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Obsidian Mirrors and Tezcatlipoca in Conquest and Post-Conquest México

Research Year: 1997

Culture: Aztec

Chronology: Late Post Classic

Location: Central México

Site: Tenochtitlán Area

Project Outline:

This project was concerned with three major issues, (a) investigating the symbolic nature of the Late Postclassic Central Mexican deity Tezcatlipoca, (b) re-evaluating his role during the Spanish conquest A.D. 1519-21 and into the early colonial period, and (c) charting the symbolic dimensions of obsidian per se, and particularly as colonial period 'mirrors' and church 'decoration' associated with post-conquest continuations of Pre-Columbian beliefs and worship of deities, perhaps specifically of Tezcatlipoca. This project built in earlier work carried out with FAMSI assistance at Dumbarton Oaks in 1996, and involved extensive library and museum research in Europe and the USA, and fieldwork in México.

Tezcatlipoca and Obsidian:

In order to investigate the post-contact symbolism of Tezcatlipoca and his materia prima, obsidian, it was necessary to build a coherent picture of the god's attributes, religious festivals, ritual aspects and guises, costumes, ceremonial paraphernalia, and to assess the etymological dimensions of his name. From the point of view of obsidian, its physical qualities and geological origins, it seemed worthwhile to examine also the relationship between Tezcatlipoca and his jaguar manifestation as Tepeyollotl, due to the symbolic associations of both entities with the interior (i.e. 'heart') of the earth as the 'land of the dead', the cosmological origin place of fertility (accessed via caves), and the location of obsidian mines.

Tezcatlipoca and the Spanish Conquest:

With a detailed 'biography' of Tezcatlipoca to hand, it was possible to re-examine the often subtle indications of the god's imagery which, in my view, were present almost as

'background noise' to the Spanish conquest of A.D. 1519-21. Hitherto, it seemed, this had been drowned out by the prevalence of Quetzalcoatl imagery associated (mainly in hindsight) with the arrival of Cortes. Investigating the mythological/political context provided by Aztec cosmogony and cosmology as articulated by the ritual calendar, it was possible to identify the 'presence' of Tezcatlipoca during the momentous first contacts between Motecuhzoma and the Spanish. Aspects of this 'presence' include the coincidence of timing inasmuch as the Spanish arrived during Aztec celebrations of Tezcatlipoca's 'Toxcatl' ceremony – the proper observances of which constrained the capriciousness of Tezcatlipoca as the patron of royalty upon whose supernatural support the emperor (and to a undetermined extent, political stability) depended.

Tezcatlipoca imagery in accounts of the Spanish conquest are small and scattered, often circumstantial, yet cumulatively significant. One example of how almost incidental details can be fleshed out in this context concerns Motecuhzoma sending his sorcerers to investigate the Spanish. Upon their return, they reported that Tezcatlipoca had appeared to them on their return journey and had predicted the end of the world. It may well be significant that the geographical location of this manifestation was a point between the snow-capped volcanoes 'Iztaccichuatl' and 'Popocatépetl' – on the latter's slopes of which was a shrine to Tezcatlipoca in his guise as Yaotl ('Young Warrior'). This was clearly known to Motecuhzoma's sorcerers, adding mythic and ritual veracity to the 'appearance' and resonating also with metaphysical ideas of the phenomenological linking of god and symbolic landscape encoded in etymology and toponymy where the 'Lord of the Smoking Mirror' is associated with the 'Smoking Mountain'.

Ritual Dimensions of Obsidian:

These aspects of Tezcatlipoca provided a detailed and contextualized background for a focus on: (a) the god as a supernatural embodiment (apotheosis) of obsidian; and (b) the various (and often syncretic) survivals of Pre-Columbian belief about deity and material into the colonial period.

This context was informed by the inability of the early Christian Mendicant priests to recognize indigenous beliefs, usually due to an inability to speak native languages (as noted by Durán and Sahagún), an overemphasis on numbers of native conversions more often apparent than real, and the continued use of obsidian (together with other examples of material culture). The ironies and paradoxes surrounding the Spanish incomprehension of native beliefs are epitomized by Torquemada's comments on the Spanish commissioning of native obsidian workers to make obsidian blades for shaving and portable altars. These comments include admiration for the skills of these stone workers yet are oblivious to the symbolic dimensions of this material as the materia prima of Tezcatlipoca who elsewhere Torquemada identifies as the 'Shining Mirror' and who he accuses of being Lucifer.

It is here that the role of rectangular slabs of obsidian, usually referred to as "'mirrors' of unknown use" comes into focus. An integral part of this study included gathering information on and photographs of 17 of these rectangular objects in museums across Europe, the USA, and México. Initial analysis indicates that most appear to be post-contact in origin albeit made by indigenous obsidian workers, and seem to have been collected during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their role in early colonial Mendicant proselytising activities is currently under investigation but it seems that they were often a fundamental element in the portable paraphernalia of the Christian liturgy.

Further situating these objects in post-contact native spiritual life was the wider role of obsidian as 'decorative' elements in early colonial crosses and churches. Investigating these rare but significant survivals was the reason for undertaking fieldwork in México. In Michoacán, I was able to locate the use of obsidian disks in early Colonial atrial crosses at Ciudad Hidalgo (ancient Taximaroa) and San Felipe de los Alzates, and also identify atrial crosses which probably once had such disks at San Felipe de los Alzates, and San Mattias – identified by empty concavities. In addition, and unexpectedly, a visit to Zinapécuaro revealed a whole wall of the church bell tower covered with designs picked out by obsidian disks, rectangular blocks and linear elements. Zinapécuaro, whose name means 'obsidian', was the place where Torquemada observed the native obsidian workers.

Adding further to this was evidence gathered at Tepeapulco in Hidalgo state. Tepeapulco was a Pre-Columbian centre for obsidian working, centrally located between the three major source areas of Navajas, Otumba, and Paredon. As at Zinapécuaro, the town's Christian monastery was built on top of a large mound which housed a pre-Spanish temple. Now moved from the courtyard to inside the church is an atrial cross which has an empty concavity which once held an obsidian disk. It was at Tepeapulco that Sahagún interviewed local inhabitants and compiled his *Primeros Memoriales* between 1558-1560, recording a description of Tezcatlipoca as the god who "makes the black mirror shine."

This physical evidence, together with conquest-period chronicles, provides many reasons for looking at the metaphysical identification of people, places, and economic resources that is an integral part of a material culture and phenomenological approach to cultural constructions of landscape. This symbolic equation is at the heart of attempts to draw meaningful material comparisons between obsidian and its religious and ritual associations with Tezcatlipoca. The symbolic aspects of obsidian's 'cultural biography' intersects time and space, mythology, ideology, changing economic imperatives, and syncretic re-alignments of materiality and belief.

Concluding Comments:

The three strands to this project, library research, analysis of rectangular mirrors in museums, and Mexican fieldwork, have provided a wealth of information upon which to draw in a fully rounded and systematic way in several forthcoming publications. They

also are probably the tip of an iceberg of potential connections and associations which are worthy of study in their own right as well as part of a larger thematic investigation into the ritual identification of obsidian with Tezcatlipoca and the materiality of religious expression in colonial México.

The information gathered during this project will be analysed and published in the following works:

- (i) A Dark Light: Reflections on Obsidian in Mesoamerica. *World Archaeology*, 2001. In Press.
- (ii) Tezcatlipoca: Dark light on the 'Smoking Mirror'. Article Mss in preparation.
- (iii) Mirrors and Tezcatlipoca: Obsidian sorcery in a colonial landscape. Monograph Mss in preparation.
- (iv) A Dark Brilliance: Tezcatlipoca – the Nature of an Aztec Deity. Monograph Mss in preparation.

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