

ONLINE ADDENDUM FIVE

Empire, Chiefdom, Hunting Bands

SHAPES OF A COSMOLOGICAL VISION

Richard F. Townsend

Mesoamerican art displays a spectrum of styles and symbolic systems, responding to empires, city-states, tribes and chiefdoms, and early village seed-planting peoples. From Teotihuacan, West Mexico, and imperial Tenochtitlan, to the Olmec capitals and Maya cities and those of other regional cultures, different societies evolved distinctive and varied imagery. Yet these diverse polities also share a deep-seated notion of human society embedded in nature, with an annual round of ritual and practical obligations aimed at securing the regular succession of the seasons, the fertility of the soil, the abundance of plants and animals, and the prosperity of the community from year to year. Between c. 2500 B.C. and c. A.D. 1500, peoples of different social and economic complexity created diverse systems of signs and symbols, yet all held to a widespread foundation of cosmological imagery. Although these traditions are broadly charted, questions remain about the visual art of earlier hunting and gathering bands. Before maize began to be planted, before the first hamlets and horticultural fields, what was shared in the thought and imagery of remote, nomadic peoples? And as the immemorial ways of those mobile bands began slowly changing as settlements evolved with growing social complexity, what ancient themes were salvaged and transmitted, to be re-adapted in the art and culture of early village farmers and the polities that followed?

To approach these questions we will step back in time from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the complex to the simple, following a range of expressive and symbolic connections between different societies, natural resources, and the annual cycle of changing forces affecting the landscape. The progression begins with a review of fifteenth-century rainmaking rites by Aztec kings of Tenochtitlan and their allies, at a temple on Mount Tlaloc and a shrine in Lake Tetzaco, once covering large parts of the Valley of Mexico (fig. 1). These events are described in sixteenth-century Spanish Colonial texts and amplified by archaeological evidence. The second review concerns the chieftaincies of first- and second-century West Mexico (fig. 2). At Teuchitlan, Huitzilapa, and scores of related sites, ceramic sculptures were made as tomb furnishings with effigies of people and animals, foods, and models of rituals. These works testify to the achievements of deceased leaders, certifying them as accomplished ancestors in the land of the dead, qualified to serve as spirit intermediaries with the natural forces upon which life

depended. Our third review is prefaced by sketches of archaeological remains from Paleoindian hunting and gathering bands in the Valley of Mexico, at Tequixquiac and Tlapacoya, roughly dating to 8000 B.C., as well as remains dated to 7700–7300 B.C. at Santa Isabel Iztapan; comparable finds will also be noted from the Sayula basin of Jalisco, West Mexico. This review will be followed by discussion of pictographs from diverse rock shelters in the U.S. Southwest at Barrier Canyon, The Maze, and other locations, dating to the early centuries A.D., as well as similar sites in Baja California where nomadic bands of more recent centuries painted an imagery also focused on hunting rites and the animals upon which communal life depended (fig. 3). These comparisons of symbolic forms from different societies trace changing religious, historic and economic themes, while also transmitting a deep-seated line of belief and ritual by which leaders asserted an ongoing role in maintaining the seasonal cycle, the regeneration of life, and the continuing prosperity of society throughout the year.



Fig. 1. Valley of Mexico

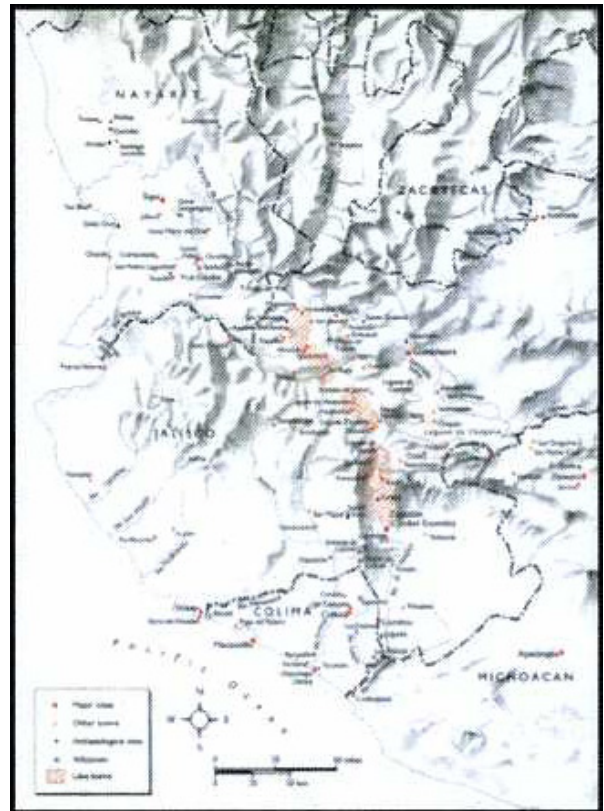


Fig. 2. West Mexico

Rainmaking Rites on Mount Tlaloc

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's sixteenth-century Florentine Codex describes the annual Aztec ceremonial cycle, with supernatural entities impersonated by masked performers in the annual rainmaking, planting, and harvest rites, followed by the dry season rites of war and the capturing

of prisoners for sacrifice offerings in the oncoming cycle of planting. Fray Diego Durán describes in detail the annual rainmaking rites at a temple on the height of Mt. Tlaloc, on the northern end of the mountain chain east of the Valley of Mexico (fig. 4). In April and May, as the long dry season leached away all remaining moisture, preparations were made for calling the rain. When the appointed day drew close, the allied rulers of Tenochtitlan, Tetzaco, Tlacopan, and Xochimilco ascended the trail on Mt. Tlaloc with their many attendants. A camp was prepared in a ravine below the temple precinct on the summit. The rectangular enclosure was approached by a narrow, walled processional way. In antiquity the enclosure walls rose to cut off the sweeping view afforded by the extraordinary location. Yet from outside the participants could see the Valley of Mexico to the west, the Valley of Puebla to the east, and the snowcapped heights of Ixtaccihuatl and Popocatepetl to the south. To the north the view extends across the Teotihuacan Valley toward the distant reaches of the dry Chichimeca.

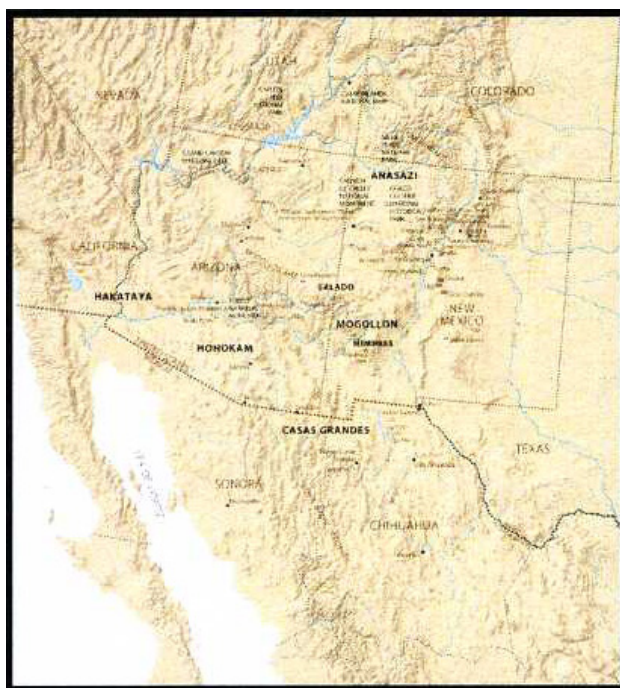


Fig. 3. Southwest and Baja California

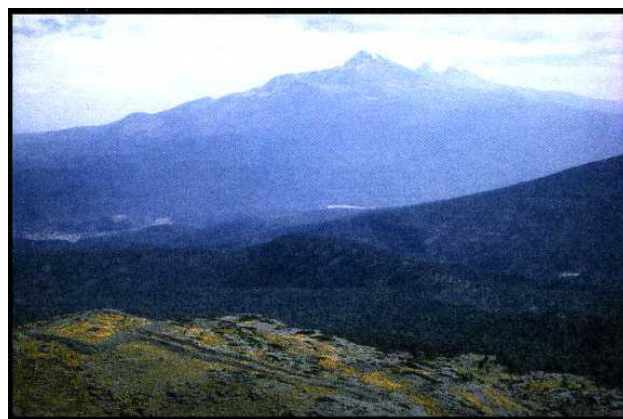


Fig.4. Mt. Tlaloc and temple ruin (foreground)

Tlaloc was the name of the Aztec rain deity as well as the name of the mountain where the Tlaloc temple is located. The Nahuatl etymologies of Tlaloc are *tlalli*, “earth,” and *oztoc*, which may be translated as “long cave.” The metaphoric name points to underground sources of water. Since remote times the mountains were known to be vast reservoirs, with springs supplying local communities for household needs around the year. After the long dry months from late September to early June, it again became time for the rulers to awaken the mountains from their long dormant role, and to call the water held within to rise up and out as towering thunderstorms, renewing the parched countryside. The mountaintop precinct may have been

built long before the fifteenth-century Aztecs, perhaps as early as Teotihuacan a thousand years earlier. The long narrow processional way and the sacred rectangular enclosure symbolized the womb of the earth. A small house-like temple standing within held a stone effigy of the deity Tlaloc. Nearby to the east, a rectangular shaft cut into bedrock led down towards the mountain's interior. On the morning after arriving, each ruler entered the earth-womb enclosure in order of rank to dress and empower the Tlaloc effigy. The procedure of this rite was akin to that of a coronation investiture for installing a ruler in office. The tlatoani of Tenochtitlan first walked up the processional way into the open precinct. His obligation was to place a royal feathered headdress upon the head of the stone Tlaloc effigy. The tlatoani of Tetzaco followed with a splendid cape; the tlatoani of Tlacopan came next with an embroidered loincloth; and the tlatoani of Xochimilco ended the dressing, bearing a pair of elegant sandals (fig. 5). Invocations and elegant supplications were made in each instance. A grand feast offered to Tlaloc was then spread out in the walled enclosure and sprinkled with blood from a sacrificed victim. Meanwhile, another royal feast was also laid out at the nearby campsite. After the offerings and concluding repast, the kings and their parties began the long descent from the mountain.



Fig. 5. Tlaloc



Fig. 6. Tota Tree

While the mountaintop rites were underway, related events were taking place in the Valley of Mexico. A tree had been selected and cut in the forest, and carefully carried without touching the

ground along the south causeway across Lake Tetzco, to be erected in the ritual center of the Aztec island capitol Tenochtitlan (fig. 6). As a symbol of regeneration, the sacred tree was subjected to prayers and songs of renewal. The tree was then taken down and carefully brought to the landing on the east side of the city. From there it would be transported on flat bottom punts, surrounded by a fleet of priests, nobles, musicians and the festive population, to a circular shrine in the eastern lake waters (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Chalchihuitlicue shrine in lake



Fig. 8. Chalchihuitlicue

The final episode began as the rulers arrived from Mt. Tlaloc and reassembled at a lakeshore landing near the city of Tetzco. Everyone then prepared and embarked to offer sacrifice to Tlaloc's counterpart, the female ground water deity Chalchihuitlicue ("jade skirt"), and the sacred tree set up by the shrine in the shallow waters (fig. 8). As the fleet of canoes with royal passengers, priests, and attendants approached with their offerings, they were met by the people, priests, officials and musicians in their canoes, accompanying the punts carrying the consecrated tree from Tenochtitlan. The tree was set up in the shallow waters at the lake shrine, together with songs, prayers, and a sacrifice offering. If all went well, and if the ritualists were of good heart, by

June the cumulonimbus clouds would be seen forming again, billowing miles upward from the peaks of Mt. Tlaloc, Ixtaccihuatl, and Popocatepetl; and as this phenomenon assumed powerful form, anvil-shaped crowns would rise far in the sky, and the wind would blow down with the threatening storm:

Quetzalcoatl—he was the wind, the guide and roadsweeper of the rain gods, of the masters of water, of those who brought the rain. And when the wind rose, when the dust rumbled, and it crackled and there was a great din, and it became dark and the wind blew in many directions, and it thundered; then it was said: “(Quetzalcoatl) is wrathful.”
(Sahagún 1950, I:2–3)

The evocative metaphor brings to the imagination the quetzal bird with long iridescent green plumes, identified since antiquity with royal office, and the word coatl, “snake,” with the sense of sinuous, flowing, potentially dangerous movement, suggesting the power of seasonal storms. As the June currents of warm moist air flow in from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific, and as the heat of the day causes the moisture to rise from warm upland valleys to the cool mountain heights, storms condense and swiftly rise from the mountains and sweep across the highland basins, bringing the long-awaited rain and renewal (fig. 9). In performing these rites, the Aztec kings thus called upon Tlaloc, Chalchihuitlicue, and Quezalcoatl, all deified powers, to advance the seasonal cycle upon which life depended.

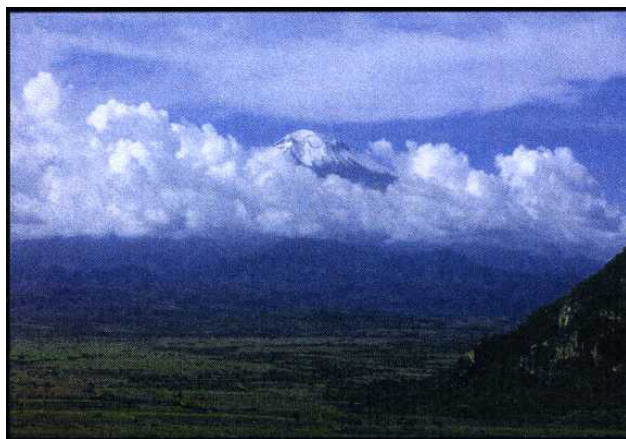


Fig. 9. Clouds form around Mt. Popo



Fig.10. Circular ritual site with central pyramid at Teuchitlan, Jalisco

Tomb Figures of Ancient West Mexico

Our search now turns to Ancient West Mexico during the first and second centuries A.D. In these parts of Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima, “old fashioned” chieftaincies had developed

complexity from earlier village-farming life. From the mountainous reaches of southern Nayarit to the shallow lake basins extending below the extinct volcano Cerro de Tequila in Jalisco, and southward into the state of Colima, many different communities developed local styles of ceramic figures and vessels. These works were displayed in lineage temples and featured as offerings in the deep shaft tombs of ancestral rulers.

It was Adela Breton from the Bristol Museum in England who first identified crucial components in the ancient culture of this West Mexico region. In the 1890s she travelled from Guadalajara to the nearby chain of shallow lake basins. The southernmost lakes evaporate during the long dry season months, but become covered again with shallow water during the summertime rains. Flights of migrating birds promptly arrive to feed as the dormant aquatic life reawakens. Strings of frog's eggs festoon the new rushes, insect larvae teem in the shallows, and hosts of small crayfish and amphibian creatures emerge from hibernation in the primordial lake bottom mud. Breton first visited an estate in Jalisco near the town of Etzatlan, where the landowner was excavating an ancient pyramidal burial barrow. She acquired a number of ceramic tomb figures and other furnishings for the Bristol Museum, before continuing by horseback and canoe around the local lake basin. The next major stop was at an island where obsidian outcrops had been a place of ancient workshops. Points, knives and razor-like blades were here chipped, shaped, and carried by traders with lines of porters to markets elsewhere. Continuing around the western lakeshore, Adela came upon an imposing unreported archaeological site on a hillside above the town of Teuchitlan (Fig. 10). Here surely was the principal site of the region, with a major earthen pyramid rising in the center of a ring of lesser mounds. Similar arrangements were seen standing nearby. Adela's brief published description of these sites was destined to remain unnoticed until the middle of the twentieth century, yet she had accurately noted the crucial relationship in ancient West Mexico between populous communities, rich lake resources, obsidian workshops, and monumental architectural constructions.

West Mexican tombs were being looted by the late nineteenth century, and this activity gathered force after the Revolution of 1910–1920, to continue expanding thereafter as appreciation of Mexico's Indian heritage gathered strength among the artistic and intellectual elite of Mexico City. The antiquities traffic grew exponentially again when the paved highway was completed in the late 1940s, connecting Guadalajara in West Mexico to Los Angeles and the lucrative international art market. Protective controls were eventually enforced after a treaty controlling the looting and sale of antiquities was signed in 1970 between the United States and Mexico. West Mexican tomb figures are featured today in museums and private collections in Mexico City, the United States, Europe and elsewhere. In a plethora of local styles, the figures feature marriage couples, couples with babies, men and women in a range of poses and diverse activities; there are warriors, ritualists, and ballplayers; models of ballcourts with players and spectators; house-like thatched buildings around festival plazas with a central circular pyramid and a tall dance-pole standing in the middle (figs. 11a & b); there are funerary processions and

scenes of ritual drinking and mourning mutilation, while other models illustrate pole dances and scenes of family feasting and drinking on the tall earthen platforms of houses (fig. 12).

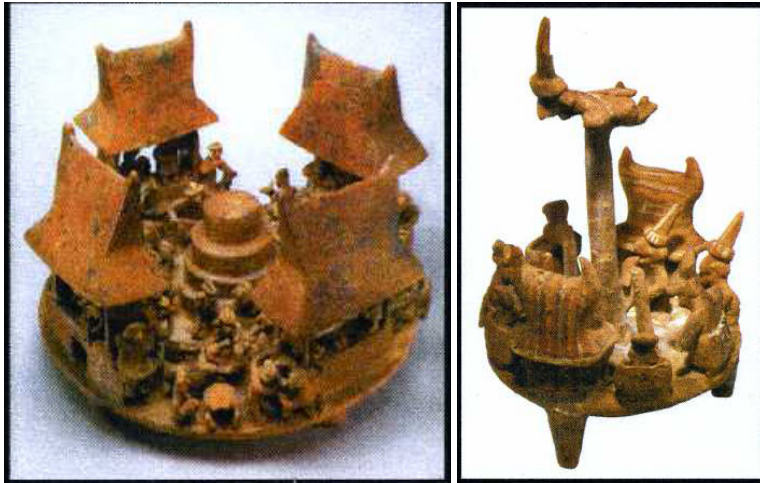


Fig. 11. a.) Festival Plaza; b.) Pole Dance



Fig. 12. Feasting Scene



Fig. 13. Squash Vessel

Many vessels are formed as bowls containing fruits and vegetables, among which the gourd squash vessels with legs shaped in the form macaws of are especially famous (fig. 13). Others are modeled as bowls heaped with shrimps, crayfish, or crabs; roasted dog is also featured, and some vessels model segments of roasted agave leaves—a rustic sweet still sold in the markets today. Many other domesticated plants and wild animals and birds of the region are represented. Most of the native food plants are still found and are widely consumed, amid all the rest that eventually arrived from the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia. West Mexico tomb effigies from the early centuries A.D. are notable in that they do not display the array of ritual masks, wands, clothing

and other emblematic items associated with the pantheon of Aztec nature-gods in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; nor do the figures display the elaborate paraphernalia and formalized bearing associated with royalty in that time, or in other earlier high cultures of Mesoamerica. In the West Mexico chieftaincies, a simple form of society had grown more complex, while retaining and expanding some of the features of the earlier village farming peoples.

Models of circular ritual places replicate the design of archaeological sites with dynastic burials, such as the one at Teuchitlan reported by Adela Breton (now looted). In the case of an unlooted site discovered in the 1990s at Huitzilapa, on the northern side of Cerro de Tequila, intact shaft-tomb chambers reveal how the departed from a local family were equipped with offerings of foods and tokens of rank and status, certifying their role as sponsors of annual rites of renewal (fig. 14). The remains lead us to infer that it was an obligation of the aristocratic elite to maintain a spiritual dialogue with their ancestors, who from within the earth would commune with the all-powerful natural forces and phenomena to ensure the yearly arrival of rain, the productivity of the fields, and the continuation of communal and animal life throughout the region.



Fig. 14. Huitzilapa Tomb

The art of ancient West Mexico has no imagery of gods, no imagery of kings. We approach an older form of stratified society, in which departed chieftains in family mausoleums were equipped with foods and vessels modeled as foods, as well as effigies of animal life and human figures representing social roles and rites of passage. The tomb figures act as certificates, testifying to ritual events sponsored by the departed chiefs, advertising their rank and achievements, and embracing the varied human and animal life in their domains, upon arriving in the underworld land of ancestral spirits. From within the earth they joined their forebears in the ongoing task of communing with the all-powerful forces of nature, with the aim of securing

the regular progression of the seasons, abundant foods, and continuity for their community and animal life in coming years.

When approaching the world-view held by these peoples, it becomes evident that humankind was not seen as standing closer to God above all else in the hierarchy of Creation. On the contrary, as was long ago noted in the case of the Zuni Indians of New Mexico, there is a proclivity to rank humankind at the lowest, beginning position, because of being the most dependent and least mysterious. Next in a rising scale come the animals, which like humankind, have similar organs and physical functions and were correspondingly regarded as mortal; yet because they also possess certain specific instincts and powers more developed than those of humans, they were ranked closer to the higher, immortal and mysterious elements of nature. And these natural elements were seen in turn to be still closer to the most remote, all-powerful, immortal and invisible creative and controlling forces and phenomena. In this mode of thought and perception, all beings, whether mortal, animistic, or deified, are regarded as belonging to a single system of interrelated life. In such a system, the spirits of ancestral chiefs and ranking heroes, dwelling within the earth, acted as sacred intermediaries between living community leaders and the most potent elemental forces and phenomena upon which all life depended.

Hunters and Gatherers: The Southwest and Baja California

Before turning to the early pictographs and petroglyphs of the Southwest and Baja California, we must pause to sketch much earlier archaeological remains in Central and West Mexico, where stone and bone hunting artifacts have been found in association with Pleistocene animal remains. In these regions before 7000 B.C., ancient big game hunters had not yet developed a figurative art portraying their spiritual and mythic world—although it is possible that such imagery was painted on hides and has failed to survive. As it stands, the archaeological record points to an early hunting culture preceding the later bands of hunters and gatherers, whose more diversified way of life essentially corresponds to that of similar band societies in the Southwest and Baja California. But, the Mexican archaeological sites of later hunters and gatherers still lack the rich graphic art of pictographs and petroglyphs such as that of the Southwest and Baja, where an ancient figurative pictorial record is especially well developed and preserved, even continuing into historic and recent times. Therefore it is to the latter two regions that we turn to find the most telling portrayals of the beliefs and practices of hunters and gatherers before the rise of sedentary seed-planting villages and the complex societies that followed.

In the Valley of Mexico north of the Lake Tetzoco basin, the site of Tequixquiac has yielded rich fossil beds of upper Pleistocene date, c. 8000 B.C. The finds include implements of stone and bone such as end- and side-scrapers, unifacial blades with lanceolate contours partly shaped by pressure flaking, and bone awls, all found in gravels and sands containing fossil remains of mammoths, horses, bison, camelids, ground sloths, and mastodons. The sacrum bone of a camelid was slightly carved to resemble a dog or coyote—a famous and unique example. At Santa

Isabel Iztapan, the site of a mammoth kill was unearthed with scattered obsidian side-scrapers, flint blades, the fragment of a bifacial stone knife, three projectile points, and prismatic knives of obsidian. The dismembered and heaped mammoth bones are dated between 7700 B.C. and 7300 B.C. The recovered instruments are similar to others found elsewhere in central and western Mexico. At the site of Tepexpan on the former northeastern shore of Lake Tetzoco, the skeleton of a buried woman was found and dated to 8000 B.C. Far to the northwest, around the shallow lakes of Jalisco, surface collections include such fossilized implements as bone awls, bones used as hammers, boar's tusk chippers, and whistles made from the metatarsal bones of extinct camelids. In the seasonally dry Sayula lakebed in Jalisco, a complete mammoth skeleton was unearthed and now stands reassembled and displayed with the above-mentioned ancient hunter's artifacts in the Guadalajara Regional Museum. In all these lands where Mesoamerican civilization eventually arose, surface surveys and excavations have thus yielded prehistoric animal remains, fossilized tools, and evidence of early hunting sites. Although these remains speak tellingly of ancient economic and social life, major works of art not prevalent, and much less is known about the ways in which these early peoples perceived and represented themselves within the larger order of their world.

In Mexico, the late upper Pleistocene tool inventory is comparable to that of Paleo-Indian Big Game Hunters in the southwestern United States. But after c. 5500 BC in the Southwest, the culture of these early hunting bands began slowly giving way as the former wetter climate began growing drier and the large Pleistocene animal quarry became gradually extinguished. A new cultural and economic life began emerging, best understood as an extension of the North American Desert Tradition, which persisted in some areas into historic times. In this way of life, greater emphasis was placed on gathering and processing wild plant foods in addition to hunting—a feature that was to continue and develop even before knowledge of maize, bean, and squash domestication slowly diffused northward from Mexico. Thus in New Mexico, Utah, and the surrounding region, early pictograph and petroglyph sites were made by hunters and gatherers with only elementary forms of shelter, testifying to the creation of cohesive cultural landscapes before the domestication of plants or permanent settlements. These ancient peoples, like those that evolved from late Paleolithic bands of central and western Mexico, may be compared with the historic Great Basin Utes, Australian Aborigines, African Bushmen, or the Indians of Tierra del Fuego, in that they travelled in small mobile bands of extended families with little property and a more or less egalitarian society. There were no full-time specialists in these groups, where leaders followed the same tasks as those of everyone else, where shamans concerned with spirit communication must also be effective hunters and gatherers, and where anyone could establish contact with the supernatural world by appropriate means. In such societies, people have little notion of omniscient gods, but rather of individual spirits with distinctive attributes and powers, which may be contacted in trance and induced to play a desired role in human life. Movement was restricted to established territories with campsites, rock shelters, and traditional ceremonial places where relationships between people, animals, and

geographical settings were ritually affirmed. But, in contrast to Mexico, this ancient way of life in the Southwest and Baja California also entailed creating a remarkable record of pictographs and petroglyphs illustrating a reductive, yet intensely focused series of spiritual as well as practical connections between the hunting and gathering peoples and the animals and forms of the landscape.



Fig. 15. The Maze

Among scores of pictograph and petroglyph sites dispersed throughout remote parts of the Southwest, three are especially developed and significant to our inquiry. The first site, in southeastern Utah, is reached by a primitive route into the Canyonlands area known as The Maze (fig. 15). A narrow, unpaved vehicle track follows hairpin bends down a steep, rock-lined escarpment and across a broken intermediate level, arriving at a promontory overlooking a vast network of red-and-white banded canyons extending below towards the deeper recesses of the Grand Canyon. The skyline is interrupted by columnar brown sandstone formations. The nearest of these columns are known today as the “Chocolate Drops;” but in antiquity they may have stood as mythic guardians, prefacing similar formations in northern New Mexico and Arizona named in terms of mythic supernatural personages by the more recent Navajo, following a custom seemingly adopted from the older Puebloan cultural tradition. In The Maze, far below these towering forms, an alignment of attenuated figures is painted on the chasm wall just above the canyon floor (fig. 16). To the left, a principal figure holds wriggling lines, seeming to represent snakes as agents of communication between the earth’s surface and underground sources of fertility and water. To the right, a mythic horned figure rises with an extended arm and an open hand; a finger sprouts a bouquet of wild plants, a bird approaches, and horned mountain sheep run down the arm in response to the gesture. Other horned attenuated figures are aligned nearby as if witnessing the event. The scene conveys a sense of invocation, addressed to supernatural spirits concerned with animal increase.

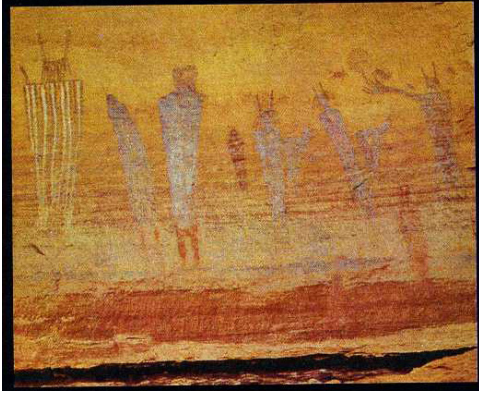


Fig. 16. Petroglyph, The Maze. Note the figure on the far right.

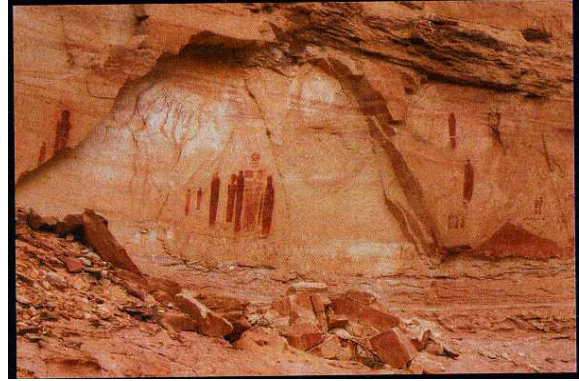


Fig. 17. Barrier Canyon

Among a host of regional pictograph and petroglyph sites, the most compelling is located in Barrier Canyon, a tributary leading into The Maze. A long winding footpath leads down the high rim to continue along the canyon floor. Past several minor pictograph sites, a bend opens to a long stage-like shelf, where painted figures of heroic size are aligned upon the pink-buff sandstone wall (fig. 17). Some figures of deep rust color have flat, attenuated mummy-like frontal silhouettes; others of long trapezoid shape are adorned with simple geometric patterns, and several have simplified mask-like faces with wide staring eyes (fig. 18). Some figures are also feathered away on the bottom, suggesting the act of levitating. Interspersed among these looming supernatural forms, diminutive human figures are drawn in action poses amid wild horned or mountain goats. Here too, as in The Maze, multiple tall supernatural figures loom by the diminutive animal forms and, in this case, several additional human figures.



Fig. 18. Barrier Canyon sheep / goats (to left) and silhouette figures



Fig. 19. Buckhorn Wash

At Buckhorn Wash, not far from The Maze and Barrier Canyon, another pictograph features similar elongated supernatural forms, interspersed with winged insect-like creatures, horned goats or mountain sheep (fig. 19). Long wiggling parallel lines may allude to snakes, and there

are mythic horned serpents with arms and hands and long, broken, angular lines suggestive of lightning. The latter are surely manifestations of the horned or plumed serpents seen in the art of later millennia in the Southwest and Mesoamerica, as metaphoric images associated with the coming of summertime rainstorms and lightning (fig. 20).

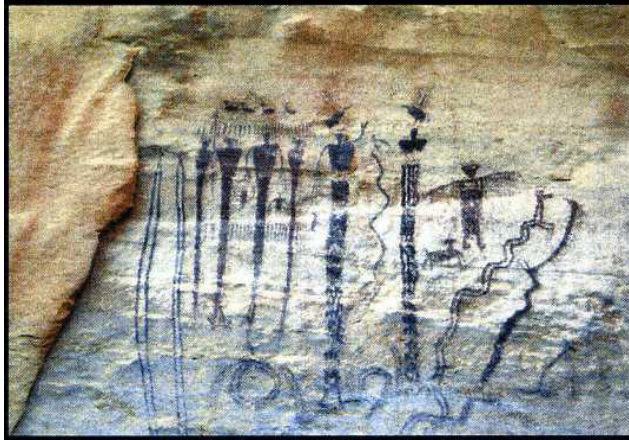


Fig. 20. Buckhorn Wash



Fig. 21. Baja California Sites

While considering these pictographs we are reminded that in band societies there are striking similarities of origin myths and the legends of culture heroes who created people, gave them their customs, kindled the first fire, taught the arts, shaped the landscape and stocked it with game, after which they retired to an idle state, playing no active role or exerting a moral force in the affairs of life. Yet all things in nature are seen to have a spirit embodying its unique characteristics, and a way in which human beings may communicate and influence it. These spirits constitute a multitude of incorporeal entities with different attributes and personalities, which may be summoned or contacted by shamans or individuals in states of trance. Pictographs of otherworldly figures appearing in The Maze, Barrier Canyon, and Buckhorn Wash suggest the presence of such supernatural spirits; some are associated with the increase of animals of the hunt; others may be linked to the weather; and still others seem more connected to the earth and its powers of regeneration. As in many other Hunting and Gathering societies, all may be brought together in connection to rites of passage, especially those concerning the initiation of adolescents. Birth, marriage, and burial rites tend to be individualized and occur randomly, but the physical onset of adulthood is gradual, and adolescents with a year or two of difference in age and from several families may be collectively initiated in a large celebration. This is especially true concerning the initiation of boys destined to be primary providers.

In the Baja California sierras, isolated canyons contain a host of pictographic sites (fig. 21). Certain of these images first came to the attention of Jesuit missionaries in during the eighteenth century. Large pictographs were found in a rock shelter, depicting mule deer and frontal silhouettes of human figures painted red and black with outstretched arms, but otherwise lacking individual features. Although these and other striking images were reported, little more was learned about them until 1889, when a French company established a copper mine and created the company town of Santa Rosalia on the Gulf of California coast. The industrial chemist Leon Dignet arrived and soon took strong interest in the natural history of the region. When Dignet returned to Paris he donated his extensive collections to the Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Man. In 1893–94 he returned to Baja California as the leader of an expedition to further his observations and collections. Dignet’s 1895 paper, “Notes on the Pictographs of Baja California,” brought the murals to the attention of a wider professional audience, although he never saw the greatest concentration of murals in the Sierra de San Francisco.

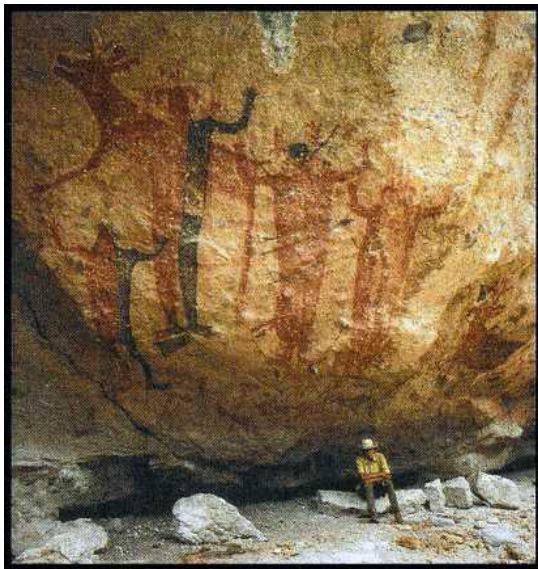


Fig. 22. Baja California pictographs reported by Clement Meighan in the 1950s



Fig. 23. Pictographs from Cueva Pintada, Arroyo de San Pablo, Baja California, reported by Harry Crosby

The Baja California sites attracted little further interest until the 1950s, when the American writer Earle Stanley Gardner reported several of the ancient murals in *Life Magazine*, and published a lively although unscholarly book, *The Hidden Heart of Baja* (fig. 22). However, Gardner also brought the highly qualified archaeologist Clement Meighan of UCLA to see some of the sites, which Meighan duly reported in a 1966 landmark article, “Prehistoric Rock Paintings in Baja California,” featured in *American Antiquity*. A major phase of discovery began in the 1960s, when Harry Crosby and his associates began a project to record and map the full range of central Baja California murals. After twenty years the project has been fully published, recording the extraordinary extent of rock-shelter imagery in dozens of remote canyons. The sites are now protected by the Mexican Government. Dating the images remains uncertain, for even by the

eighteenth-century Jesuit missions, the local Cochimi Indian population seemed to have no connection with the images. Nevertheless, although archaeology in the rugged, isolated region is still in its infancy, a carbon-14 date of 1432 plus-or-minus 80 years indicates that the paintings were made by the Comondu Indians, who were ancestors of the Cochimi. Many superimposed images and a great range of weathered sites across the central sierras suggest much older origins for this isolated, anachronistic pictorial tradition. Regardless of their actual date, the images hark to the culture of an earlier age, comparable to that of the ancient Utah sites.

Baja California pictographs tend to be located in shallow rock shelters, often opening high in cliffs. Among the more than 200 sites in the rugged mountains in the middle of the peninsula, those in the Sierra de San Francisco are the most extensive and especially well developed. On the east wall of the Arroyo de San Pablo, the Cueva Pintada murals are remarkably well preserved (fig. 23). Over 500 feet of the rear wall and ceiling contain images of men and women, leaping mule deer, mountain sheep, rabbits, and birds. Many figures are superimposed in a large-scale palimpsest. Human forms, interspersed with the animals, hold a frontal pose with arms outstretched in the “orant” pose; the figures are painted all black or all red, or in both colors divided lengthwise down the middle. The artist’s interest was not to present a single cohesive scene; rather, human and animal figures are crowded, often superimposed, or in partially overlapping positions. Sections of the rock shelter wall are more extensively painted, while others are less congested or vacant. Other shelters in the Sierra de San Francisco feature animal and human figures shot with spears or arrows, as well as animals including rare mountain lions, fish, manta rays and other sea creatures. At Arroyo del Parral in the southern reaches of the sierra, a 26-foot-long panel at Cueva de la Serpiente displays images of two elongated, antlered serpents with mule deer ears—variants of the plumed and horned serpents seen in Utah pictograph sites, and a multitude of others from later Puebloan and Mexican traditions. Over 50 small frontal figures in red, black, or both colors, are drawn above and below these undulating, dragon-like creatures. In later Southwestern and Mesoamerican symbolic traditions the plumed and horned serpent is a metaphoric icon associated with powerful rainstorms, as we have seen in the above-cited Aztec text describing Quetzalcoatl; and we must also not forget the plumed serpent as a Mesoamerican sign of royal office. In Baja California, other cave shelters also depict manta rays, sea turtles, sea mammals, and shorebirds, suggesting seasonal migrations of people from mountains to shores and back again.

Without buildings, tombs or constructed precincts, hunting and gathering bands in the austere Southwest and Baja California claimed and ordered their world through symbolic expression. Selected landscape features—rock shelters, canyon walls, eroded natural columns and other formations—became congruent with mythological events, and were brought into the human domain by means of pictographic signs and symbols. Painted images become part of local natural settings, contributing to the sense of belonging to a mysterious and meaningful habitat. In Baja California as in the Southwest among hunting and gathering bands, images drawn in rock shelters and other protected places affirmed spiritual charters that established and validated

rights to the land and its animals and plants. By virtue of founding mythologies the charters also became historic, as confirmed through long occupation. Finally, the charters were economic, in terms of affirming privileges to hunt selected animals and to gather plant resources. These categories are all complementary and reinforcing ways of perceiving and using the landscape, providing the visual lexicon for a continuing and productive relationship between the people and their habitat.

Themes of Renewal

As the long dormant dry season approached its end in the Valley of Mexico, Aztec kings and allies ascended Mt. Tlaloc, invested the effigy in royal attire and summoned the waters held in the mountain; then they came to the lake shrine with offerings to Chalchihuitlicue, Jade Skirt, the mother of waters. The rites brought to a close the long dry season and opened the time of rain and renewal. Graphic and sculptural images of Aztec deities do not have the humanized character of Greco-Roman gods, who even by the time of Homer had the legendary capacity to intervene capriciously in human affairs as well as controlling the natural elements. In the fifteenth-century Valley of Mexico, the names of the deities are extended poetic metaphors, *kennings* with a complete substitution of terms, alluding to the properties and powers of the elements represented. There is a sense of participation in the ceremonial events, in which assembled kings and priests respectfully summoned and installed the energies and forces of fertility and annual growth. Throughout these ritual exchanges, the immediacy of the landscape and the natural forces remained ever-present.

In ancient West Mexico the presence of gods is absent. Images of nature deities seen among the Aztecs and their neighbors a thousand five hundred years later are nowhere apparent. The chiefs of leading lineages and their ancestors stood as primary agents of communication with the forces and phenomena of nature. Within the shaft tombs, figures of men and women represented the departed, sometimes standing, sometimes seated side by side, while other figures play instruments, wield weapons, carry burdens, and perform many daily or special tasks; there are other figures of family and lower ranking community members; and the tombs are equipped with real or modeled foods laid out in the burial chambers. Such figures were made to certify the status and achievements of the deceased, certifying their fulfillment of communal obligations upon arriving among their forbears within the earth. Joining the ancestral spirits, it became their ongoing task to transmit the petitions of the living community and to help in securing favorable connections with the natural elements upon which life depended.

In the ancient Southwest and Baja California, primary connections between the social and the natural orders were affirmed by pictographs and petroglyphs. Here we find no pantheon of deities, and the presence of ancestors and their varied activities is also lacking. In Barrier Canyon, The Maze, and Buckhorn Wash, supernatural figures may be attenuated and horned, or of elongated, solid silhouettes or looming trapezoidal shapes, rising among diminutive human and

animal figures. In Baja California, human forms of red and black color, frontal stance, and open-armed gesture, accompany lively images of animals sought in the hunt. It may be that these depictions, like many others belonging to hunting and gathering bands, refer to a world where mythic creator gods have completed their tasks and long become passive, giving way to an assortment of spirits providing active connections between hunters, animals, and the natural elements. Such entities seem to be represented by the anthropomorphic figures in these Baja shelters. In addition to serving for seasonal hunting rites, a likely purpose of the Utah and Baja California pictographic sites was to serve as settings for rites of passage, especially intended for initiating adolescent boys into adulthood and its obligations in hunting and gathering life. Instead of temples and tombs, rock shelters were places for spiritual communication, serving as openings between the visible physical world and the invisible domains of the animal powers upon which life depended.

Underlying these different views, rites, signs and symbols, a fundamental theme was held and transmitted, providing a line of cultural continuity between the Aztecs and their neighbors, the West Mexico chiefdoms, and the Southwestern and Baja hunters and gatherers. These societies stand among many others that evolved in different periods, places, and historical circumstances, with diverse social structures and various economic, military, and religious activities. Yet they also shared an ancient and abiding notion of human society as an active participant, maintaining the regular, predictable succession of the seasons, the continuing wealth of plants and animals, and a deep-seated sense of integration with the landscapes where they lived. Visual art and ritual performance played a vital role in expressing that connection. To be sure, ancient societies could be as destructive of their natural environments as those of today on a grander scale. Nevertheless, throughout the history of this mode of thought, it was ever held that the wellbeing of the community depended on maintaining a relationship of reciprocity between the order of human society and the larger order of the natural environment—an ancient principle of universal significance, standing as a point of reference, a touchstone for our own ongoing vital concern for safeguarding the resources of the planet.

Recommended Reading

- Castleton, Kenneth B. 1987. *Petroglyphs and pictographs of Utah, vol. 2, The South, Central, West and Northwest*. Salt Lake City: Utah Museum of Natural History.
- Clottes, Jean. 2002. *World Rock Art*. Translated by Guy Bennett. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust.
- Crosby, Harry W. 1997. *The Cave Paintings of Baja California*. San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, Inc.
- Sahagún, Bernardino de. 1565. *Florentine Codex, General History of the Things of New Spain, Book I, The Gods*. Translated by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Santa Fe and Salt Lake City: The School of American Research and the University of Utah.
- Schaafsma, Polly. 1980. *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest*. Santa Fe and Albuquerque: School of American Research and University of New Mexico Press.
- Service, Ellman R. 1966. *The Hunters*. Foundations of Modern Anthropology Series. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Townsend, Richard F. 2009. *The Aztecs*. Third edition. London and New York: Thames and Hudson.
- . 1998. *Ancient West Mexico*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Weaver, Muriel Porter. 1981. *The Aztecs, Maya, and Predecessors, Archaeology of Mesoamerica*. Second Edition. New York: Academic Press, Inc.