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The Concept of Feminine Places in Mesoamerica: The Case of Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala, Mexico

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RECENT ADVANCES IN ARCHAEOLOGY, as well as its self-assessment as a discourse created by and for a particular society, have without doubt broadened not only the explanatory scope of our discipline but also its ability to provide useful and reliable information for all those who seek an explanation of their present in the past. Archaeological studies of gender have made one thing clear: On many occasions, the interpretation of archaeological finds reflects a homogeneous concept of society. Researchers—men and women alike—tend to generalize and to refer to the inhabitants of ancient settlements as generic human beings, forgetting that the place assigned to each member depends on his or her physical characteristics, age, manual and mental skills, economic status, class membership, and even personal preferences. We frequently overlook the fact that we are talking about men and women who have a specific place in society, and that often it is precisely their sex that determines their position in life and the social group to which they belong. The same can be said about other groups, such as children and the elderly.

This tendency to generalize has invariably led researchers to give attention to very broad aspects of the social group they are studying, forgetting not only everyday life but also the importance that individuals, with their own particular skills and limitations, have within their society. The dangers inherent in such neglect of the individuals are illustrated by the recent excavation at an Epiclassic site in Central Mexico.

In the southeastern part of the state of Tlaxcala on the Central Plateau of Mexico, in a landscape framed by the majestic volcanoes Popocatepetl, Iztaccíhuatl, and La Malinche, stands the hill of Xochitécatl, an ancient volcano with a Pre-Hispanic ceremonial center at the top (Fig. 1).¹ Its favored geo-

¹ All figures and photographs were made for the Proyecto Arqueológico Xochitécatl, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia—UNAM, México, D.F.



Fig. 1 The archaeological site of Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala, and its surrounding landscape, from the northwest, with the view of the Iztaccíhuatl (White Woman) volcano in the background.

graphical location at the center of the Puebla–Tlaxcala plains, permanently watered by the Zahuapan and Atoyac Rivers, was a factor that determined the settlement here of large population nuclei engaged mainly in agriculture (Fig. 2).

As is normal in any archaeological project, the investigation of the Xochitécatl site has yielded a large amount of information and, along with this, some puzzles yet to be solved. The chronological and geographical position of Xochitécatl (Fig. 3) provided those of us who excavated the site with an initial framework for systematizing and delimiting our data. However, as work progressed, the excavations led us along an unexpected path. In contrast to other occasions, we did not need in-depth studies to be able to begin interpreting the roles played by individuals, both men and women, in this society.

The presence of feminine elements in cultural discourse came to light with the first archaeological finds. Numerous ceramic and stone representations of women discovered at the site were key in determining the course of our interpretation of the data. At the risk of jumping to conclusions, we can say that Xochitécatl appears to have been a ceremonial center that at the end of the Formative period (400 B.C. to A.D. 100) and during its second occupation in the Epiclassic period (A.D. 650 to 850) (Fig. 4) was dedicated to a feminine cult.

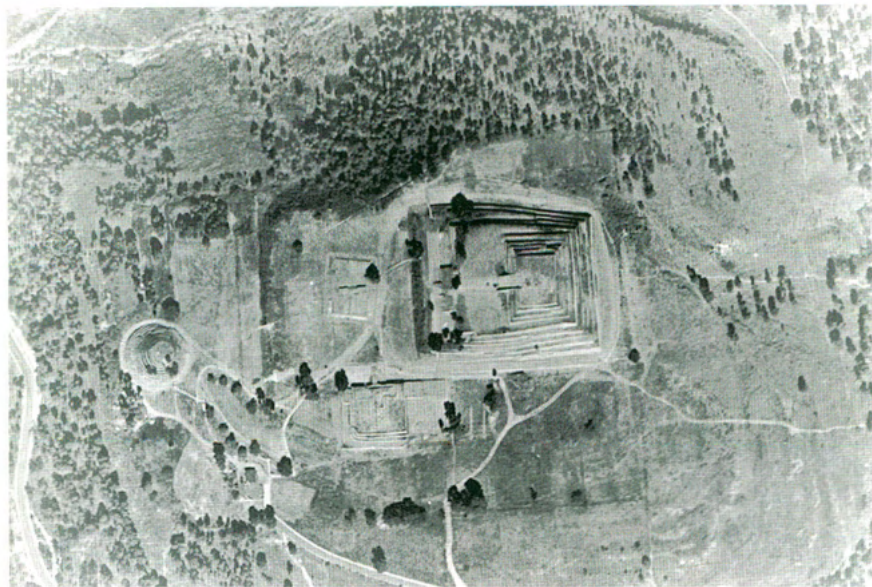


Fig. 2 Aerial view of the ceremonial center at Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala, after the excavations (counterclockwise from left to right): the Pyramid of Flowers, the Building of the Serpent, and the Building of the Spiral; at the center of the plaza, the Base of the Volcanoes.

Images of goddesses, female rulers, and women in various phases of the life cycle, as well as fertility symbols and evidence of cosmic rituals, have begun to emerge during our work.

The archaeological evidence at Xochitécatl has compelled us to study the representations of women, their associations, and their contexts in depth. At this stage of investigation only a very descriptive study can be offered, since the data need further analysis before more exact and verifiable conclusions can be reached. With this essay, however, I hope to provide new elements of analysis for the investigation of gender in Pre-Hispanic Mexico.

The ceremonial center of Xochitécatl was built on the top of a hill, which was altered to give it the form of a great plaza. This monumental architectural complex is composed of four buildings. In the Formative period, the first building stage of the incipient ceremonial center was completed, which included the construction of the Building of the Serpent, the Pyramid of Flowers, and the Base of the Volcanoes. In the site's second period of occupation, between A.D. 650 and 850, the Pyramid of Flowers was again used for ceremonies, but it was enlarged by the addition of more levels and a temple on the top, and given a new orientation, as was the Base of the Volcanoes.

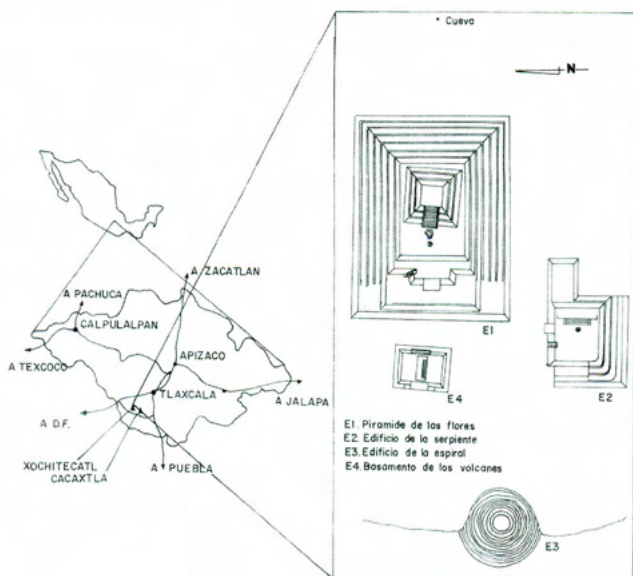


Fig. 3 Location map of Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala; (right; clockwise)
 E1: Pyramid of Flowers; E2: Building of the Serpent; E3: Building of the Spiral; and E4: Base of the Volcanoes.

Xochitécatl is closely connected with its better-known neighbor, the archaeological site of Cacaxtla, famous for its splendid palace murals with designs and colors exhibiting Maya influence. Cacaxtla was at its height between A.D. 600 and 800, or, in other words, at the end of the Classic period, at which time the two sites formed a single cultural unit. Xochitécatl most probably became the place of worship for the residents of the palaces, people from the public and administrative buildings of Cacaxtla, and the population of the surrounding valleys. In addition, it also became a key trade center, controlling the routes to the Gulf of Mexico, Oaxaca, and the Maya area.

Despite its strategic location, monumental architecture, and closeness to Cacaxtla, Xochitécatl had received little attention from scholars of Pre-Columbian Mexico. Until a few years ago, only a handful of investigators knew this site. From the beginning of colonial times up to 1939, Xochitécatl lay completely forgotten.

The site is mentioned in such colonial documents as the map of Cuauhtinchan no. 2 (Reyes García n.d.), Diego Muñoz Camargo's *Historia de Tlaxcala* (1978), and the *Monarquía indiana* by Juan de Torquemada (1969). Nineteenth-century travelers such as José María Cabrera (1995), Hubert Bancroft (1883), and Eduard Seler (Sepúlveda y Herrera 1992:89) likewise noted that it

PERIODS		XOCHITÉCATL OCCUPATION SEQUENCE	DIAGNOSTIC CERAMICS	DIAGNOSTIC ELEMENTS	POPOCATEPETL ERUPTION DATES	XOCHITÉCATL RADIOCARBON DATES		
LATE POSTCLASSIC	1600	SECOND ABANDONMENT	Colonial ceramics Cholula polychrome	Burials in the Pyramid of Flowers Offerings with marine elements Offerings of figurines	A.D. 800 to 1095	Pyramid of Flowers figurine offerings A.D. 632 to 774		
MIDDLE POSTCLASSIC	1500							
	1400							
EARLY POSTCLASSIC	1300							
	1200							
	1100							
	1000							
	900							
EPICLASSIC	800						SECOND BUILDING PHASE	COYOTLATELCO COMPLEX Tablero fine incised Foso thick wall, fine incised
	700							
	600							
	500							
	400							
CLASSIC	300	FIRST ABANDONMENT						
	200							
	100							
	A.D. 1	FIRST BUILDING PHASE	Tezoyuca Ticomán Red on white White spiral	Tina-Escalinata- Escultural Complex lithic workshop	100 B.C. to A.D. 215	Building of the Serpent 388 B.C. to A.D. 342		
LATE FORMATIVE	100							
	200							
	300					Substructure of the Serpent 688 B.C. to A.D. 538		
	400							
MIDDLE FORMATIVE	500	INITIAL BUILDING PHASE	Red on white fine incised ceramics with differentiated firings White fine incised			Substructure of the Spiral 792 B.C. to A.D. 354		
	600							
	700							
	800							

Fig. 4 Cultural chronology of the Puebla-Tlaxcala valley.

existed. Xochitécatl is also referred to in the *Atlas arqueológico de la República Mexicana* of the Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia (1939), and described by Pedro Armillas in an article in *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Antropológicos* (1946). However, it was not until 1969 that Bodo Spranz of the German Foundation for Scientific Research conducted an archaeological survey of the hill of Xochitécatl and sketched the ceremonial area. He later carried out the first controlled excavations (1970:37). Due to further topographical surveys, and the analysis of archaeological material made by Angel García Cook (García Cook and Merino Carrión 1984), it has been possible to define the chronology of the most important archaeological sites in Tlaxcala.

Thanks to the project begun in 1992, the ceremonial center of Xochitécatl has been explored intensively as part of the fourteen Special Archaeological Projects carried out under the auspices of Mexico's National Archaeology Fund.² The archaeological work of the Xochitécatl project began with an analysis of aerial photographs, surface reconnaissance, and detailed topography studies, and ended with extensive excavations and the clearing and strengthening of the structures. It has enabled us to sketch out a history of the settlement, which shows distinct cultural influences from the Valley of Mexico, Teotihuacan, Cholula, the Gulf Coast, Oaxaca, and the Maya area. The site was abandoned during the Classic period and reoccupied in the Epiclassic, around A.D. 850. It was again abandoned at the end of this period with the eruption of Popocatepetl, an event that, thanks to recent studies, can be carbon 14-dated as contemporary with Xochitécatl (Siebe et al. 1996).

The largest and most imposing building at Xochitécatl is the Pyramid of Flowers, located at the eastern end of the central ceremonial plaza, with a rectangular base almost as large as those of the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan and the pyramid called Tepalcayo 1 at Totimehuacan, Puebla. This base measures approximately 144 meters from east to west, and 110 to 115 meters from north to south. It is more than 30 meters high, and is composed of nine stepped tiers on its northern, eastern, and southern faces. The most complete sequence of cultural materials comes from the Pyramid of Flowers and dates from the Late Formative, the Epiclassic, and, in a few cases, the Post-Classic period. This is the building that yielded the archaeological evidence discussed below.

The most important find consisted of more than thirty-two burials, mostly of females and infants, accompanied by offerings and several stone sculptures. Two large monolithic vats were discovered in front of the pyramid's main fa-

² The National Council for Culture and the Arts, through the National Institute of Anthropology and History, was responsible for this fund.

cade, which faces west and has a central staircase composed of rectangular blocks of stone. The first layout and the construction of the building—with boulders and blocks of tuff, or *tepetate*—date from the Late Formative period. Later on, in the Epiclassic period, the pyramid was remodeled, a *tepetate* staircase was constructed over one of the stone blocks, and a temple was built on top of small blocks of dressed *tepetate* covered with stucco. The building's enormous volume suggests that many gangs of workers carried hundreds of tons of rocks and boulders from the lower slopes of Xochitécatl. The structure therefore provides evidence of a high degree of social organization in which the ruling group assigned activities and ceremonies.

At the southern end of the central plaza is the Building of the Serpent. It has a rectangular ground plan (73 by 58 meters), faces north, and has a mud-covered staircase and a ramp leading up to its top. It consists of four stepped tiers, which have rounded corners on the southwestern face. Another monolithic vat, 1.3 meters in diameter, which was found in the middle of the top platform, contained a sculpture of a serpent's head.

The Building of the Spiral, located at the western end of the ceremonial center, is composed of thirteen circular stepped tiers. The diameter of its base is 50 meters, and that of the upper tier, 17 meters. Rising 15.6 meters over the level of the central plaza, it belongs to the Middle Formative period. According to radiocarbon dating, it was built in the Texoloc phase (760 to 380 B.C.).

At the center of the plaza is the rectangular Base of the Volcanoes, measuring 45 by 33 meters. As it is a later structure, its design and orientation are not like those of other buildings. Its architectural features, style, and materials date it to the end of the Epiclassic period (A.D. 650–850). It is distinguished by its *talud* and *tablero* faces of red volcanic stone, or *tezontle*, covered with stucco like the faces of the temple of the same date built on top of the Pyramid of Flowers.

The region of the Puebla–Tlaxcala valley, where Xochitécatl stands, shows signs of sedentary occupation by people engaged mainly in agriculture on the alluvial plains since early times. There is evidence of this in some archaeological sites located in the region, with domestic units belonging to the Late Formative period, precisely when the ceremonial center was planned and built. The scarcity of cultural material from Early and Middle Classic periods, when Teotihuacan flourished, and its increased abundance after this time would seem to support the theory that the ceremonial center reached its peak during this final, Late Formative, period, as was the case for the neighboring elite palaces at Cacaxtla. At this time, trade with places such as Teotihuacan, Cholula, Oaxaca, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Maya area brought numerous luxury items to Xochitécatl, and with them came the integration into a shared system of religious beliefs.

The buildings of Xochitécatl fall squarely within the pattern common for the Central Plateau of Mesoamerica. For the moment, however, we can know the use of the spaces created in this ceremonial center only through their archaeological contexts. The activities that took place in the buildings and plazas can be reconstructed by inferences drawn from the analysis of traces that are left by the individuals who acted here at particular times. Here I agree with Diane Lyons:

All context, i.e., all human experience occurs in time and space. Control of resources in a society requires control of social interaction and control of how individuals or groups of individuals perceive their roles and identities to be within their society. Both social interaction and social identity are profoundly shaped by the manipulation of time and space. In order to understand past social structure we must be conscious of the construction and meaning of the dimensions of context. (1991: 113)

I define the space discussed in this essay as including not only that occupied directly by the Pyramid of Flowers at Xochitécatl, but also that of the area surrounding it—both the platform on which it stands and the landscape, as well as “sight lines,” orientation, and siting, with the view of the volcanoes Popocatepetl, Iztaccíhuatl, and La Malinche. In addition, there is a “sidereal space,” the movement of constellations and stars as points to be observed from this building. In short, one can speak of sacred geography.

We have identified a complex of artifacts and architectural features as signs of the possible activities that were carried out at the Pyramid of Flowers. They include offerings of figurines; spindle whorls; burials of mostly young women and children; staircases and the temple; stone monuments, namely, round sculpture and vats; and a cave. Orientation and integration of the building into the surroundings contribute to our interpretations.

OFFERINGS OF FIGURINES

The offerings of female figurines found embedded in the staircases of the Pyramid of Flowers are the most important indications of a feminine cult and its association with fertility.³ The offerings, seven in all, were deposited directly in the fill of the different tiers, in other words, without any type of special casket or pit to hold them. They covered areas ranging from 2 to 7 square meters, and were made up of figurines placed one on top of the other, some-

³ Due to their position and composition, the figurines reported earlier by Spranz (1970, 1973) were likely part of one or more of the votive caches.

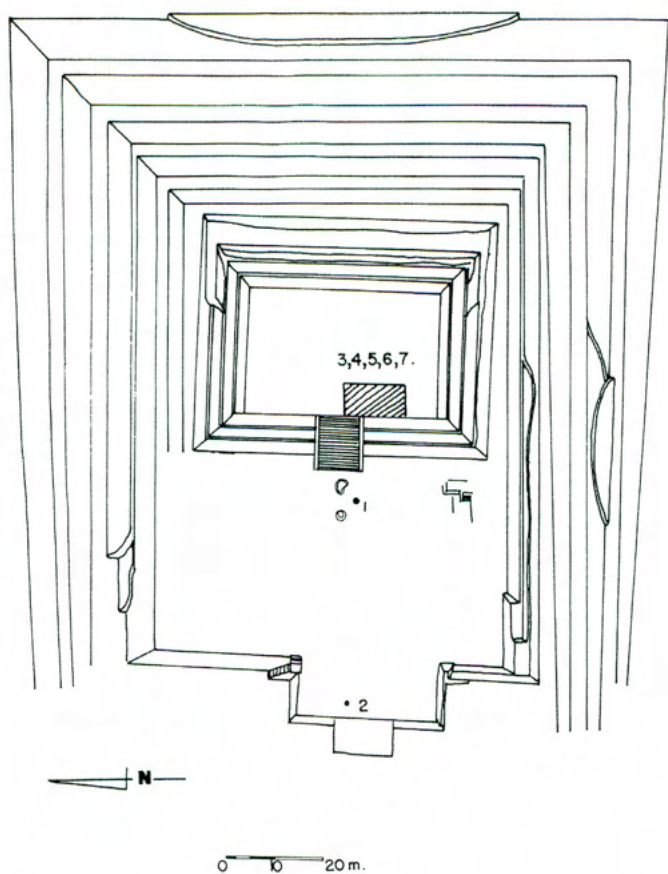


Fig. 5 Location of the seven figurine offerings at the Pyramid of Flowers, Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala.

times in association with bowls or other figurines. Only one of the offerings had a connection with architectural elements (a floor and a bench), while two others were associated with child burials (Fig. 5).

The figurines can be divided into eight different groups:

1. Supplicating, praying, or worshipping women. The first group consists of modeled and polished figurines that are hollow (some with perforations, perhaps for hanging) and polychrome. Either seated or standing, they are characterized by the particular position of their arms, which are raised in an attitude of supplication or prayer. The figures have short hair with a fringe and side

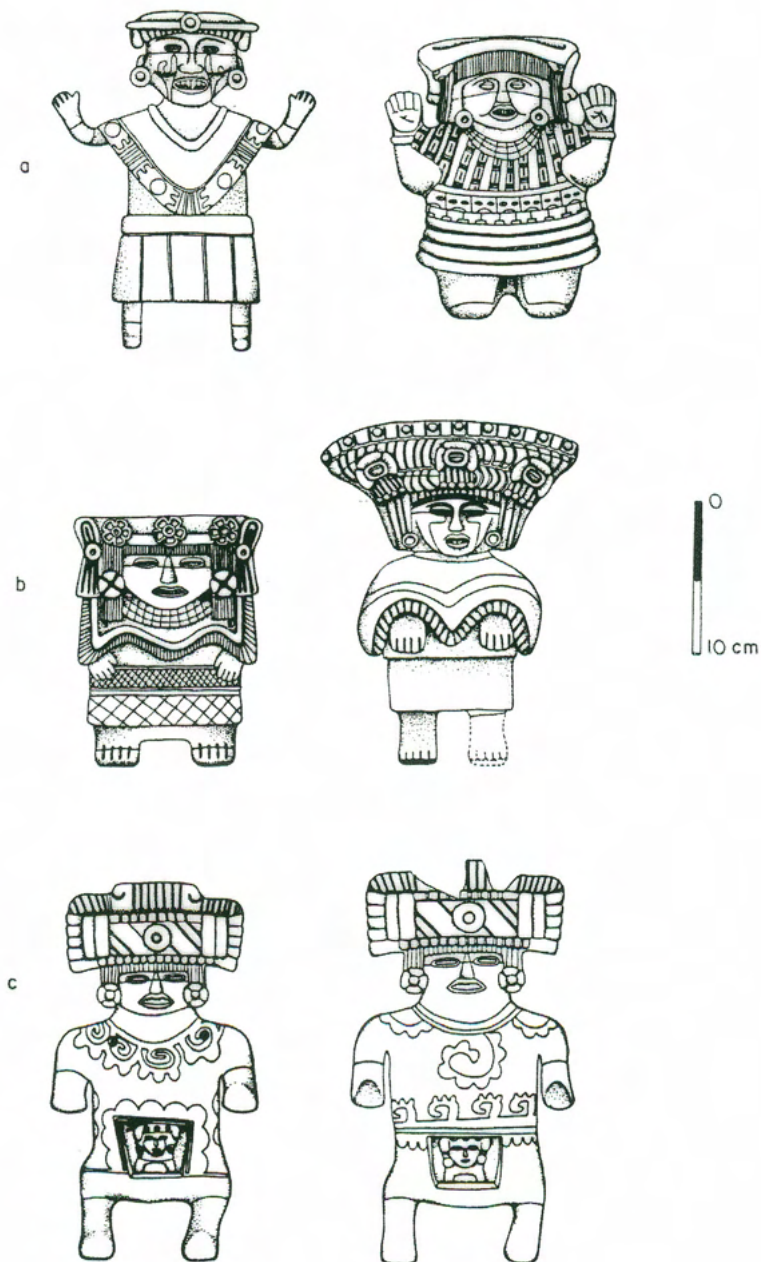


Fig. 6 Female figurines, Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala: (a) worshiping women; (b) richly dressed women; (c) pregnant women, or receptacles.

bunches, and red-and-white headbands, sometimes with circular ornaments. Their faces are painted red from eyes to chin, and several have black lines that look like tears. The women's smiling mouths reveal the so-called T-shaped dental mutilation.⁴ The figures also have circular earplugs. They are wearing blouses, or *quechquemiltl*, with geometric decoration in red, black, and white; the garments seem to be very complex in structure, perhaps produced using the technique of curved weaving. Many figures also wear skirts or wraps around them, held up with a sash, as the fringes hanging at the waist indicate; the skirts are likewise decorated, following the design of the blouse, in red, black, and white. The hands of the figures are painted red, with bangles indicated in black. Most have their feet shown painted or with bands around their ankles, and some are wearing sandals with bows (Fig. 6a).

2. Richly dressed women. The second group consists of flat, polychrome figurines cast in molds, usually with two holes for hanging them up. They represent richly dressed and adorned women whose faces are half covered with red paint. The figures show T-shaped dental mutilation, and each has earplugs in the shape of flowers, a necklace of beads or in the form of a band, a *quechquemiltl* decorated with fringes, a skirt with varying designs, and bare feet. There are two variants in this group: women alone and women with children. The women alone wear headbands with three flowers, of five petals each, and both of their hands are placed on their skirts (Fig. 6b).

3. Pregnant women, or receptacles. This group includes hollow modeled figurines, each with an orifice in the abdomen usually occupied by the small, removable figure of a child. The mothers wear headbands decorated in the center with a circle and a feather surround, flower-shaped earplugs, and red face paint. Hands are not indicated at the ends of their short arms, and clothing is simply drawn on the figures with black and white lines. The child figure is flat and also has a headband, circular earplugs, and face paint (Fig. 6c).

4. Women with children in their arms or on their laps. This group is made up of flat, polychrome, cast figurines, which have holes for tying or hanging them. Each of these images represents a woman with a child in her arms and sometimes another on her back. In addition to the presence of infants, the headdresses are markedly different, consisting of a wide band with three sloping stripes in black and white; in the center, there is a circle surrounded by feathers (Fig. 7a).

⁴ On the subject of this form of mutilation, Spranz says, "This T-shaped mutilation with inlays of small stone disks is known from the Maya region of Belize, the Uluá valley, Copan, and Uaxactún. Surprising in this connection is the first and hitherto only appearance of wall painting in a Maya style in the Mexican highlands, discovered in 1976 at Cacaxtla, immediately to the east of Xochitcatl" (1982: 165).



Fig. 7 Female figurines, Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala: (a) women with children; (b) infants in cradles; (c) old women; (d) articulated figurines.

5. Infants in cradles. This group contains modeled figures of babies in cradles, which are simple flat plaques, usually with a handle that extends over the baby's upper body. The infants have face paint, and their clothing is drawn on them (Fig. 7b).

6. Enthroned, deified women. Each of these figurines depicts a woman seated on a palanquin or throne, wearing a headdress of a serpent, or the Earth Monster, holding a shield and a scepter, and richly dressed in a *quechquemiltl*, skirt, sandals, belt or sash, bracelets, and necklaces. Like the figurines of pregnant women, these represent an occupation or activity—not of a mother this time, but of a ruler, a warrior, or a priestess. Although they could be deities, I suggest that, based on the overall context and their association with other figurines representing different phases of the female life cycle, they are worldly and ordinary. (Fig. 8)

7. Old women. This group of figures, which may be flat or hollow, cast or modeled, represents old women. Their faces are crossed by lines depicting wrinkles, while their smiles show their only two remaining teeth. Their hair is carefully arranged, and they wear a simple *quechquemiltl* or their bodies are painted (Fig. 7c).

8. Articulated figures and rattles. The last group is composed of hollow figurines with movable limbs. They are anthropomorphic and have pear-shaped bodies covered in red paint. These “women” wear headdresses profusely decorated with bands, flowers, circles, and other motifs, and display the red face paint and the T-shaped dental mutilation mentioned above. Some of them resemble the “praying women” described earlier (group 1), and several contain beads and can be used as rattles (Fig. 7d).

The types of figurines described by Spranz (1973) coincide with those found in the Pyramid of Flowers. Having been made locally, they correspond chronologically to the late period of Teotihuacan, or the Epiclassic. Spranz tried to identify the figurines by comparing them with the pictures of deities in the codices of the Borgia group, although the figures are more complex in their design and coloring. According to his analysis, three Borgia-group goddesses are represented in the Xochitécatl figurines: Xochiquetzal, identified by a headband, sometimes twisted, and a typical headdress with three rosettes and two upright or lateral bunches of hair (this is the type referred to here as “richly dressed women”); Xilonen, the young corn goddess, who wears a headband with rosette in the center (as in the case of “women with children in their arms”); and Tlazolteotl, originally a Huastec goddess of the earth and a patroness of newborn children, who wears a cotton headband with dark and white stripes (corresponding to “pregnant women, or receptacles”).



Fig. 8 Figurine of an enthroned woman, Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala.

Recent explorations at Xochitécatl have demonstrated limitations of the analysis made by Spranz. The absence of a clear archaeological context for the origin and association of the figurines that he studied prevented him from going beyond iconographic analysis and the questionable identification with Aztec deities. In my opinion, the figurines from the offerings at Xochitécatl represent flesh-and-blood women. Each offering includes infants, mature women, mothers, and old women, or, in other words, the complete life cycle of real women. Although it may be true that some of their traits appeared later as attributes of Aztec goddesses, this is because Mesoamerican supernaturals typically adopted elements of dress from mortals (Fig. 8).

SPINDLE WHORLS

Nearly five hundred spindle whorls were found in the Pyramid of Flowers, most of them in the stratigraphic level corresponding to the figurine offerings, although they were not associated with the figurines. It is significant that more than 65 percent of the whorls were discovered in the upper part of the pyramid and the staircase area. As has been pointed out many times, spindle whorls were closely linked to the images of goddesses or women.

BURIALS

Thirty-two burials were found in the Pyramid of Flowers. Covering all the different periods of the site's occupation, the burials were collective and indi-



Fig. 9 Offering 6, Pyramid of Flowers, Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala.

vidual, primary and secondary. They contained more than fifty persons and were distributed in the upper section of the pyramid and along the front staircase in excavated pits. Fourteen of the burials additionally included offerings of conch shells, shell artifacts, small obsidian blades, beads and plaques of green stone and bone, ceramic vessels, and figurines dating from the Epiclassic period (Fig. 9).

Preliminary analyses of bone remains, which are in a very poor state, show that some of the burials are of adult women, but the majority—70 percent—

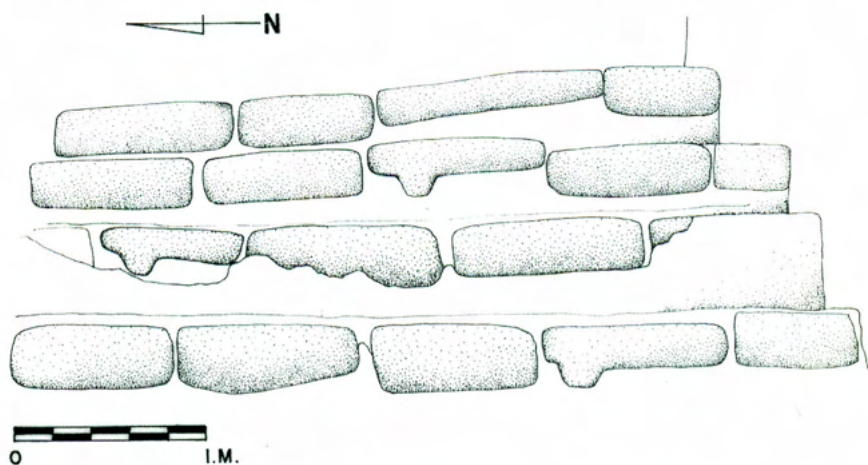


Fig. 10 Front view (west facade) of the staircase of the Pyramid of Flowers, Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala. Note the use of *metates*.

are of children and adolescents. Two corpses were covered with inverted vessels in the shape of truncated cones. At least two of the bodies show signs of ritual sacrifice: two infants had been beheaded and their hands cut off.

STAIRCASES AND THE TEMPLE

Another element associated with the female nature of the space is the staircases that lead to the top of the pyramid where a temple once stood. These staircases are where most of the figurine offerings were discovered. They are built of dressed stone, but saddle querns (*metates*) were used for some of the steps. This isolated element could lead one to think that although the *metates* were worn and had been discarded, it was logical to reuse them in buildings because they were made of very good raw material, generally basalt. In connection with all the other archaeological evidence present, however, it is valid to assume that they do in fact have a ritual meaning associated with the feminine cults practiced in the Pyramid of Flowers (Fig. 10). In the archaeological context in Mesoamerica there is always an association between grinding maize and women's work.

STONE MONUMENTS

The stone sculptures found in the rubble of the staircase of the Pyramid of Flowers are yet another feature of the "feminine cult." They are as follows:

1. A man, perhaps the only male figure at Xochitécatl, sits cross-legged

with one arm over his chest and his hand resting on his shoulder. In the other hand he holds his penis as if masturbating, which almost certainly is an allusion to semen as fertilizer. This statuette is fragmented and has no head (Fig. 11a).

2. A skeletal woman carved in relief lies with her arms over her head and her legs spread open to reveal her sexual parts. The woman's ribs are marked in the chest area, and she has an opening in her belly like the "pregnant" figurines discussed above (Fig. 11b).

3. A serpent woman (Cihuacoatl) of gray stone, found in the debris of the staircase of the Pyramid of Flowers, is portrayed with gaping jaws and the body of a serpent that spirals around the statue to end in a rattlesnake's tail on the woman's back (Fig. 11c).

4. Two round stone vats or water holders, measuring 1.7 and 3.7 meters in diameter, Vats 1 and 2, were discovered in association with the staircase. The first contained four sculptures: a toad, a person in the jaws of a reptile, and two anthropomorphic figures, one probably suffering from facial paralysis and the other with a face suggesting death. Vat 2 seems to have been buried with its rim at floor level; like Vat 1, it has a drainage hole. Judging from their stratigraphic position, both vats, like the stone staircase, date earlier than offerings of figurines. They could be related to a fertility cult because they contain water and were oriented to face the female volcano of La Malinche (Fig. 12).

Findings like these have been recorded at other sites in the Puebla-Tlaxcala valley (e.g., Totimehuacan and Tlalancaleca, suggesting that the complex just described is not unique to Xochitécatl but typical of the whole region.

THE CAVE

During the surface reconnaissance, a cave was detected on the eastern slope of the hill, located exactly opposite the facade of the Pyramid of Flowers and aligned with it. This archaeological feature has not been studied thoroughly because of the poor safety conditions inside it. However, we do know that it is a natural cavity that people altered by cutting chambers and entrance tunnels into it. As has been demonstrated at Teotihuacan, the presence of caves gives a site a mythical meaning, linking it with the places where the human race and the universe were thought to have originated. Caves were also often associated with the woman's womb in Pre-Hispanic times.

ORIENTATION AND INTEGRATION INTO THE SURROUNDINGS

As noted previously, Xochitécatl is a ceremonial center located at the top of an extinct volcano. Its orientation is very important in connection with the arguments laid out here. Once topographic surveys were made and the exact position of each building plotted, there became distinguishable a series of sig-

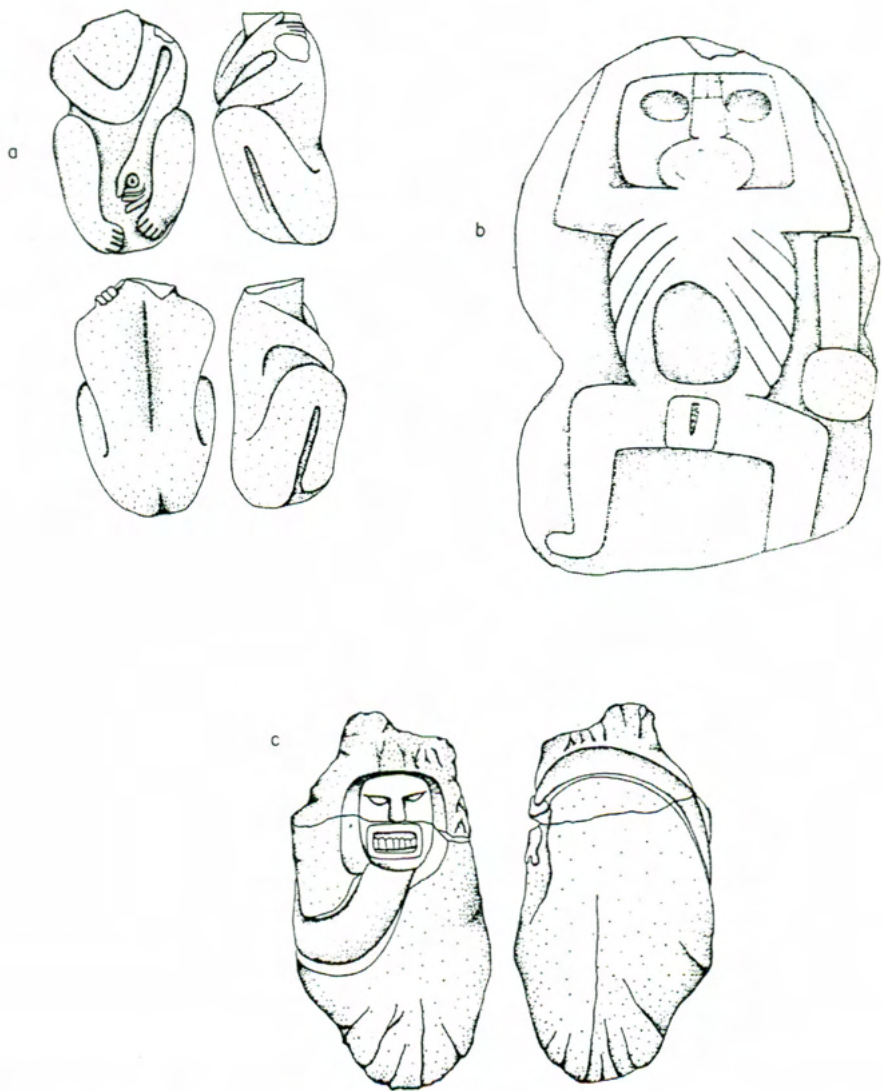


Fig. 11 Round sculpture from the Pyramid of Flowers, Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala: (a) man masturbating (ca. 60 cm high); (b) skeletal woman (ca. 45 cm high); (c) serpent woman (front and rear views) (ca. 75 cm high).

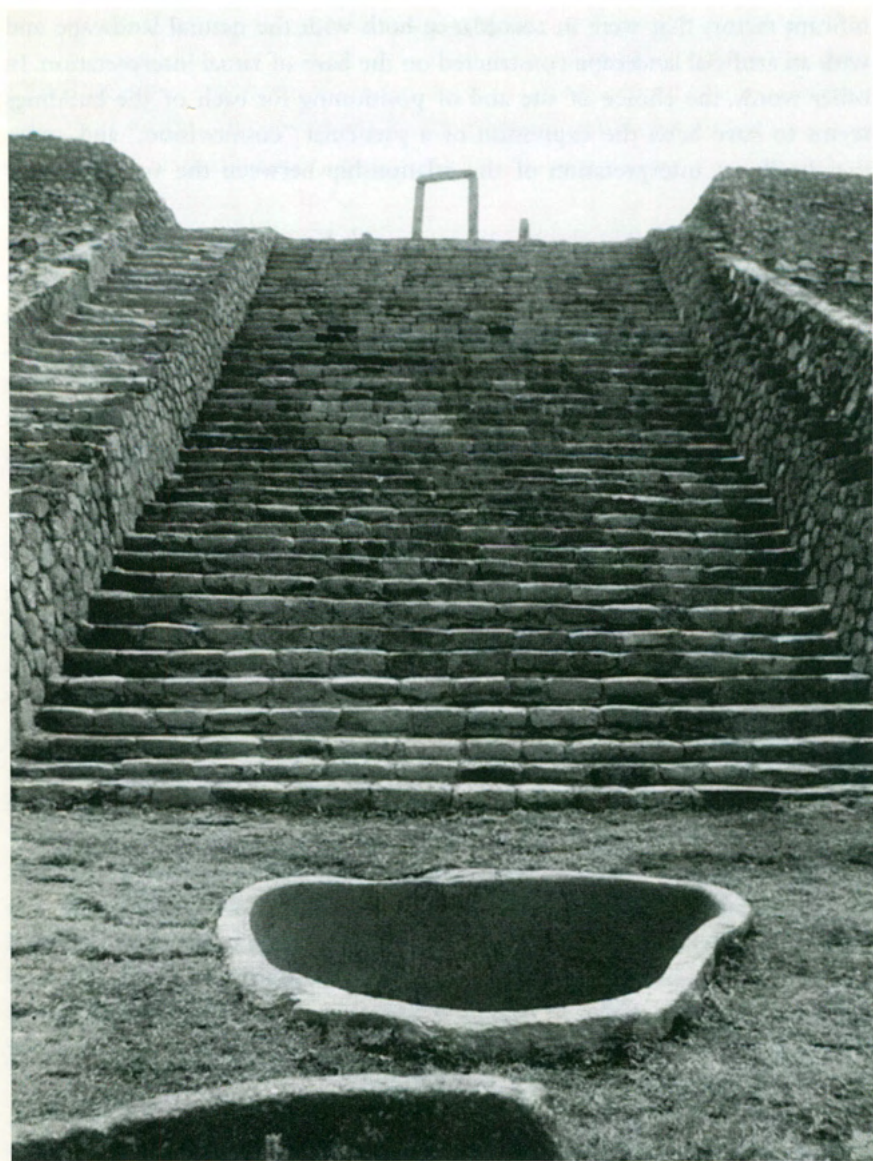


Fig. 12 Vats 1 and 2, in front of the staircase at the Pyramid of Flowers, Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala.

nificant factors that were in accordance both with the natural landscape and with an artificial landscape constructed on the basis of ritual interpretation. In other words, the choice of site and of positioning for each of the buildings seems to have been the expression of a particular “cosmovision,” and, more specifically, an interpretation of the relationship between the volcanoes and humans.

In this case, there is a close connection with Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl southwest of the site, and with La Malinche to the east. Viewed from the center of the plaza, the Pyramid of Flowers aligns perfectly with the profile of La Malinche. This is evident not only in the direction of the facade and the staircase, but also in the positioning of burials and offerings. The Nahuatl name for this extinct volcano is Matlacueye, or “She with the Blue Skirt,” which, depending on the source, refers either to the springs that rise in its foothills or to the color of renewed vegetation.

Throughout Mesoamerica, mountains and settlements were related symbolically by alignments with astronomical and calendrical characteristics. These particular connections could have influenced the foundation of sites and temples throughout the Puebla–Tlaxacala valley, including places surrounding Xochitécatl where there was concordance between such observable phenomena (Broda 1991: 461). The concepts that the ancient Mesoamericans had of geography and climate included not only elements derived from exact observation of the environment, but a large number of mythical and magical notions as well. Cosmovision, defined as the structured observation of the universe in relation to man, embraced the close fusion of these components.

I do not discuss here the archaeoastronomical studies that are being conducted at La Malinche and Xochitécatl; it is worth mentioning, however, that there are important days, such as 28 September, when sunrise can be observed from the highest part of the archaeological site. As John Carlson has observed (personal communication, 1994), the orientation of the Pyramid of Flowers (and possibly Building A at Cacaxtla) is related to La Malinche, as well as to the connection between Venus, corn, and fertility.

At dawn on 28 September the sun, when seen from the Pyramid of Flowers, casts its first rays through the “mouth” of the female profile formed by La Malinche (Fig. 13); at the same time on the other side of the valley, these rays light up the Popocatepetl volcano. The next day, the nearby village of San Miguel del Milagro celebrates its patron saint in a regionally important fiesta. These days coincide with the beginning of the Late Postclassic (A.D. 1300–1520) Nahua month *Tepeilhuitl*, or “Feast of the Mountains,” which fell on 30 September, as described by Bernardino de Sahagún:



Fig. 13 Sun rising in the “mouth” of La Malinche’s “profile” on 28 September.

In this month they celebrated a feast in honor of the high mountains, which are in all these lands of this New Spain, where large clouds pile up. They made the images of each one of them in human form, from the dough which is called *tzoalli*, and they laid offerings before these images in veneration of these same mountains.

Upon arrival of the feast in honor of the mountains, they slew four women and one man. The first of these [women who were representations of the mountains] they called Tepexoch. The second they called Matlalcueie. The third they named Xochitécatl. The fourth they called Mayauel. And the man [who represented a serpent] they named Milnauatl. They decked these women and the man in many papers covered with rubber. And they carried them in some litters upon the shoulders of women highly adorned, to the place where they were to slay them.

After they had slain them and torn out their hearts . . . they carried the bodies to the houses that they called *calpulco*, where they divided them up in order to eat them. The papers with which they arrayed the images of the mountains, after they had broken them to pieces in order to eat them, they hung in the *calpulco*. (1982: 137–139; translation mine)

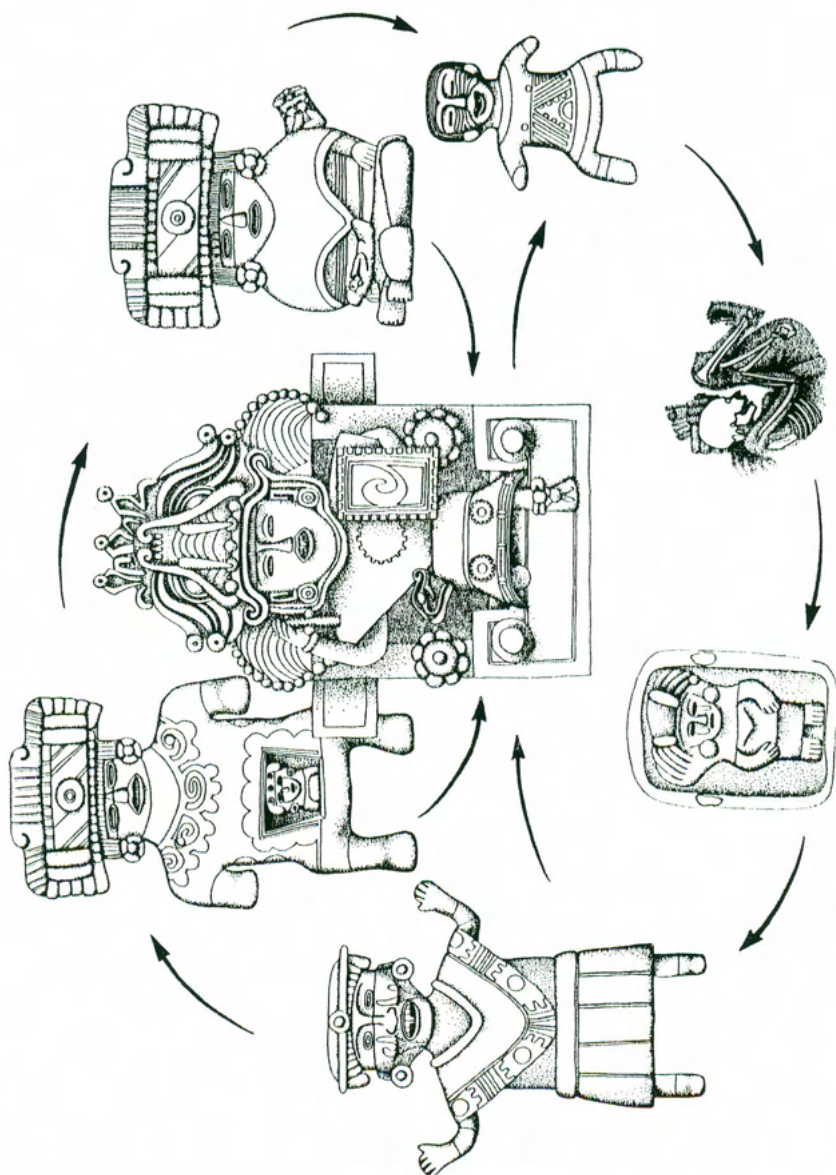


Fig. 14 Cycle of life: Female clay figurines of Xochitcatl, Tlaxcala.

CONCLUSIONS

The most important conclusion so far about the finds at the Pyramid of Flowers at Xochitécatl derives from the clear archaeological evidence of an obviously feminine ceremonial center. Further analysis of the contexts and material briefly discussed here will no doubt eventually enable us to draw a full picture of places where rituals and ceremonies of a female nature took place.

In contrast to neighboring, Cacaxtla, Xochitécatl is clearly an “exclusively ceremonial area”; it cannot be said with any assurance, however, at what date or time of the year the ceremonies were performed, and to which deity, natural power, or moment in the life cycle they were dedicated. Approximate answers can only be arrived at through ethnographic comparison, analysis of sources, and tools such as archaeoastronomy.

It is important to emphasize that many of the female figurines found among the offerings show birth, motherhood, maternal care, and old age—in other words, the complete female life cycle. This probably points to ceremonies related to the fertility aspect of female life, connected not only with the earth, but also with the reproduction of human society itself (Fig. 14). Other elements, such as the vats, clearly indicate a water cult. Thus, the entirety presents duality, the pairing of earth and water, of positive and negative, of masculine and feminine principles.

Who performed these ceremonies? Men and priests or women and priestesses? Perhaps this is not the most important unknown element; possibly both sexes participated. What is more interesting is to understand the meaning of any such ceremony and the influence it had on the behavior of the social group that performed it and believed in it. The reason for the existence of a feminine cult, a female deity, and a feminine space can be explained in part by studies of Nahua female deities, which reveal similarities to some of the archaeological evidence found:

Women were offered up at the feast of Xochiquetzal. Girls who were sacrificed in her honor had their legs crossed at the moment of being killed to indicate that they were dying virgin. Another woman was sacrificed who was dressed as the goddess; she was flayed so that a man could put her skin on and sit on the temple steps, where he pretended to weave. Artisans and painters dressed as different animals gathered in front of this man to dance, each holding his working tools. This dance lasted until dawn, then they all went to bathe and so wash away their sins. (Rodríguez-Shadow 1996; translation mine)

Among the archaeological elements found in direct association with the Pyramid of Flowers and possibly related to the description of this ceremony are the sculpture of a sacrificed woman and figurines that are richly decorated with flowers.

At the time when the sculpture of the serpent woman was discovered, some old residents of two nearby communities, San Miguel Xochitecatitla and San Rafael Tenanyecac, had already told us the legend of Queen Xochitl, who lived at Xochitécatl. A very beautiful woman, always dressed in white, she charmed men who looked at her and made them cross a river where she washed her clothes. Once these men, attracted and captivated by her beauty, plucked up the courage to cross the river, she helped by carrying them but, halfway across, turned into a serpent and devoured them.

As noted by Cecelia Klein (1988), the elites of the Aztec capital emphasized the cruelty of Cihuacoatl and expressed her monstrous aspect in terms of insects, skulls, sacrificial knives, and her alleged lasciviousness.

To retain their place in the Tenochca pantheon, the goddesses worshipped by peasants had to adopt masculine, warlike characteristics and equip themselves with feather headdresses, shields, and arrows.

The above simply shows that the fertility traditionally associated with the female figure and peasants cults was transferred to and identified with what may be the penis because of a masculinizing, warlike ideology. Therefore, goddesses of agriculture, especially Xochiquetzal, could not remain completely female but had to acquire a dual or ambiguous character, in a way, a type of symbolical hermaphroditism. (Rodríguez-Shadow 1996, translation mine)

As regards the worship of female deities in Mesoamerica, we can refer to the ideas put forward by Janet Berlo (1992) and Félix Báez-Jorge (1988) about the existence of a feminine cult that took various forms during the region's history. The Mother Earth Goddess originated very early on and was basically linked to agriculture. However, in Aztec times she was separated into several different avocations, which dramatized their presence in many spheres of divine action. For example, there were Chicomecoatl, propitiator of human fecundity, who was venerated for her fertility that provided corn and thus nourishment; Xochiquetzal, who turned sexuality into a sacred moment and place of earthly and human fertility; Tlazolteotl, who helped her sons and daughters to sweep away their sins and who assisted at the birth of new human beings; Chantico, honored daily by the household fire; Mayahuel, symbol of pulque, which referred back to the myth of death generating life; Tonantzin,

“Our Mother,” generous but a fearsome warrior; Tonacacihuatl or Omecihuatl, the primordial creator goddess, a Mother deity par excellence; and Coatlicue, mother of Quetzalcoatl–Venus, Huitzilopochtli–Sun, and Coyolxauhqui–Moon.

The goddess of Xochitécatl is a bridge between the Great Mother Goddess of Teotihuacan and the multiple avocations of the divine female principle that appeared in Aztec times. Although she shares certain traits with the Mother Goddess, such as, for example, an association with caves and mountains, there are peculiarities in her representations that may allow for differentiation of specific deities.

Although Xochitécatl’s dedication to a specific deity is still the subject of debate, its geographic location shows that it was a cosmic center of primary importance. This is evidenced by the orientation of the site toward dawn on a particular date, its special relation to La Malinche, and the fact that the Pyramid of Flowers is a copy of that mountain itself (Fig. 13). Together, these observations reveal a site where ceremonies were performed in which women played the main roles, where children were sacrificed, and where other ritual activities, such as baths and offerings, took place. All of these factors point to ceremonies dedicated to the Earth Mother, as personified by the female volcano.

Another hypothesis still open to proof is whether there was a government made up of women, perhaps a matriarchy, in view of the overwhelming presence of females among the figurines and stone sculptures. Women are shown seated on thrones, holding shields and scepters, which is often associated with goddesses in colonial manuscript paintings. Why not consider the possibility of a female ruler, an outstanding “Amazon,” or a religious leader? As I have repeated throughout the discussion of the archaeological evidence, however, we still lack data to confirm these hypotheses.

For now, it only remains for us to accept the challenge of identifying what indicators an archaeologist should look for, and which ones have yet to be interpreted, in order to bring us closer to an understanding of the position and the role of the women who lived at Xochitécatl.

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