

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.

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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 *chicahuac* 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-Huehuetotl ("Lord of the Year," "The Old God"), a numen of fire and its transforming power. Without a doubt, the cult dedicated to Xiuhtecuhtli-Huehuetotl 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

Huehueteotl acquired more complex and standardized form and were produced in greater quantity. From there, they spread throughout Mesoamerica to Western Mexico, the Gulf Coast, Oaxaca, highland Guatemala, and Yucatán.

Xiuhtecuhtli-Huehueteotl was intimately associated with time and with space. His festivities coincided with the register of annual, quadrennial, octennial, and secular (fifty-two year) periods. It was also believed that this god resided in the center of the universe, in which position he was invoked as Teteo Innan-Teteo Inta ("Mother, Father of the Gods"). He was also called Nauhuyotecuhtli ("Lord of the Group of Four"), because he was the god of fire in relation to the four cardinal points, just as the brazier for kindling fire was the center of the indigenous household and temple.

It is interesting to note that, along with Xiuhtecuhtli-Huehueteotl, nearly all the Old Gods of the Mexica pantheon belong to the select group of supreme divinities. These were beings with enormous powers related to creation, generation, and sustenance. They were also distinguished by their esoteric knowledge of divination, sorcery, and medicine, and on occasions they were related to weaving, music, and dance. The most important Old Gods were Tonacatecuhtli ("Lord of Our Sustenance") and his consort Tonacacihuatl ("Lady of Our Sustenance"), Iztac Mixcoatl ("Serpent of the White Cloud") and his consort Ilamatecuhtli ("Old Lady"), Teteoinnan ("Mother of the Gods"), Toci ("Our Grandmother"), Itzpa-palotl ("Obsidian Butterfly"), Huehuecoyotl ("Old Coyote"), and Tlacaocelotl ("Man Jaguar").

Old Gods also abounded among the Maya. Examples include God D or Itzamná, supreme divinity, creator, and god of sustenance, who was usually represented as a caiman or a personified tree; God G or Kinich Ahau, a solar deity; Goddess I, related to the moon, maize, and weaving; God L, associated with the underworld and commerce; God N, lord of the mountain, supporter of the sky, and a being symbolically linked to music and inebriation; and Goddess O or Ix Chel, a generative creator divinity and goddess of death, also related to weaving, divination, and healing.

[See also Fire Deities.]

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OLMEC. This Preclassic-period archaeological culture of Mexico's tropical southern Gulf Coast, extant around 1200–500 BCE, is significant as the first Mesoamerican society to create stone monuments, a trait that for centuries set them apart from their contemporaries. However, the term "Olmec" is also used loosely to characterize a variety of Preclassic-period iconographic motifs, pottery vessels, figurines, and jadeite objects that occur at sites within the Olmec realm, as well as at non-Olmec sites across a large area of Mesoamerica (e.g., "Olmec art," "Olmec motifs," "the Olmec style"). Whether the archaeological culture and the widely used motifs and objects were somehow related is a hotly debated topic among scholars. Nevertheless, the two different uses for "Olmec" lead to frequent confusion and misunderstandings, and they are treated separately here.

Olmec, the Archaeological Culture. An "archaeological culture" is defined by scholars on the basis of a distinctive complex of artifacts that occur within a restricted geographic region. The archaeological culture called "Olmec" was first distinguished by magnificent stone monuments found on Mexico's southern Gulf Coast within a limited area extending from the Tuxtla mountains of southern Veracruz approximately 160 kilometers (100 miles) east to the humid lowlands of western Tabasco. That area was a source of rubber production in pre-Hispanic times, and "Olmec" essentially means "people of the rubber country," but that name was given by modern scholars; what the Preclassic peoples of that region called themselves will never be known. Although more than two dozen sites with monuments are known in the Olmec area, the majority of the carvings occur at just three large sites: La Venta, San Lorenzo, and Laguna de los Cerros. This suggests that those sites were major Olmec political-religious centers. Numerous other sites, each with only a few monuments, may have been secondary centers. The majority of Olmec settlements were populated by rural farmers and are more difficult to discover because they lacked stone monuments.

La Venta was the first Olmec center to receive intensive excavations. In the 1940s and 1950s, that research focused on only one area of the site, a plaza the archaeologists denominated Complex A. The excavations there yielded impressive discoveries: tombs containing jadeite offerings, numerous caches of jadeite celts, and large bur-

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