to Salvador Guil'liem Arroyo, the project photographer, for photographs. Throughout this research I received valuable comments from Rosa Margarita Brambila, researcher in the archaeology section of the Museo Nacional de Antropología.



Fig. 1 The monolith of the masked god, discovered near the Red Temple, 26 August 1981.

masked god of fire. Bearing in mind that the specific ends of a given study determine the method and techniques used, the principal objectives of the iconographic research in the present study are: (a) the discovery of the ancient codes of cosmic taxonomy, and (b) the classification of the logic of certain sociopolitical structures and actions whose legitimacy is based on the structure of the cosmos. As a corollary to these two objectives of the iconographic study, I will proceed from the identification of the masked god to the posing of two questions that exemplify each of the stated goals.

Although the final formulation of the theoretical bases of my method is still distant, it seems useful now to test the analytical steps proposed in that earlier article. Every methodological contribution that strives to develop the scientific rigor of a discipline should be preceded by certain processes, among them the gathering, analysis, and explanation of more or less empirical and conscious practices used in the exercise of the discipline; the ordering, revision for congruence, and ranking of such practices; the study of their logical and epistemological bases; the elimination of negative procedures that lead to error, vagueness, or subjectivity; and the reformulation, development, and systemization of the remaining procedures. One does not begin at zero; it is the process of understanding itself that criticizes and refines, although there is a qualitative leap from criticism

and refinement. These processes are not merely theoretical, since they can be purified and refined in practice. Nor does the methodological contribution lead to a final, unique, finished method, but rather to a dynamic and perfectable procedure.

The materialist point of view insists that "the object of study of esthetics and art history cannot be the work but is rather the process of social dynamics in which its meanings are made manifest and vary" (García Canclini 1979: 17). I depart from this affirmation to determine the objective and goals of iconographic research. Despite the difficulties of understanding broad areas of Mesoamerican ideologies, iconographic research ought to remain within them, and these ideologies, in turn, ought to be considered within the context of the social totality. In general there is very little descriptive material that allows one to undertake these holistic aims; but the attempt of a holistic understanding is the path to historical explanation. The symbols depicted on the codices, on the walls, on implements, and on stone monuments make up codes whose referents go far beyond the sphere of esthetic emotion. These symbols include the taxonomic and structural bases of the cosmos and were produced by peoples who oriented their actions in the belief in a universal harmony and organization. Iconographic research cannot always guide us toward the historical event, but it can tell us much about what ought to be: an archetype, a justification or elaboration, a model, or a pattern within which behavior took place.

I place a positive value on the expression of doubts, hypotheses, points of view, and mere opinions in academic works. I believe that the notion of a rounded, perfect, finished academic study is analogous to that of merchandise that is offered to be consumed, kept, or inherited, and its author would seem to me to be the artisan who believes he has created something that will endure forever. I prefer to see in scientific production a work of transitory value that is created within the academic community, not only as a created object, but also as a work that is creative—thanks even to its own destruction within the dialectic of scientific process. For this reason I will boldly offer two hypotheses derived directly from the identification of the masked god in the final part of this paper. I hope that, at least, these will be considered as steps in the search for method.

The image of the masked god is similar to that of the goddess made of greenstone and identified as *Mayahuel* (López Austin 1979) in that it contains a complex of symbols that are apparently opposed or of difficult complementarity (Figs. 2, 3). It is a seated anthropomorphic figure, with the legs crossed in front, the head hunched slightly forward, and the hands placed on the knees. He wears a *maxtlatl* (loincloth). A distinctive feature is

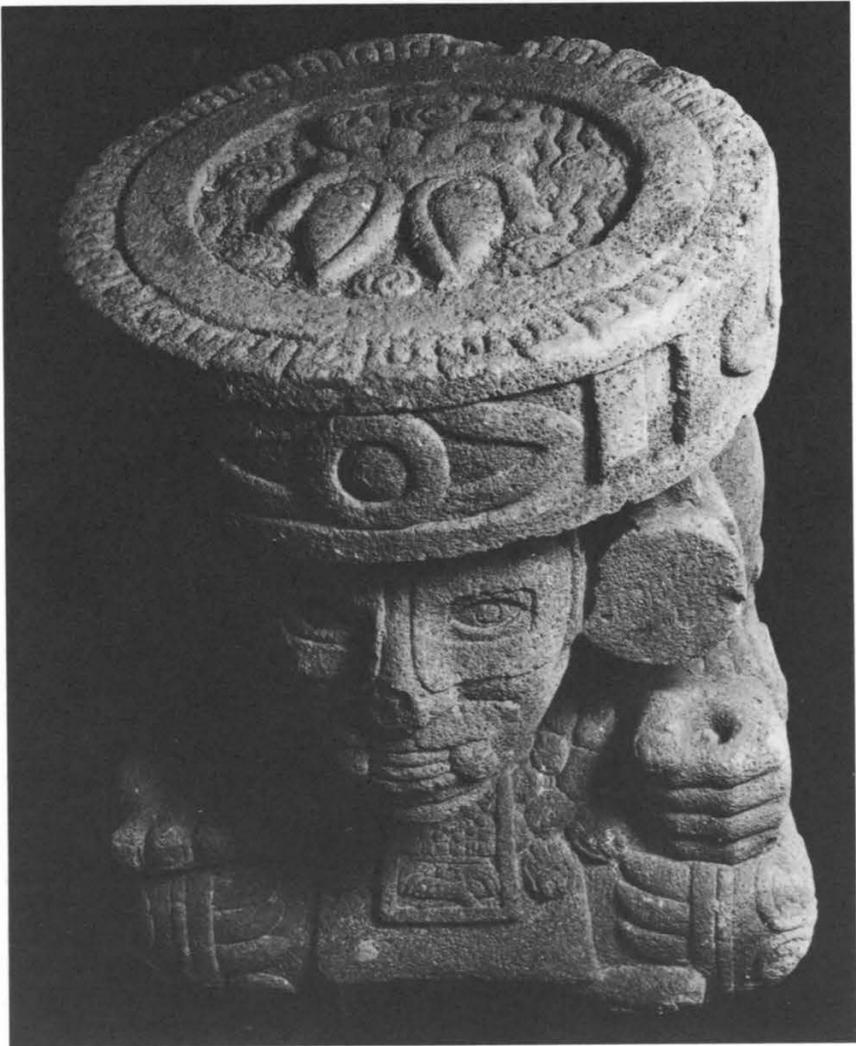


Fig. 2 A front view from above of the monolith of the masked god of fire. Aquatic symbols can be seen on the upper surface of the altar. Photograph by Salvador Guil'liem Arroyo.



Fig. 3 Different aspects of the masked god of fire.

the broad, low cylinder on the head; on the sides of this cylinder appear four images of "eyes" alternating with four pairs of bars. On the upper surface of the cylinder are aquatic symbols with a border of feathers in relief. The eyes of the face are surrounded by two rectangular plaques with rounded corners, and a third plaque (also rectangular with rounded corners) surrounds the mouth with fangs at each end of the rectangular opening. There are fanged masks on the elbows and knees. Very elaborate *cactlis* (sandals) are worn on the feet. The figure is ornamented with a necklace of several strands of thick beads and a plaque, compound anklets, and large cylindrical earspools. On the figure's back a semicircular panache of feathers issues from the cylindrical headdress, and a rectangular device hangs below. The upper third of this rectangular device is composed of three vertical bands, the central band having two disks or jades and the lateral ones having a braid motif; the middle third has horizontal bands over which have been placed, in the center, a rectangle with the calendrical sign 11 Acatl; the lower third is a border of long feathers.

The whole image must be taken as the unit of analysis, since it is assumed to have both structure and autonomy of meaning. The elements can be distributed in four categories of symbolic relations, and unidentified elements can be placed in a separate fifth category (Fig. 4).

Elements related to fire (Fig. 4A):

- (1) Seated position, hunched forward, with legs crossed in front.
- (2) Wide cylinder on the head, similar to the so-called "brazier of Huehuetotl."
- (3) Alternating "eyes" and pairs of bars on the side of the cylinder.
- (4) Circular earspools which are seen as large disks from the front.
- (5) Hands, one a clenched fist and the other open with the palm up, resting on the knees.
- (6) Abundant feathers. This element is not distinctive.
- (7) Short, rectangular feathers that form the border of the cylinder's top surface. There is doubt about their specifically fire-associated character, although according to Felipe Solís, there is some evidence for it (personal communication, October 1983).

Elements associated with water (Fig. 4B):

- (1) Snails, whirlpools, and water motifs on the top surface of the cylinder.
- (2) Pierced plaques as eye frames.
- (3) Plaque forming a mouth mask with two large fangs.
- (4) Two jades on the dorsal device.

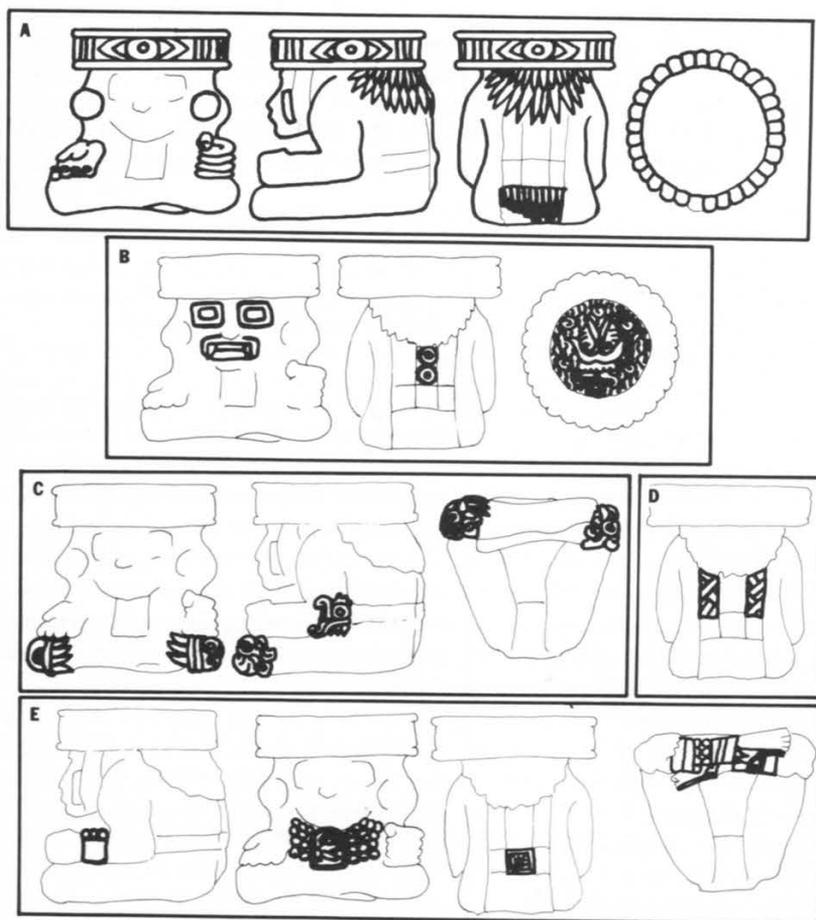


Fig. 4 Symbolic representations of the god of fire as they relate to: (A) fire; (B) water; (C) death-earth-water; (D) earth; (E) not identified.

Elements representing death-earth-water (Fig. 4C):

- (1) Grotesque masks with circular eyes and large fangs on the figure's knees and elbows.

Elements representing earth (Fig. 4D):

- (1) Braid designs on the lateral bands of the dorsal device.

Unidentified elements (Fig. 4E):

- (1) Glyph of the date 11 Acatl in the dorsal device.
- (2) Trapezoidal pectoral showing a seated, anthropomorphic figure with crossed legs, wearing a helmet in the form of an animal head with an open mouth that can be viewed either as two facing profiles or as a single frontal image.
- (3) Necklace of large, green (there are traces of paint) beads with pendant bells.
- (4) Bracelets of the same beads.
- (5) Anklets with short feathers, beads, and horizontal bands.
- (6) Elaborate sandals.

The simple grouping of elements into separate categories is a very primitive procedure, for it recognizes the individual elements but not their syntactic value. This carries the danger of considering of equal importance elements that in the composition may have a hierarchical significance, and on a list like this perhaps nonexistent concordances or contradictions appear. The researcher frequently "relates" a divinity with a symbol; but the term *relation* produces an unwarranted feeling of certainty, with its vagueness, and permits an unjustified interpretation of the data. Unfortunately, at present we must use primitive techniques in the hope that they will enable us to find the syntactic foundations.

The classified elements merit some comment. The image of the figure is unmistakable in its immediate identification with the more traditional sculptural representations of the god of fire from the Classic period of the Central Highlands. At the same time there are some unusual elements: a smooth face behind the mask; the mask itself; and the "brazier-vessel," which in this case is not a vessel but a massive cylinder, nor can it be a brazier, since its symbols are clearly aquatic on a surface that on other sculptures is empty background. That is to say, the indispensable elements that have been used to identify these figures as the god of fire—the aged appearance and the assumption that fire was burned within the vessel—are missing here.

As is the case with the representations of other gods, there appears not to be an exact correlation between the pictorial and sculpted images.² Thus the first Colonial historians did not identify any specific statues with the god of fire. For example, Motolinía (1971: 41) said that there were:

² This does not exclude the possibility that sculptures closer to the painted images did exist. This might be the case of the one Doris Heyden (1972: 3) identifies as the god of fire or as "the portrait of a ruler on the day of his investiture, dressed as the god."

some like images of bishops with their mitres and others with a mortar on their heads, and I believe the latter was the god of wine and that there they poured wine over it.

Las Casas (1967, 1: 639) changed "I believe" into "it is believed." Mendieta (1945, 1: 94) says "it seems," and Francisco Hernández (1946: 136) positively states:

Thus Ometochtli, god of wine, was depicted holding a barrel on his head, which they filled with wine when they celebrated his festival, which happened frequently.

In contrast to these opinions I could find only one mention—insufficient—in Muñoz Camargo (1981: 154v) that could remotely link this type of image with braziers:

There were other penitents who walked at night, who were called penitents, called *tlamaceuhque* in their language, who put a small brazier on their heads, which they carried lit from sunset almost until dawn, and they walked at night from temple to temple, alone and in great silence, visiting their gods. This penitence and poverty lasted for one or two years, dedicating themselves to poverty and want to gain something through humility.

Hernández's clear statement loses force when its origin is known: it springs from an opinion of Motolinía which at most has some validity in the use of the vessel but not in the identification of the divinity represented. The documentary sources appear not to offer any assurance, but neither should we give much weight to the lack of correlation between the pictographic and sculpted representations; there can be a functional explanation: fire, water, pulque, a decapitated quail, and any other offering they might make could be placed in the vessel. The sculpture was thus both image and altar. Its function could have been retained for centuries without "contaminating" the representational iconography. It would seem to be an analogous case to the altar image known as a Chacmool.

Officially—and the academic community has its official truths—this type of representation, of old men with large vessels on their heads, are those of the ancient god of fire. Thus it was established by the weight of Seler's prestige (1912: 194), despite the thinly veiled criticism by Beyer (1969: 249–250). I accept Seler's opinion, not because of the weight of his authority, but rather because of present conviction; I feel that the age of the personage, the enormous importance of the images of this type, the idea of centrality apparent in some of the few symbols depicted on them,

and the appearance of these symbols linked with fire in other contexts are sufficient—at present—to sustain the official version.³

We begin, then, with the idea that the figure corresponds to the god of fire and that it is an atypical representation.⁴ Among its typical characteristics are the alternating motifs of “eyes” and bars on the side of the circular altar. The symbolism of this border is limited—the borders have crosses alternating with bars (as in the case of the Huehuetotl of the Cerro de Las Mesas),⁵ or meanders either beginning in a J-shaped hook or composed of straight interlocking lines,⁶ or the most common motif, “eyes,” whose interpretation has given rise to various theories and controversies. Another characteristic is the earpool, which appears as a large disk from the front. A third is the position of the hands on the knees, the left hand forming a fist and the right with the open palm up. It is true that in some cases the palms of both hands rest on the knees, showing the backs of the hands; but a fist and an open palm—though left and right hands are often undifferentiated—are characteristic of this official representation of the old god. The fist and the open palm even appear together on a very crude *candelero* studied by Rosa Brambila (1973). The receptacles formed by the fist and the open palm of the Teotihuacan figures transform these sculptures into triple altars.⁷

The value of the feather elements as distinguishing characteristics is small. All indication of color is missing, unless it is detectable by microscopic analysis, but even then it would be only a vague indicator unless the

³ There are large numbers of small ceramic objects, called *candeleros*, that sometimes bear the symbols that appear on the sculptures under discussion: faces of old men, vertical bars, crosses, and “eyes.” It has been suggested that these *candeleros* had the function of the stone *saleros*, receptacles for the blood of autosacrifice, of which Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón (1953: 40) and Jacinto de la Serna (1953: 244) speak. However, Rosa Brambila (personal communication, July 1983) believes that the perforations in the outer walls of many of these pieces make them unsuitable as receptacles for liquids, while the perforations would be adequate air vents were the small artifacts really used for offerings of fire. Laurette Séjourné (1964: 175) asserts that these pieces are frequently found still full of charcoal.

⁴ It should be made clear that for a long time different scholars have held opinions about the “aquatic contradictions” of the god of fire. Among these authors, Thompson (1951: 33) says “it is interesting to note that his name means ‘lord of the turquoise’ or ‘lord of the years’, and that despite his igneous dominion, he had his abode in a land of flowers amidst the water, wrapped in water clouds, and was the lord of the day Atl.”

⁵ The quincunx of the little ceramic figure of an elderly Teotihuacan personage, a piece published by Laurette Séjourné (1957: 104, fig. 3) should be noted.

⁶ There are two pieces with these lateral designs in the Museo Nacional de Antropología. The first, with a curvilinear design, is from the west, without a firmer provenience or a catalogue number; the design appears to be an aquatic meander and is repeated on the lateral faces of the base. The second piece, with a rectilinear design, is classified under no. 9-3852.

⁷ Morelos and Monzón Flores (1982: 129, 134), in their interpretation of the two receptacles formed by the hands of a Teotihuacan sculpture, say that the personage carries “two small incense burners.”

polychrome patterns attributed to the plumage of the god of fire in written accounts were present. As for the feathers of the border, these evoke the figure of the god described by Sahagún (Codex Florentine 1979, bk. 6: 14r, Spanish text), who is the “father and mother of all the gods: the ancient god, who is the god of fire, who is in the midst of flowers; and within the pool enclosed by four walls, and he is covered with shining feathers which are like merlons.” However, I do not find this description, from Sahagún’s Spanish text, a very solid indicator. The citation itself is very doubtful, since birds rather than feathers are mentioned in the original Nahuatl.⁸ This border also evokes the crest in the form of an arc that Xiuhtecuhtli displays in the Codex Vaticanus A/Ríos (6v; 1964: lám. vii); but neither is this a proof of identity. The aquatic symbols on the upper surface of the cylindrical altar are unmistakable. The image of a pair of *Olivella* mollusks is common in aquatic symbols; but here, in addition, there is below the *Olivellas* the symbol of a bleeding cut, which is common, for example, on the decapitated heads of animals that appear as symbols of the days.⁹ These bleeding *Olivellas* appear in the representa-

⁸ Indeed, the description appears in several different texts that are not identical, and Sahagún’s versions are full of crossed-out items, which indicate his doubts. The texts, in Spanish and Nahuatl, appear on 14r, 34r, and 71v–72r of bk. 4, as follows:

14r: “Padre, y madre de todos los dioses: el dios antiguo, que es el dios del fuego, que está en medio de las flores; y en medio del alberque cercado de cuatro paredes, y está cubierto con plumas resplandecientes, que son como las almenas.” (English translation in text of article.) “In teteu innan, in teteu inta, in veveteutl, in tlalxicco maquitoc, in xiuhtetzaqualco monolitoc, in xiuhtototica mjxtatzacujlitica.” (The mother of the gods, the father of the gods, the old god who remains within the place enclosed by turquoise stones, which is crowned with turquoise birds [*Cotinga amabilis*].)

34r: “Antiguo dios, y padre de todos los dioses, que es el dios del fuego, que está en el alberque de agua entre almenas cercado de piedras como rosas, el cual se llama Xiuhtecuhtli.” (Ancient god and father of all the gods, who is the god of fire, who is in the pool of water between merlons enclosed by stones like roses, who is called Xiuhtecuhtli.) “In teteu inna, in teteu inta, in veue teutl, in tlexicco, in xiuhtetzaqualco maquitoc, in xiuhtecuhtli.” (The mother of the gods, the father of the gods, the old god who remains within the place of the navel of the fire, in the place of the enclosure of turquoise stones, Xiuhtecuhtli.)

71v–72r: “Dios del fuego, que es el padre de todos los dioses, que reside en el alberque de agua, y reside entre flores, que son las floridas almenadas, envuelto entre unas nubes de agua: este es el antiguo dios, que se llama Ayamictlan, y Xiuhtecuhtli.” (God of fire, who is the father of all the gods, who resides in the pool of water and lives among flowers, which are the flowery merlons, enveloped by clouds of water: this is the ancient god, who is called Ayamictlan and Xiuhtecuhtli.) “In teteu innā, in teteu inta in tlalxicco onoc, in xiuhtetzaqualco maquitoc, in xiuhtototica mjxtatzacujlitica in veve teutl in aia mjctlan in xiuhtecuhtli.” (The mother of the gods, the father of the gods, who is extended in the place of the navel of the earth, which remains within the place of the enclosure of turquoise stones, which is adorned with water of turquoise birds [*Cotinga amabilis*], the ancient god, Ayamictlan, Xiuhtecuhtli.) In this third text, “inaia mjctlan,” which I have translated as “Ayamictlan,” the name of the god, following Sahagún, is doubtful. The verb *inaya* means to hide oneself, take refuge, so that the phrase could read “he takes refuge in Mictlan.” See also n. 20.

On 34r of bk. 4 is a drawing of the god in his precinct; regrettably it is not in color.

⁹ This can be observed in several codices including the Vaticanus A/Ríos.

tions of the waters from which spring the cosmic trees (Codex Tudela 97r) and in waters of the underworld.¹⁰ The central and symmetric design on the cylinder gives the impression of a grotesque mask, a deliberately credible effect. All of this suggests the existence of an origin myth, in which a divinity was mutilated, in the time of the myth, losing some double part of the body which was transformed into *Olivellas* or other aquatic animals.

I believe that eye-frames and mouths, made by rectangular plaques with rounded corners, are aquatic elements because they are characteristic of the *tlaloque*. Their tendency toward a rectangular shape can be considered a stylistic convention, similar to those of the Mexica Chacmools in the Museo Nacional de Antropología. Certainly the stylistic similarity between this piece and the best-preserved of these Chacmools (Fig. 5) is astonishing. Lizardi Ramos (1944: 137) identified the eye-frames and teeth of this Chacmool as belonging to Tlaloc, and the mask of Tlaloc on the upper surface of the Chacmool's vessel/altar (Fig. 5) has the same rectangular plaques with rounded corners. These are not the only cases, for the base of a stone box in the British Museum (Fig. 6) has a relief carving of a *tlaloc* in the act of pouring water and maize over the earth; its eye-frames are clearly rectangles. A greenstone figure, some 31 cm tall, of a *tlaloc* with rectangular eye-frames was also recovered in the recent Templo Mayor excavations (Bonifaz Nuño and Robles 1981: fig. 59).

The identity of the masks on the elbows and knees of the god as death-earth-water beings is clear. Discoidal eyes and curled lips with fangs or sharp teeth appear consistently on *tlaloc* figures and on flint knives; moreover, the goddess of the earth was conceived as a monster, with her joints armed with fanged mouths. The grotesque masks on the joints signify both that the beings of death have taken possession of a human or divine body and that the possessed person/deity has the potential for multiple aggression, since it has itself been transformed into a monster of death. The placement of the masks on the elbows and knees is in response to the idea that these joints, which allow the organism to move, are locations where spirit-beings are concentrated. As points of concentration of vital substance, these are the places that are attacked by the cold beings of the rain, of the earth, and of death that cause cold diseases, among them rheumatism. The joints of a corpse have been invaded, and the corpse thus becomes, like all possessed bodies, a vessel within which the possessor can work.

The most important identifying symbol, the calendar glyph, is that of 11 Acatl. Unfortunately I do not know its meaning. It does not appear on

¹⁰ This appears on the lower part of the base of a Chacmool from Mexico City which is in Santa Cecilia Acatitlan (Solís 1976: 12, fig. 24).



Fig. 5 The Chacmool found in 1943 in Venustiano Carranza and Pino Suárez streets showing the rectangular eye-frames of the god of rain. On the right is the mask, with the same eye-frames, carved on the top of the Chacmool's vessel/altar. Photograph by José Naranjo, courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington.



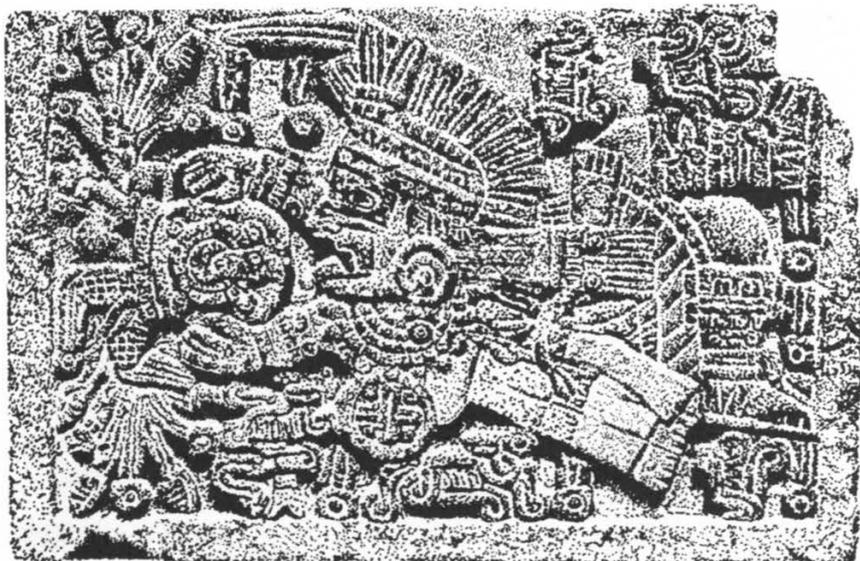


Fig. 6 The base of a stone box in the British Museum showing a *tlaloche* with rectangular eye-frames, pouring water and corn from a vessel.

Caso's list of dates associated with deities (1967: 196). It belongs to the thirteen-day period 1 Calli, which marked those born during that time with violent death, including death by fire (Sahagún 1956, 1: 354); however, this is not sufficient. Jacinto de la Serna (1953: 123, 117) relates the sign Acatl with water, but he bases this on an interpretation that forces the four signs of the year to fit with the four elements of the European concept of the sublunar world. The sign 11 Acatl appears on the monolith called "Stone of the Five Suns" in the Time Museum in Rockford, Illinois, but there the date has been interpreted chronologically (Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1983: 41-42).

The rest of the elements in the last group offer us nothing. The seated personage on the pectoral might give a terrestrial reading to the figure, although this is very remote. There are other pectorals with similar seated figures that wear a headdress of a split animal face (Fig. 7). I agree with Cecelia Klein (1976) that the frontality and the dual profile-frontal presentation are common in terrestrial personages, but they are not sufficient in this case to identify the personage. Moreover, we do not know the syntactic meaning of the seated figures on the pectorals. They undoubtedly qualify the image, but we do not know whether they indicate the more or less permanent attributes of a god, indicate the specific context of the



Fig. 7 Pectorals with frontal figures that wear headdresses of animals: (*left*) a stone plaque found in the fill of the Templo Mayor; (*center*) the pectoral of the masked god of fire (see also Fig. 3); (*right*) a jade plaque from the Mexican Collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna, cat. no. 334.

image, or narrate some mythical episode in which the god won the insignia from his enemy, etc.

In sum, the various elements of the sculpture undoubtedly inform us that the personage represented brings together elements of the god of fire, on the one hand, and of the underworld as the region of earth, water, and death (the feminine part of the cosmos) on the other. The elements that are both basic to the form and most easily and quickly recognized by the viewer are those of the god of fire. In order to appreciate the rest, it is necessary to come closer and interpret the image. The sculpture represents a god of fire that is either strongly placed in a particular context or highly qualified according to the order established by the reading, because it is logical that this order should determine the ranking of the categories of elements.

However, the rarity of this image of the god of fire in the Postclassic presents no little problem. It appears in the Preclassic as a god with a discoidal altar on its head, even in its typical seated and hunched position (Nicholson 1971a: 96). In the Classic period at Teotihuacan it acquires an orthodox form that is repeated monotonously.¹¹ Later in the Postclassic the production of this image seems to cease, and the monolith of the Templo Mayor, by its similarity to Teotihuacan symbols, appears to be an anomaly. This is complicated by what may be seen as an archaizing tendency among the Mexica, of which Temple C (the Red Temple), near

¹¹ There are, however, figures that, in spite of having a wrinkled face, a seated posture, and the emphasized spinal column, do not resemble those from Teotihuacan. See the one from Oztotitlan, Guerrero, reported by Moedano Koer (1948: 106, xxvi).

which the monolith was found, is an architectural example, and the stone warrior, of Mexica work but modeled after a Toltec figure, is a sculptured one.¹² Was the masked god of fire a very Mexicanized copy of a Teotihuacan model? Did it bear a new meaning? Kubler (1967), following the theories of Panofsky, has suggested that the meaning of the ancient Mesoamerican forms varied over time. The notion of a change in meaning here would please Kubler, since the transition from Orpheus to the Good Shepherd, which he gives as a typical Old World example, would be perfectly exemplified in Mesoamerica. Nevertheless, I think there are reasons to believe that we are not dealing with similar forms filled with different meanings:

(a) It is not a unique Postclassic piece. There is at least one other in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, registered as coming from Tlahuac.¹³ The evidence from Motolinía given earlier should be noted here, for he must have seen images of this type.

(b) A second argument involves the sacredness of the images of the gods. The artist did not choose the form in which to represent the god. He believed he obeyed the will of the god—possibly under divine possession that implied a “god-like heart”—and he also believed that the god, on identifying with the image, would place his power within it. We should keep in mind the many sculptures that are perfectly carved on the undersides. Durdica Segota (n.d.: 106), referring to Mexica sculpture, says that the carved faces, never seen by the nobles or priests, imply a belief in a communication with the gods. Indeed this intention to communicate must have existed, but through a sacred form. The sculpture was carved on its lower face because that was the way it ought to be. The image, to be converted into a link, had to have a sacred resemblance to the god. We cannot believe that any god could be represented by just any model. Although anachronistic—if this is the case here—the sculptor had identified the ancient model with the form of the god whose image he wished to carve.

(c) If a Teotihuacan model were present, the features of the aged one and the presence of other symbols such as the bars and “eyes” would make his own aged god, his god of fire, unmistakable.

(d) The sculpture under study did not acquire only elements of Tlaloc. The form was not used to attach rain symbols. These are symbols of earth and death. Moreover, there remain ancient symbols, such as the different

¹² The Toltec style warrior is catalogued in the Museo Nacional de Antropología as no. 11-3456. See also Nicholson (1971a: 119), and Navarette and Crespo (1971).

¹³ This piece has the museum catalogue no. 11-3181. The altar is greatly reduced, almost like a crest. One hand forms a fist and the other has its open palm face up. The wrinkles of the cheeks are raised like facial adornments. The headdress is decorated with three pairs of serpent heads.

position of the hands, that might well have been eliminated if they did not fit into the symbolic array. It is impossible to believe that these forms became empty of meaning to the Mexica mentality and were mere decoration of such an important image.

To continue with the interpretation, I believe that the linguistic model proposed by Kubler (1967), through which he seeks the nominative, attributive, or verbal character of each one of the elements, is a useful means of arriving at the unit of analysis. However, the steps are not simple. Within Mesoamerican polytheism it is difficult to establish a clear distinction between the necessary attributes of a god, the accessories peculiar to him, and those that are circumstantial. The distinction between iconographic nouns and adjectives is not clear if only the religious system is considered, since the distinction between a god, his particular characteristics, and his division to form a new divinity were derived from social relationships (López Austin 1983). Furthermore these categories were mobile, situational, and often subjective. One can imagine the worshiper or the spectator, standing in front of the image, recognizing either god X represented in the east, or god X of the east, or Y (who might be the equivalent of god X of the east), or simply god Y. This is in large part determined by the patronage of the deities. Nevertheless, the written sources and the frequency of association of the attributes can assist us in the differentiation and classification of the gods, allowing us at times even to make partial derivational pyramids, segments of complexes which must have been very broad and meaningful.

Myth is of great use in understanding an attribute or context and in identifying a god by distinguishing characteristics. One can turn to myth to identify the monolith of the green goddess of the Templo Mayor as the dead Mayahuel. The present case is different, however, because I do not believe a myth relevant to the interpretation of this image has been recorded.¹⁴ With or without applicable myths, it is necessary to define some of the characteristics of the god which can serve to uphold or deny the concordance between the divine image and what appears to be the meaning of the iconographic elements.

The first characteristic is the importance of the god. One can say with Beyer that, for the indigenous mind, fire penetrates everything. The heading for chapter 13 in the Codex Florentine lists the god of fire among the divinities of secondary importance. However, this heading is not based on the original Nahuatl text, folio 37v of the Codex Matritense del Real

¹⁴ Perhaps very close to this is the myth of Chantico in the Codex Vaticanus A/Ríos (34v; 1964: lám. xlix) and Codex Telleriano-Remensis (21v; 1964: lám. xxviii).

Palacio. Moreover, all the sources contradict it, both with regard to family and public worship (and, above all, the number and importance of the public feasts dedicated to the god each year, every four years, and every fifty-two years) and with regard to the constancy of fire rites in family cult. Pedro Ponce tells us (1953: 374-375):

The fire should never be allowed to go out in the homes of Indians nor should firewood be lacking, and if by chance there is none and some misfortune befalls the householder, on arriving at his house he begs pardon of the fire, believing that the mishap occurred because the fire was not burning or there was no firewood. And thus in the valley [of Mexico] and in other parts the Indians put racks for fuel from the roof, attaching them to a wall for support and they put the fire below, and on top of these supports they place the firewood in orderly fashion, so that one who sees it thinks that they have the wood there to dry it. Others put the firewood around the fire or near it.

And Ruiz de Alarcón tells us (1953: 24):

They also believe the same of the rivers, lakes and springs, since to all they offer wax and incense, and what they most venerate and almost all hold to be a god, is fire.

Proof of his importance lies in his far-reaching nature, manifest in the plurality of his names. Among the list of his names are: Xiuhtecuhli (Lord of the Fire), Huehuetēotl (Aged God), Ixcozauhqui (He Whose Face is Yellow), Cuezalin (Red Feather), Nahui Acatl (Four Cane, which is one of his calendrical names), Milintica (He Is Waving), Tzoncozahuitica (His Hair Is Turning Yellow), Teteo Innan Teteo Inta (Mother and Father of the Gods), Coztic Tlamacazqui (Yellow Priest), Nauhyotecuhli (Lord of the Group of Four), Chicunauhyotecuhli (Lord of the Group of Nine), Xípil (Noble of the Fire), Tzoncoztli (With Yellow Hair), Tlahuizcalpantecuhli (Lord of the Place of the House of Twilight), Tocenta (Our Single Father), Huehue Ilama (Ancient Man, Ancient Woman), Teyacancatzin Totecuyo (Our Lord the Venerable One Who Guides the Rest), Ocopilli (Noble of the Pine), Ocotecuhli (Lord of the Pine), Otontecuhli (Lord of the Otomies), and many more too numerous to mention here,¹⁵ some of which will be taken up later. Among the names acquired under Christian rule are Xoxeptzin (Saint Joseph) and Ximeontzin (Saint Simeon), both

¹⁵ Obviously the sources are very abundant. I cite as examples: Sahagún (1956, I: 56), Serna (1953: 65, 203, 249), and Ruiz de Alarcón (1953) in many of his invocations. Among contemporary references, that of Reyes (1970: 39) is of interest.

because they refer to old men, and Dios Espíritu Sancto (Serna 1953: 65; Ponce 1953: 372), names which give an idea of the preeminence of the god of fire.

The second characteristic is his strong ties to the number three. Examples are the stones that serve as the three hearthstones (the first called Mixcoatl or Xiuhnel, the second called Tozpan, and the third called Ihu-itl); three tamales pricked out with his image in the feast of Xocotl Huetzi; the three *tetlephantlazque* priests or those who threw people into the fire, whose names were Zacancatl, Coyohua, and Hueicamecatl; the three days of penitence in his cult, etc.¹⁶ The god lives in the three principal divisions of the universe: Ilhuicatl, Tlalticpac, and Mictlan.¹⁷ His palace is central; it is on the *axis mundi*.¹⁸

From the sky the new fire descends (*huetzi*) through the fire drill, just as when the sky god, Mixcoatl-Camaxtli, brought it forth for the gods the first time (*Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas* 1965: 33). Beyer (1965) places him in the sky by his blue color, the color of the firmament.

In the intermediate sector, the earth (Tlalticpac) is included in the four lower heavens (see Fig. 9A). The sun travels through one of these as the messenger of fire.¹⁹ He is also in the four points of its extremities, for which he receives the name Nauh-yotecuhtli. Because of this, four of his transformations (the Green Xiuhtecuhtli, the Yellow, the White, and the Red) die ritually in his temple at Tzonmolco (Codex Florentine 1979, bk. 2: 117v). Symbolic of these four points are the drinking vessels used in his feast of Huauhquiltamalculiztli, which are described as "*ei icxi, nauhcampa nacace*" (with three feet, with corners on the four sides) (Codex Florentine 1979, bk 2: 105v). On the surface of the earth he is spread in the place of the navel, in the center.

Because he lives in the underworld, he receives the name of Chicunauh-yotecuhtli (Lord of the Group of Nine) (Serna 1953: 65) and perhaps that of Mictlan of Mist.²⁰

¹⁶ Here also there are many references. I give as examples Sahagún (1956, 1: 185-186), the *Costumbres* manuscript (Gómez de Orozco 1945: 57), and the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* (1945: 3, 6).

¹⁷ Thus Paso y Troncoso (1979: 238) has it. Seler (1963, 1: 93) says that the god of fire is Ilhuicahua (Lord of the Sky) and Tlalticpaque (Lord of the Surface of the Earth).

¹⁸ Caso (1953: 55) and Séjourné (1957: 103-104), among many others, have referred to his central position.

¹⁹ See Seler (1892) on the confluence of the divinity of fire and the solar divinity.

²⁰ This depends on the words *inaia mjctlan* to which I referred in 8n. If they are interpreted as in *Ayammictlan*, it would gloss "Mictlan of the Mists," as one of the names of the god. If it is interpreted *minaya Mictlan*, it would be "he who hides in the world of the dead," which can also be a name of the god. It is more probable that a double *m* is missing than that an initial *m* at the beginning of the verb has been omitted. In any case, the allusion to his belonging to Mictlan is clear. Seler (1963, 1: 93) also comments on the translation.

Thus the god is associated with the number four in one context and with the number nine in another, and he is threefold when he is seen in his form as the hearthstones. These hearthstones are three gods, and because of this the name Mixcoatl is used. Xiuhnel is not only a parallel name but also maintains historically with Mixcoatl the relation of governor-man-god (Xiuhnel) and god whose power comes down to the man-god (Mixcoatl). I have elsewhere made reference to the practice of giving to the man-gods the names of the god who possessed them and that of making them governors. The *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* (1945: 5) state: "I Tecpatl . . . the same year Xiuhneltzin was enthroned king of Cuauhtitlan in Temilco . . . in the time of the 'devil' Mixcoatl who was with them at that time. . . ." The three hearthstones together were the same god of fire, and to step on them was to offend him and await his punishment.

The third characteristic of Huehuetotl is his power of transformation. According to Serna (1953: 197), the first transformation occurred when the mythic beings of the time of creation passed into the time of the created world:

The foundation our Mexican Indians had for worshipping this creature [the sun] and not their creator was that there was a very ancient tradition among these Indians that there had existed two worlds with two kinds of people: one in which men changed themselves into animals, into the sun, moon, and stars, attributing to them rational souls, and the same with the stones and the elements, as if they could have them; and they call upon them and speak with such things as if they were speaking with men. Another kind was that in which the men who existed had first been animals and stones and that the gods had changed them into men, which was almost the error of the followers of Plato, which, in order to grant the immortality of the soul, said that the dead were made from living bodies and the living from the dead, the spirits passing from body to body; and the Japanese maintain this error even today.

And in order to establish this worship of the sun, they tell a tale like Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and they dissemble their transmutation in this manner, and they say that in order to pass from this age to another and for the ancient ones to transform themselves into what they were to become, and for the other age to remain and for each to achieve the transformation they deserved for their merits, the gods commanded that a very large, bright, well-lit fire be made, which would serve as a proof of the merits for transformation which each one had, with the certain promise and

pact that by enduring that fire they would obtain greater or lesser glory in the other age of their transformation, in accordance with their greater or lesser suffering of the flames and their deeds.

It is no wonder that among his first attributes it is said that he warms those who are cold, cooks the food, transforms brine into salt, thin honey into thick, wood into charcoal, limestone into lime, the water of the bath into steam, that he brings forth the oil *uxitl* and heats the lye with which old and dirty cloth is made new (Sahagún 1956, 1: 56). Due to him also is the growth of children, celebrated during the feast of Pillahuano (Sahagún 1956, 1: 57). For this reason he receives the cult of firstfruits, drinks the *pulque* and eats the foods before the worshiper tastes them, and with his rite presides over the building of lime kilns and steam baths, the opening of maize fields (*milpas*), and the occupation of a new house (Ponce 1953: 376–378). The transformation should be understood for the fire as a process of death (visible or invisible), travel to Mictlan, and resurrection with a different form. As Jacques Soustelle (1982: 108) states, there is “the sacrifice by fire as a condition of resurrection.”

It is interesting to note that in this journey the dead one eats in order to be reborn. Thus it appears in an invocation collected by Ruiz de Alarcón (1953: 71), of which I translate a fragment; I will return to this idea later:

[Limestone], deign to come. I have already placed my flowery mat [the bed of the fire] on which thou wilt recline. But thou wilt not remain there long; alone thou wilt work quickly, only thou wilt go to eat, rapidly wilt thou return. She will live, the white lady [lime] will be born.

The journey to the world of the dead is mentioned in the *Histoyre du Mechique* (1965: 109) when the myth of Nanahuatzin—the bubo-afflicted god who, when he threw himself into the fire of Teotihuacan, was changed into the sun—is related:

Nanahuaton threw himself into the fire by magic art . . . and he went then to Hell, and he brought thence many rich pieces and was chosen to be the sun.

A fourth characteristic of the god of fire is his association with power, and in this sense both the beginning of the thirteen-day period 1 Itzcuintli and the fourth day, 4 Acatl (whose name corresponds to that of Huehueteotl), are important in the 260-day cycle. In the feast of Izcalli the *tlatoani* dressed with his clothes, and his image was dressed with those of the *tlatoani*; in his temple of Tzonmolco Calmecac the *tlatoani* took the new fire he had to offer ritually; the ceremony to choose *tetecuhitl* was directed

toward him and the *tetecuhtin* and the judges were chosen in the *trecena* period 1 Itzcuintli; and on 4 Acatl the lords invited each other to feasts, and on this date the prisoners were sentenced to die, and those who had been unjustly enslaved were set free.²¹

A fifth characteristic of the god was his personal participation in the cycle of the journey to Mictlan. The cyclical processes of the Mesoamerican gods can be seen clearly in the ritual death of the men who were their living images and who by their death guaranteed the vigorous rebirth of the divinities. The god of fire was no exception, and the sources tell us of both the individual ritual death of an enemy dressed in his clothing (Motolinía 1971: 65) and of multiple instances in which several victims were surrogates for the god (Sahagún 1956, 1: 222–223, 240). In the feasts, in Xocotl Huetzi, the descent of the dead god was also represented: the god's form was made of amaranth-seed dough that was lowered from on high on a post and was broken up in an act of communion (Serna 1953: 187; Durán 1951, 2: 166, 291). The return of the god was celebrated in a feast called "Resurrection" (Izcalli).²² In this feast the absence, arrival, strengthening, and use of fire is presented ritually in the prohibition of cooked food, the setting of new fire from the Temple of Tzonmolco Calmecac, the feeding of the reborn god with birds and water creatures, and, at the end, the consumption of very hot foods, among which were the *acociles*, grayish crustaceans which turn a brilliant red through cooking (Sahagún 1956, 1: 57, 131, 220–221).

It must be understood that during the trip to Mictlan the divine beings rested, caught their breath, regained strength, cooled off, and nourished themselves. All these processes are part of the same complex, although their association may seem strange to us. It is the acquisition of *ihiyotl*, the strength supplied by rest, coolness, food, and *pulque*. This is why it is said of maize in an invocation: "From thee will I gain strength [*ihiyotl*], through thee will I become cool."²³ The god of fire is the fire itself, as lord of the transformations, who carries out the hardest work, who becomes tired. The way to reinvigorate it is to cool it constantly with *pulque*, so that "the venerable ancient may wet his lips."²⁴ Each time a person drank *pulque* he was to spill a little at the edge of the fireplace, and in the rites in

²¹ This can also be found in Sahagún (1956, 1: 56, 136, 353), Serna (1953: 180), the *Costumbres* manuscript (Gómez de Orozco 1945: 57), and the Codex Borbonicus (1979: fig. xxiii).

²² This is Jiménez Moreno's apt translation (1974: 63). Beyer (1965: 312) tries to relate this feast with the winter solstice.

²³ Ruiz de Alarcón (1953: 104). The text says *motech nihiyocuz*, *motech niceyeyaz*. See López Austin (1980, 1: 257–262).

²⁴ Ponce (1953: 373–384). The phrase *motenciahuiz in huehuentzin* is used.



Fig. 8 The setting sun represented as a dead god with the mask of Tlaloc, about to be devoured by the earth monster: (left) from the Codex Borbonicus (1979: 16); (center) from the Tonalamatl Aubin (1981: 16); (right) from the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (20r; 1964: lám. xxv).

honor of the aged god, the offering of *pulque* to the flames was one of the principal acts.²⁵ The elderly themselves drank *pulque* in the feast of Izcalli as beings who were near and kindred to the god, and they explained it saying that "they were cooling the oven."²⁶

These characteristics of the god of fire provide a basis for the establishment of a link between him and the image under study. The god of fire is here represented in Mictlan as dead, in invigorating repose, and in a position which does not differ from that which he has in the upper levels; it agrees with the functions of dominion which he may exercise in the lower world, where not only does he gain strength, but also offers the power of his flames, of his transforming force, to the beings who will return again to the surface. The mask of Tlaloc is a mask of death. It is the same one that the sun wears as he descends, lifeless, in the west to the dark and humid region, as it is depicted in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, in the Codex Borbonicus, and in the Tonalamatl Aubin (Fig. 8). No longer do the wrinkled features of the exhausted god lie beneath the mask of Tlaloc, but rather the new, smooth face of the god about to be reborn.

Esther Pasztory (1974: 9–10), using Tozzer's interpretation that the mask of Tlaloc on the face of the sun transforms him into Tlalchitonatiuh,

²⁵ Among many examples: Serna (1953: 131, 133), Ponce (1953: 373), and Sahagún (1956, 1: 243).

²⁶ The text says "*texcalcheuia*" (Sahagún 1956, 1: 221).

believes that this is one more proof that the circular eye-frames do not always identify Tlaloc. She states that the use of circular eye-frames in the Postclassic to represent darkness and the earth makes it possible to see a similar meaning at Teotihuacan. I believe that this is a false dilemma. The aquatic symbols of Tlaloc are also those of the earth and death. Tlaloc is a god of the underworld, of water, of death, a cold being. The masks of the Tonalamatl Aubin and of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis are comprised of more than circular eye-frames: at the least there appears the fringe of sharp teeth.

There remains to be named in the characterization of the god the one that corresponds to the sculpture. The combination of fire/death leads us to the patron of the twenty-day period of Xocotl Huetzi (The Fruit Falls), also called Huey Miccailhuil (Great Feast of the Dead). Carrasco (1950: 138–146) proposed, as the names of the god of fire and of the dead, the following: Otontecuhtli, Ocotecuhtli, Xocotl, and Cuecuex, which mean respectively “Lord of the Otomíes,” “Lord Pine,” “Fruit,” and the last: “Restless,” “Nervous,” “Agitated,” “Shameless” and “Full of Unfulfilled Desires.” He is the god of the Otomíes, in particular the Tepanecs, worshiped principally in Azcapotzalco, Tlacopan, and Coyohuacan. It would not be an unlikely supposition if Huehuecoyotl (Aged Coyote) or Ixnexthli (Ashes of the Face)—also a god of the Otomíes—also belonged to this complex (Carrasco 1950: 154–155), since the god of fire was represented by a carnivore that strongly suggests a coyote (Codex Tudela: 72r).

Thus far I have attempted to identify the image of the masked god of fire found in the Templo Mayor. I now continue with the consideration that each conclusion should be studied as a possible premise of other syllogisms. Without attempting the rigor of a hypothesis, I can put forward two propositions: the first dealing with the development of a taxonomy based on tripartition in the conception of the cosmos, and the second dealing with the implication of this taxonomy in political relationships.

The importance of numbers as the bases of the different taxonomic orders among Mesoamerican peoples is well known. The names of the god of fire tell us that some of these numerical bases were used in the development of his characteristics: “Our Single Father,” for example, is one of the names that marks the point of departure, the identification of the god of fire with supreme divinity (Fig. 9B); “The Old Man, The Old Woman,” “Mother, Father of the Gods” corresponds to the polar division of the cosmos, indicated as a sexual division (Fig. 9C); “Lord of the Group of Four” indicates the horizontal division of the cardinal directions (Fig. 9E); “Lord of the Group of Nine” denotes the segmentation that includes only the lower part of the universe, as we have seen in the case of Cuecuex (Fig. 9F); the fundamental, triple division to which this whole study refers comprises the whole cosmos in its three principal levels (Fig. 9D).

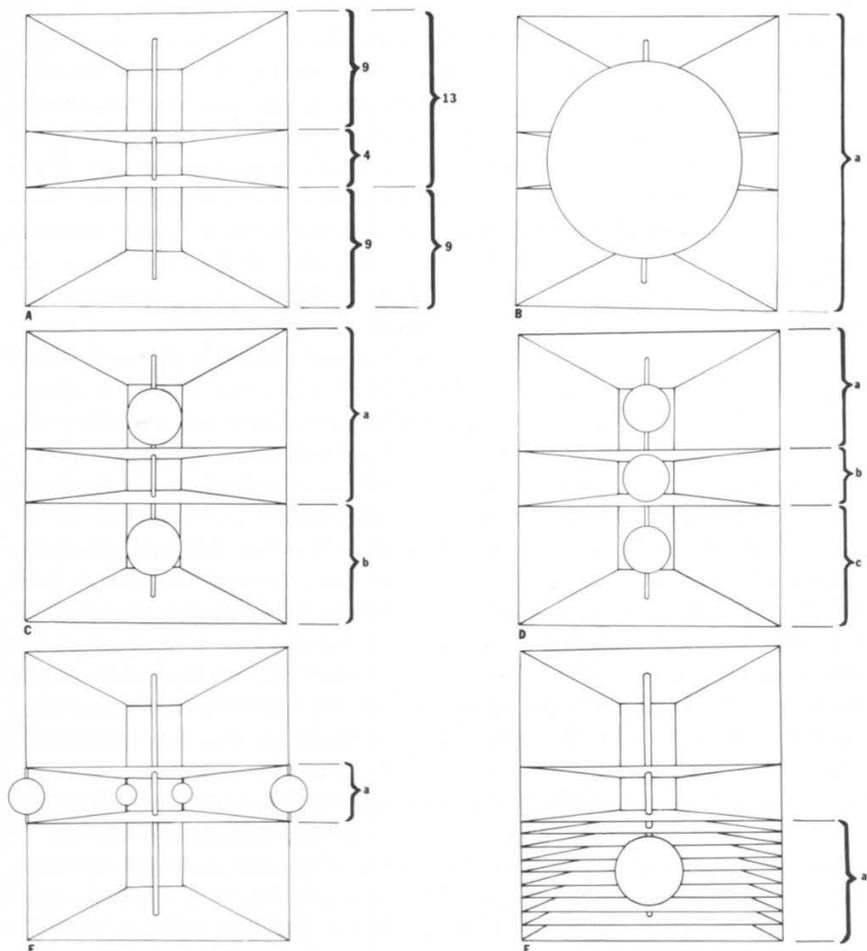


Fig. 9 The cosmos and the place of the god of fire within it: (A) The division of the levels of the cosmos: thirteen upper levels and nine lower ones, or nine levels in the upper sky, four in the lower sky, and nine in the underworld. (B) Fire as Tocenta (Our Single Father). (C) Fire in a dual relation—a as Huehue (The Ancient), Toteo Inta (The Father of the Gods), and b as Ilama (The Ancient Woman), Teteo Innan (The Mother of the Gods). (D) Fire on the three planes—a as Ilhuicatl Xiuhtecuhtli (Lord of the Fire of the Sky); b as Tlalācpac Xiuhtecuhtli (Lord of the Fire of the Surface of the Earth); and c as Mictlan Xiuhtecuhtli (Lord of the Fire of the World of the Dead). (E) Fire as lord of the quadrants—Nauhyotecuhtli (Lord of the Group of Four). His forms are Xoxouhqui Xiuhtecuhtli, Cozauhqui Xiuhtecuhtli, Iztac Xiuhtecuhtli, and Tlatlahuqui Xiuhtecuhtli, respectively, the lords of Green Fire, Yellow Fire, White Fire, and Red Fire. (F) God of fire in Mictlan: Chicunauhyotecuhtli (Lord of the Group of Nine).

This has to be taken into account for purposes of classification and, consequently, iconography. The division into three major planes does not oppose a division into two; rather they are complementary. Elsewhere (López Austin 1980, 1: 58–64) I said that the division of the two original planes with thirteen masculine levels above nine feminine ones gives rise to another division which separates the thirteen upper levels into nine over the remaining four, by means of which the universe is separated into the nine levels of the true paternal heaven; the nine levels of the maternal underworld; and four lower levels of heaven, making up the surface of the earth on which are found men, the actions of weather (rain, snow, wind, etc.), and the heavenly bodies that move across the sky (Fig. 9A). These are the three abodes of the god of fire. The division into these three planes brings to mind Nicholson's (1971b) well-known classification of the gods. Nicholson speaks first of the gods of heavenly creation, of a divine paternalism; second of the gods of rain, humidity, and agricultural fertility; and third, of the gods of war, of sacrifice, and of the bloody nourishment of the sun and earth. I have proposed a paternal heavenly plane of creation; a subterranean, maternal plane, dark, aquatic and agricultural; and a third plane, the surface of the earth and the immediate sky levels, occupied by the heavenly bodies and forces of weather and on which the wars of the course of history take place. I do not agree with Nicholson that there can be a rigid classification of the gods based on this tripartite division, since it would deny the cycles of some and the ubiquity or presence in different places of others.

As for the iconographic problems presented by the different bases of division of the Mesoamerican taxonomy, it should be noted that one of the pertinent precautions is the identification of the base that is functioning in a given context, since an isolated element can lead to confusion: a god of yellow fire or a god of red fire can differ in their meanings when they are considered on a horizontal plane of four and when they are designated on a vertical plane of three. The colors—like other symbols—do not have absolute meanings.

In Mesoamerica three, as a basis of division, was applied to other aspects of the cosmos. The classificatory principles of many ancient societies tended to lump together the most diverse orders of beings, including them with holistic rationalizations. In these agglomerations, compositions of "biyective" functional links were established between the different groups, until they formed the basis of the larger parts of magical practices.²⁷ Mesoamerican societies

²⁷ In these taxonomic systems there are sets with the same number of elements in the most diverse orders. There are one-to-one and "suprayective" functions ("biyectives") between pairs of sets. When linking all these pairs of domain and counterdomain, compositions of

were no exception. This provides a basis upon which scholars tracing the "biyections" can determine the classificatory forms and meanings which are fundamental in the study of ancient ideologies. The search for the principle of tripartite division in Mexica taxonomy is very productive.

The determination of the fields is not an arduous technical problem in investigating the functional divisions. It is sufficient to begin with a very careful review of the texts in which the given number of elements appear together. The number three can provide an example: the three planes of the cosmos, three divinities that correspond to the three hearthstones, three priests who throw the sacrificial victims into the fire, three places mentioned in the religious canticle of Ixcozauhqui, and so forth. The difficulty lies, first, in the establishment of secure criteria for uncovering the divisions without forcing the elements, so that all the correspondences appear naturally and with a necessary objectivity; and second, in determining the nature of the relationship in the direct as well as indirect function.

The classification of the cosmos is not a mere projection of social and economic structure. As an ideological form it operates reciprocally in the real dialectical process to orient social action, justify sociopolitical processes, and validate the traditional kinds of relationships between the groups making up the society. Given the importance of the number three in the taxonomy of the Mexica and other peoples of their tradition, the question for study is whether there is a cosmological basis for the ancient institution called *excán tlátoloyan* (the tribunal of the three heads), which, in turn, was the justification for the exploitation, political control, and military expansion of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Tetzaco, and Tlacopan. I have discussed the antiquity of this institution elsewhere: this was not an institution born of the victory over Azcapotzalco, rather it was an instrument of domination dating from the time of the splendor of Tollan, used by different peoples in the lake basin. The war of Azcapotzalco was only one manifestation of this struggle. The *excán tlátoloyan* presents an opportunity to study the "biyective" functions of a model, a political materialization, and a set of challenging or validating arguments. All would revolve around a heavenly, order-producing Acolhuacan with its capital at civilized Tetzaco; a warlike, dynamic, sun-oriented Culhuacan, guided by Tenochtitlan; and a land-based, productive Tepanecapan, which directed the affairs of the fierce Toluca valley from Tlacopan.²⁸

"biyective" functions are formed. In many acts of magic one begins with the belief that action on an element in one domain will have an effect in the corresponding counterdomain.

²⁸ Carrasco (1976: 218) speaks of two of these specializations: "The ruler of Mexico functioned as the general of the allied armies, and this gave him a weight within the alliance which grew with time. On the other hand, the king of Tetzaco, Nezahualcoyotl, is de-

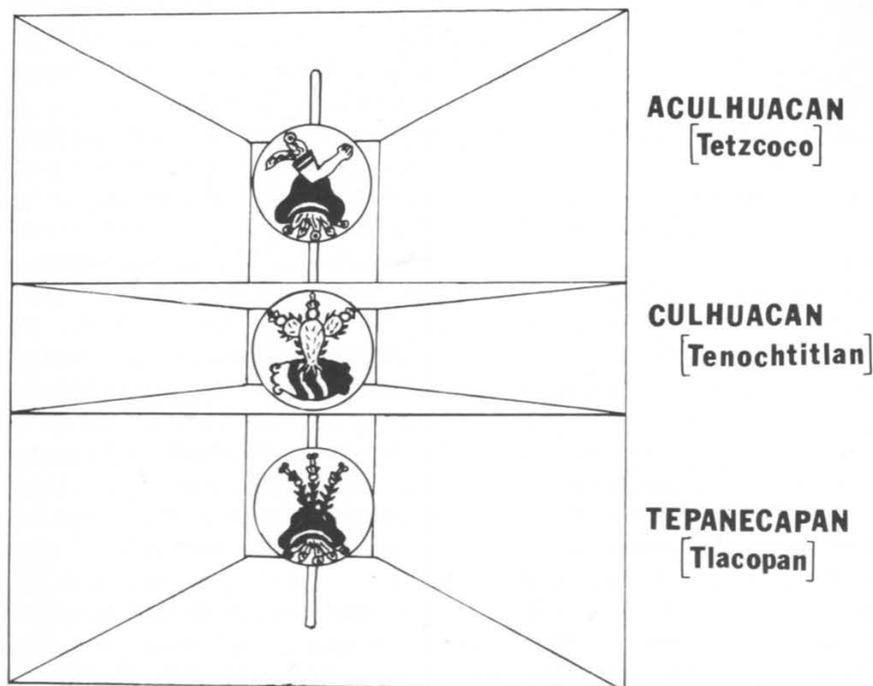


Fig. 10 The powers of the *excán tlatooyan*: Tetzoco of Acolhuacan, the capital of the upper sky; Mexico-Tenochtitlan of Culhuacan, the solar capital; Tlacopan of Tepanecapan, the capital of the underworld.

Reyes (1979: 34) asserts that there are several examples in Pre-Hispanic Mexico of capitals that were considered the magical center of their domains. If we bear Reyes's statement in mind, in the case of the Triple Alliance there were three capitals and three "centers" of the world, which is geometrically possible only if the capitals are located, superimposed, on the *axis mundi*; only if each capital is located in one of the central houses of the god of fire (see Fig. 10). The symbolism makes this placement clear. The lords are not simple *tlatoque*, but *huey tlatoque*, the three lords of the *excán tlatooyan*. Noguez (1975: 83) states:

It is clear that the rulers who made up the so-called "Triple Alliance" played a different role within the framework of power relationships: they were *huey tlatoque*. We should keep in mind the substantial change brought about by the defeat of Maxtla,

scribed as a legislator, poet, and builder, which can be not only a personal characterization, but also a functional specialization of the Tetzcocans within the alliance."

lord of Azcapotzalco, which broke up an ancient alliance to make way for the creation of a new organization of domains under the ever more evident aegis of the Mexica-Tenochcas. It is the *huey tlatoque*, the great lords, and their symbolic representation associated with the god of fire and in particular with the *xihuitzolli*, which we would analyze through the iconography in order to identify hierarchical differences.

Noguez points out, rightly, that the new nature of the *tlatoque*—now *huey tlatoque*—had to be marked with the turquoise crown which is exclusive to the god of fire.²⁹

Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl presents us with a prophetic panorama of ancient Tetzcoco that foretells Christ before the words of the Gospel had been heard. His ancestors were—he tells us—worshippers of the Lord of Heaven, the builders of a tall temple without an image, who renounced war and human sacrifice. This is not simply this historian's imagination, despite his distortion of Tetzcocan history. Behind idyllic images are found those who created bodies of law for Acolhuacan as well as for the members of the alliance, including Tenochtitlan; the great engineers of the hydraulic works; the poet kings; those not specialized in war, although they benefited from it.

The Tenochca, directors of the conquests of the Triple Alliance, worshiped the sun, the great warrior. Jacinto de la Serna (1953: 173) tells us: "The principal feast of these was in honor of the sun, because he was the first god revered by the Culhuas, and he reckoned his origin to the ancient founders of the Culhua state."

The Tapanecs, the "men of the stones," worshiped *Ocotecuhtli* and had as their principal feast that of *Xocotl Huetzi*, and they not only acknowledged *Cuecucx* as their patron but also gave his name to important offices or personages (Carrasco 1950: 142).

I believe that this idea of linking cultural relations and historical processes to a tripartite division of the cosmological and religious order is suggestive. If a hypothesis of this kind can be proved, the result would imply the existence of ethnic rights of subjection, of norms governing alliances, and of political codes that can be independent of, and can govern, the events of history.

Perhaps we would then understand certain arguments which are today obscure. For example, the source states that the men of *Cuauhtitlan* re-

²⁹ Exclusive in its three levels, because the gods with whom *Xiuhtecuhtli* is fused in the sky and in the lower world—*Tonacatecuhtli* and *Mictlantecuhtli*—appear with this crown. See the texts of fols. 15r and 24r of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis.

quested alliance, identifying themselves before Nezahualcoyotl as being protected by a sky-god (Anales de Cuauhtitlan 1945: 76):

. . . they sought by reason of being known by their ancestry and by the arrow and by their god called Mixcoatl. . . .

With this they denied the possibility of allying themselves with the enemy Tepanecas:

. . . and they added that the Tepanecas, whose arm was the sling, were not their relatives and that they did not recognize them, because the god of these was the one called Cuecuex, and that they were not their equals. . . .

People of the arrow, people of the sling, and people of the *atlatl*?

Cuecuex could have passed later to a preeminent place in the Tenochca temple as an ally and complement of the god who had the same nature: the fire of the navel, of the sun, of the heart, of war: the Mexica fire of the center plane of the *axis mundi*.

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