

## **Ceremony, Symbolism, and Public Architecture in Late Formative Jalisco**

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Christopher S. Beekman - Glenn Black Laboratories  
8120 Bridgeway Circle #3B  
Fort Wayne, IN 46816  
(219) 447-8328  
(Address valid until December 5, 1999)  
E-mail cbeekman@aol.com

### **Abstract**

The art and archaeology of Precolumbian Jalisco have consistently been interpreted as an outsider to Mesoamerica, due largely to the minimal attempts at comparative analysis. As the dirt archaeology of the region is being reevaluated and rewritten, the symbolic aspects of Jalisco society also deserve a new approach. This paper examines the prominent and distinctive circular Teuchitlan Tradition public architecture centered in Jalisco in a preliminary attempt at just such a comparative study. To this end I use the existing archaeological data regarding the form and function of the architecture, as well as the Precolumbian ceramic models that show various activities taking place around these structures, and some ethnographic data. The activities depicted in the ceramic models include a pole-climbing ceremony that appears to be a direct correlate of that found in contact period Aztec society and even Classic period Teotihuacan. The significance of these rites in agricultural terms is discussed, and the organization of the architecture into upper, middle, and under worlds is presented. At this point, we can draw a number of cosmological parallels between public architecture in Jalisco and in selected areas of Mesoamerica. The paper concludes with a discussion of maize symbolism in the Teuchitlan Tradition architecture and how this compares to maize symbolism commonly found elsewhere in Mesoamerica.

### **Introduction**

West Mexican Precolumbian art and archaeology has consistently been interpreted as an outsider, due largely to the minimal attempts at comparative analysis. The region is usually seen as influenced variously by major Mesoamerican centers, by South Americans, by contacts with the American Southwest, etc. But the region is rarely seen as *belonging* to any particular one of these areas, least of all Mesoamerica. The exotic aspects of West Mexican society have usually been emphasized at the expense of the more numerous points of comparison.

I want to illustrate an alternative approach today by examining the Teuchitlan Tradition public architecture of the Late Formative and Classic period (300 B.C.- A.D. 900), focused primarily in the highlands of central Jalisco with some outliers in surrounding states. Buildings of this tradition are nicknamed guachimontones, and follow a general pattern of increasing elaboration over time. The Late Formative examples have 4 structures around the central altar, while the later Classic period examples have usually 8, but sometimes 10 or even 12, structures around a central conical pyramid. One cannot deny the odd regularity of the form. Its distinctive form has only encouraged the argument that these are too outre to be Mesoamerican.

Most prior studies of the architecture have either been exclusively archaeological, discussing hierarchy, labor costs, etc. (Weigand 1985, Ohnersorgen and Varien 1996), or they have tended to focus on the distinctive geometry of these centers (Weigand 1992). *The* introductory work to the symbolic aspects of the guachimontones remains that of J. Charles Kelley (1974), who pointed out that ceramic models found in western Mexican tombs depicted recognizable Mesoamerican ceremonies taking place in these arenas. Kelley and those following him have specifically identified this as the pan-Mesoamerican *volador* ceremony (Clavijero 1958[??], Torquemada 1723[1612]), still practiced in many areas today. Kelley went on to note the calendrical, four-directional and world tree symbolism to be found in various of these dioramas, and more recently Christopher Witmore has added to this view, arguing that the models interpret the architecture as an *axis mundi*, a central focal point of power often associated in the Mesoamerican worldview with mountains on the one hand, and spiritually charged shamans or rulers, on the other (cf. repeated references in Freidel, et al. 1993).

Their conclusions in essence relate the guachimonton form to the Mesoamerican cosmological structure. Certainly the central circular altar is tied to the sky and the upper world through the medium of the pole. The patio as the place of dancing, drinking, and other activities may be identified with this world. Finally, shaft tombs have on various occasions been found underneath these secondary structures on the outside of the circle, and although the guachimonton architectural complex itself was as yet unrecognized in the early 1970s, Peter Furst plausibly argued at that time that the ancient West Mexicans conceptualized the shaft tombs as entrances to the underworld.

By embodying all three levels of the Mesoamerican cosmological worldview, the guachimonton appears to be following a pattern similar to that identified at various other Mesoamerican centers (e.g. Guillemain 1968, Coggins 1980, 1982, Sugiyama 1993, Grove 1999, Joyce n.d.). Ashmore in particular (1989, 1991) has pointed to the tendency for Mesoamerican architecture to encompass representations of the sky, earth, and underworld. She has noted (Ashmore 1989: 273-274) that within the layout of many Maya centers, there is often a tendency for the highest structures, as representations of a sacred mountain, to lie along the northern edge of a plaza. Similarly, there are other symbols indicative of the sky or celestial features, as well as hieroglyphic or iconographic references to ancestors of the elites, who thus presumably have some kind of tie to these spheres after death. Along the southern edges of these same plazas, Ashmore identifies examples of elite residences, ballcourts, and symbols of the earth or underworld. Sugiyama (1993) has described an emphasis on similar principles at Teotihuacan. Here the mountain and celestial aspects have been combined (120-121) in the Pyramid of the Moon, while the southern part of the city's center is focused on the royal palace, water symbolism, and the underworld. Arthur Joyce (n.d.) has recently made similar arguments in Oaxaca, and David Grove has focused instead on variations in these patterns between different Formative centers (1999).

Although the broad Mesoamerican worldview seems clearly represented in the Teuchitlan Tradition architecture, there are differences that have been imposed by the circular form. Whereas the Maya examples have turned the universe sideways so that the different elements could be arrayed on the various sides of a rectangular plaza, the guachimonton presents the cosmological elements in vertical relationship. I suspect that in this discussion I am not stating anything terribly shocking to anyone. For those expecting to find Mesoamerican connections, the pattern seems relatively clear. Indeed, this increasing recognition of the presence of Mesoamerican principles in Teuchitlan Tradition architecture has begun to change the tone of scholarly discussion (Townsend

1998), despite the almost total lack of any formal argument to this effect.

I think we might add to our understanding, however, by noting that the ceramic dioramas I showed you earlier may not all depict the *volador* ceremony, but some may better correspond to the Xocotl Huetzi, a ceremony from the veintena Huey Miccailhuitl recorded in central Mexico in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but to be found ethnohistorically and ethnographically from the Mixtec to the Maya, and from the Otomi to the Aztec.

The Xocotl Huetzi ritual, as described by Duran (1971[1574-79]), Sahagun (1950-69[1578-80]), and others (Quinones Keber 1995: Folio 2V, Boone 198?:195-196), involved the placement of either banners or an image in amaranth dough of the fire deity Xiuhteuctli or the Otomi deity Otonteuctli. Dancing, drinking, and feasting were part of the ceremony, which culminated in a race among male youths to reach the top of the pole and capture the image. Seler and more recently Annabeth Headrick (1998) have interpreted this ritual, which was the central ceremony for one of the months in the central Mexican 365 day calendar, as martial in orientation and as devoted to the souls of dead warriors. Headrick notes, however, that the Tepantitla mural painting that depicts the Xocotl Huetzi ceremony at Classic period Teotihuacan also includes a number of agricultural references associated with the Great Goddess, and I would like to take off from this point.

Both the volador and Xocotl Huetzi rituals make a number of interesting parallel references to fertility. Motolinia (1903[??]) and Boturini (1933 in Robelo 1951) actually conflate the volador ceremony with that of Xocotl Huetzi, while scholars such as Krickeberg seem to have actually confused illustrations of the latter ceremony with the former. Both pole ceremonies have been interpreted by Margain (1939) and Stresser Pean (1948) as phallic in orientation, and the culminating moment of the volador ceremony occurs when the four flyers leap from the top of the pole. We have no precolumbian name for the volador ritual, but Xocotl Huetzi means "Fall of fruit", evidently a reference to ripening plants and an early harvest. Krickeberg (1964:160) argued that the volador was practiced as a ritual to the origins of edible plants. Castro de la Rosa (1985) and Luis Leal (1977-78) have emphasized the fertility aspects of both rituals. Dahlgren de Jordan (1966:245-249) describes pole-climbing ceremonies among the Zapotec and Mixtec as explicitly tied to pleas for rain for crops.

Although the Xocotl Huetzi ceremony was in Precolumbian times specifically linked to late in the month of August (Sahagun 19??, Duran 1971, Quinones Keber 1995, Boone 198?), the various classes of pole-climbing ceremonies today are scattered across the calendar (Mena and Arriaga 1930:40, Redfield 1936, Bunzel 1952: 424-426, Larsen 1937, several others to be added from HMAI). I do, however, discern foci in the spring and the month of August. Both, I think, may relate to points in the agricultural calendar - an early planting prior to the rainy season, and about the time of early harvest, perhaps a correlate to the very significant Green Corn ceremony found among Native Americans further to the north. Dates of agricultural significance will, of course, vary across Mesoamerica's ecological zones, and will require more specific study.

But the timing of these rituals seems particularly significant when we take another point into account. About a year and a half ago I was examining Wellhausen, et al.'s (1952) classic volume on maize varieties in Mexico, and in particular their cross-sectional representations of the different varieties. I was more than a little startled when I realized that cross-sections of eight-rowed varieties such as Harinoso de Ocho or Tabloncillo were extremely similar in appearance to maps of the 8 structured guachimontones of the Classic period.

My first doubts were in regards to the cross-sectional nature of the image. But Byron

Hamann has since pointed out to me that cross-sections are not alien to Mesoamerican art, and he has even pointed to the glyph row layout around the rim of Maya altars as another possible example depicting the seed rows of maize in a cross-sectional form.

My second set of doubts was in regards to such a tremendous emphasis on maize and the attention to the detail of the maize rows. Byron once again came to my rescue, pointing to the dual column organization of Maya writing and its possible reference to the paired nature of seed rows on maize ears. In addition, Karl Taube has demonstrated the common depiction of maize in Olmec, Maya, and Aztec art (1996, 1999), and in particular its substitutional relationship with jade lightning celts, quetzal plumes, and the axis mundi. Together these form a “symbolic language of corn” (Taube 1999:?) relating maize and rain that Taube argues to have been in place by the Middle Formative period, and associated with the rapidly growing dietary dependence on maize. The emphasis on this staple crop is entirely understandable - it may have formed around 70-80% of the Precolumbian diet. So is the iconographic convention in both Mesoamerica and the Southwest U.S. of relating maize to symbolic wealth specific to those areas, jade and quetzal plumes in the former, vs. turquoise, imported shell and macaw feathers in the latter.

My final set of doubts were rather more prosaic. Corn is not simply corn, perhaps a bias inflicted on me by spending the past two years in Indiana. Maize, although originating in Mesoamerica, has spawned a wide variety of races, ranging from 8 to 30-something rows (e.g. Wellhausen, et al. 1952). These numbers are always even, due to the paired nature of the chromosomes determining row number in maize. Classification and an understanding of maize evolution has taken great strides in recent decades, and studies by Benz (1986) and Sanchez Gonzalez (1989), among others, have clarified several large groupings with strong geographical foci. One of the most prominent is the West Mexican or 8-rowed group (see Sanchez G. 1994:141-142), consisting of about 16 varieties including those I named above. Of course, maize varies somewhat, and the actual row number of a given cob can be 8, 10, 12, although usually towards the low end of this scale. While several of these varieties are of post-Conquest origin, still others have been identified in archaeological contexts from the Southwest, northern and central Mexico extending back to the Classic and Late Formative periods. The distribution of these maize races virtually rings the area in central Jalisco I am discussing, but excavation here has been so minimal as to identify only maize pollen to date, and no remains assignable to race. Nonetheless, western Mexico is looking increasingly like another major center of maize experimentation and diversification, along with the three other centers of central Mexico, southern Mexico, and Guatemala (Sanchez G. 1994).

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the Teuchitlan Tradition public architecture in its Late Formative version makes clear reference to the Mesoamerican worldview of the four world directions and the layered cosmos, all parts of an iconographic and conceptual complex that Taube has linked to an increasing dependence on agriculture. The models of the pole-climbing ceremonies are thought to pertain to this period, and whether we see them as volador or Xocotl Huetzi rituals, then we have another potential agricultural reference at this early date. These allusions become considerably more significant sometime towards the end of the Late Formative, when these people take maize symbolism even further by molding the architecture into the form of the most prominent varieties of maize to be found in the region.

The link between these two major threads of cosmology and agriculture, or what have

been called the Great and Little Traditions of Mesoamerica, is not as clearly evidenced in tangible architectural form anywhere else in this culture area to my knowledge. Yet major questions remain. 8 rowed varieties appear to be somewhat greater in productivity compared to earlier varieties postulated for the far west - did experimentation and improvement of corn varieties play a role in the increased symbolic attention being given to maize? How did this increased public reference to agriculture impact upon the social status of everyday farmers, on whose backs Mesoamerican society was built? How did this particular ideology compare to the overlapping one associated with the shaft tomb mortuary program and its seemingly distinct emphasis on privileged elites and exotic imports?

I have a great deal more accumulated on this topic which I intend to elaborate upon in the near future, but I do hope to encourage a response from the more qualified iconographers and art historians, who I am firmly convinced will have much to add to our understanding of West Mexico in the years to come.

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