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A New Interpretation of the Aztec Statue Called Coatlicue, “Snakes-Her-Skirt”

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Abstract. Most scholars, citing a passage in the sixteenth-century *Florentine Codex* by Bernardino de Sahagún (1550–82), have interpreted the famous Aztec stone statue known as Coatlicue, “Snakes-Her-Skirt,” as a reference to that goddess’s role as the mother of the Aztec patron deity Huitzilopochtli. Sahagún’s text, however, cannot account for the statue’s portrayal of Coatlicue as decapitated and dismembered, the presence of similar statues that appear to have been part of the same set, or the lavish attention the carver paid to her skirt of braided serpents. The statue seems to better match several other sixteenth-century accounts in which, at the creation of the world, Coatlicue and four of her sisters were voluntarily sacrificed in order to put the sun in motion. The women left behind only their *mantas*, or large rectangular panels of cloth used to make Mexica skirts, from which they eventually were resurrected. The Coatlicue statue may represent this resurrected creatrix, whose sacrifice gave us light and warmth, in the form of her personified skirt.

Prior to the 1978 discovery of the now-famous carved-stone relief of Coyolxauhqui, “Bells-Her-Face,” the rebellious sister of the Mexica migration leader Huitzilopochtli, the most famous Aztec sculpture of a woman was the one known as Coatlicue. Towering over visitors to the Museo Nacional de Antropología, this statue, at a height of over eight feet, remains the largest three-dimensional Mexica carving in existence. Discovered in the course of reconstruction and drainage work in the Plaza Mayor of Mexico City in 1790, the statue was named for the figure’s magnificently carved skirt, which is formed by multiple intertwined rattlesnakes (fig. 1). The skirt and the figure’s exposed breasts make it clear that the statue is gendered female. The snakes have long been regarded as a ideogram for the name Coatlicue,



Figure 1. "Coatlicue," Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico. Photo courtesy of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

“Snake Skirt,” or, more accurately, “Snakes-Her-Skirt.” The skirt, in other words, tells us the name of the being portrayed in the statue.

Most scholars have tried to understand the Coatlicue statue as the mother of Huitzilopochtli, whose statue at the time of the conquest presided over the southern half of the Mexica’s main temple, located just northeast of the Plaza Mayor.¹ By that time, Huitzilopochtli had become the national patron and stood at the apex of the entire Mexica pantheon. The identification of the Coatlicue statue as Huitzilopochtli’s mother is based on a recorded incident that took place at a mountain called Coatepec, “Snake Mountain,” toward the end of the Mexica migration from their mythical homeland in Aztlan. Book 3 of the *Florentine Codex*, written in the second half of the sixteenth century by the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún (1950–82: 3:1–5), recounts that at Coatepec, Coyolxauhqui led an attack against her mother, here named Coatlicue, because she was annoyed that her mother had become pregnant. The child that Coatlicue carried in her womb was Huitzilopochtli, and he, having learned of the threat against his mother, emerged, fully armed, to successfully defend her. An accompanying illustration of the birth depicts Coatlicue wearing a skirt formed of tangled serpents (fig. 2).

The narrative ends with Huitzilopochtli decapitating his sister on the top of Snake Mountain and rolling her body down its side, where it broke into pieces. This event is commonly taken to explain the fact that the Coatlicue statue appears to have been decapitated and dismembered. The figure’s arms and legs each take the form of a giant snake, while two serpents appear to rise up from the neck and join at the nose to create a monstrous head. As Justino Fernández (1990 [1954]: 134) observed some years ago, the serpents that form the peculiar head of the Coatlicue statue represent streams of blood, indicating that the goddess has been beheaded. The snakes that form her missing limbs imply that she has also been dismembered.

Curiously, that it is Coyolxauhqui rather than her mother who is decapitated and dismembered in Sahagún’s version of events has seldom been seen as troubling. In the contemporary variant of the tale provided by Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc (1975: 35), it is Huitzilopochtli’s mother, there named Coyolxauhcihuatl, “Bell Face Woman,” whose insubordination against her son Huitzilopochtli leads to her death. It is therefore easy to avoid the discrepancy by assuming that Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui were variants of the same being (e.g., Klein 1988: 243; Heyden 1998: 177). Alvarado Tezozomoc, however, says nothing about Coyolxauhcihuatl having been decapitated or dismembered. Rather, he says only that the god consumed his mother’s heart, an act suggesting that she died as a result of heart excision, a common form of Aztec human sacrifice, according to colonial authors. That Coatlicue appears in stone missing her head and



Figure 2. Coatlicue having given birth to Huitzilopochtli. After Sahagún's *Códice florentino* [Florentine Codex], Book 3, folio 3v. Drawing by the author.

limbs is therefore not explained by either Sahagún's or Alvarado Tezozomoc's narratives of the events that took place at Coatepec.

There are, moreover, several other aspects of the Coatlicue statue for which Sahagún's version of the events at Coatepec cannot account. One is the extraordinary visual importance accorded to the woman's skirt, which bears elaborate detailing seldom seen in the treatment of clothing in Mexica stone carvings. Another is the presence of the date 12 Acatl, "12 Reed," which appears on the upper part of the figure's back. Third, as Elizabeth Boone (1973, 1999) has pointed out, there exists in the Museo Nacional de Antropología an equally large and elaborately carved statue of a similarly dismembered woman who wears a skirt formed not of snakes, but of human hearts (fig. 3). Although the top of the so-called Yolotlicue (Hearts-Her-Skirt) statue is missing, it presumably had a "head" formed of two serpents just like Coatlicue's. This being likewise has the date 12 Reed inscribed on her upper back. The size, composition, iconographic details, and carving style of this second figure match those of the Coatlicue statue so closely that it is clear that they were carved by the same workshop, if not the same artist, and that they were probably intended to be displayed together.

Finally, as Boone (1973, 1999) has noted, there are fragments of at least one and possibly three other statues in the *bodegas* (storerooms) of the Museo Nacional de Antropología that were almost certainly part of this same set (figs. 4, 5). One of these fragments represents part of a skirt of braided serpents, while another represents a section of a shell-tipped back panel, or "Star Skirt" (*citlallinicue*), combined with part of a serpent skirt. Both the Coatlicue and the Yolotlicue statues wear these distinctive back panels.²

Previous scholars who have written about the Coatlicue statue have neglected to mention, let alone tried to account for, most or all of these features. In what follows, I will therefore offer a different reading of the Coatlicue statue, one that in my opinion better accounts for the features just described. This reinterpretation of one of Mexico's best-loved national treasures has important implications, not only for our understanding of the pre-Hispanic past, but also for gender studies in general. By redirecting our attention to a mythic event that has never before been linked to this statue, I will argue that the statue represents Coatlicue as an important creator goddess who, along with several other deities (all of whom, according to one source, were likewise female) long ago gave up their lives to give birth to and energize the fifth and present sun. According to the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891), it was in the form of their mantas, or large rectangular panels of cloth, which I suggest formed their



Figure 3. "Yolotlicue," Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth H. Boone.



Figure 4. Fragment of stone statue, Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth H. Boone.

skirts, that these goddesses returned to life, to be venerated by the Mexica during their stop at Coatepec along the migration route from Aztlan. My thesis is that it is precisely such an anthropomorphized skirt that we see in the famous statue of Coatlicue.

If I am correct, Coatlicue assumes the unusual form that she takes in this famous statue not simply—or even primarily—because she was the mother of the national patron deity (indeed, Sahagún’s story of Huitzilopochtli’s birth is all about how he saved his mother’s life, not took it), but because she was a primordial creator goddess who, long before the Mexica left Aztlan, voluntarily gave her life to help create a habitable world. Like her companions, she appears in stone as she looked when she returned to life: as a personification of the quintessential female garment representative of her name and gender. Because this distinctive skirt embodied the formidable generative powers of all women—that is, of Woman—those powers could continue to be accessed down through time by the living.



Figure 5. Fragment of stone statue, Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth H. Boone.

This reading of the Coatlicue statue draws from colonial accounts of a very different episode in Mexica mythohistory. One of these appears in the anonymous *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*, thought to be one of the earliest colonial documents to survive the conquest (García Icazbalceta 1891: 235, 241). There it is stated that long ago, when the earth was still in darkness, the god Tezcatlipoca created four hundred men and five women “in order that there be people for the sun to eat.” The four hundred men died four years later, but the five women lived on for another twelve years before dying, according to the text, on “the day the sun was created.”³ Although it is not explicitly stated, the implication is that it was the women’s voluntary deaths that made it possible for the sun to be born. This is supported by a similar account in the *Leyenda de los soles* (Bierhorst 1992a: 149). There the sun is said to have been unable to move. The situation was resolved, according to the *Leyenda*, by the collective self-sacrifice of five deities, two of whom were male and included Huitzilopochtli. The name of one of the three females was Xochiquetzal, “Precious Flower,” while the other two were named Nochpalliucue, “Red-Her-Skirt,” and Yapalliucue.⁴

While none of the three goddesses in the *Leyenda de los soles* was named “Snakes-Her-Skirt,” it is significant that two of them have the word “skirt” in their names. The inclusion of the word for skirt strongly suggests that the goddesses’ skirts were keys to their identities at the same time that it reminds us of the distinctive, carefully carved designs on the skirts of the Coatlicue and Yolotlicue statues. The reference to skirts in these names further raises the question of whether a direct link exists between the names of these women and the two statues. At this time, this does not appear to be the case for Yapalliicue. Although *yapalli*, the root of that name, is not included in John Bierhorst’s (1992b) glossary to the *Leyenda de los soles*, Alonso Molina’s (1970: 31v) Nahuatl-to-Spanish dictionary gives it as the “color black.” This suggests that Yapalliicue is best translated as “Black-Her-Skirt,” a name that cannot be directly tied to either the Coatlicue or the Yolotlicue statue.

Eulogio Guzman (personal communication, 2006), however, has pointed out that Nochpalliicue, the name of the second primordial woman who gave up her life to get the sun to move, may be a more appropriate name for the statue known today as Yolotlicue. Bierhorst (1992b: 151) translates *nochpalli* as “tuna color, i.e., carmine.” While this points to a translation of Nochpalliicue as “Red-Her-Skirt,” it is significant that the root word *nochtli* refers to the fruit, or “tuna,” of the nopal (*nopalli*) cactus (Molina 1970: 72v). In its basic form and reddish color, the nopal tuna may be seen to resemble a human heart, a resemblance of which the Aztecs made much.⁵ As Alfonso Caso (1927: 56) observed of the large cactus carved on the back of the miniature pyramid known as El Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada (the Pyramid of the Sacred War), the Aztecs frequently depicted nopal tunas in the form of human hearts (fig. 6). The association of the tuna, or *nochtli*, with human sacrifice is further evident, as Caso (57) pointed out, in the Aztec use of the word *cuauhnochtli*, “eagle tuna,” to refer to the heart of a sacrificial victim. For Caso, the nopal cactus surmounted by an eagle, which served as the prime symbol of the founding of the Aztec capital, was a “tree of sacrifice” that fed the sun with the hearts of sacrificed victims. This notion is echoed in Carmen Aguilera’s (1985: 117) statement that the tunas on the nopal cactus in the *Codex Mendoza*’s version of the foundation of the Aztec capital (Berdan and Anawalt 1992: 3: folio 19r) symbolize “the bloody hearts of the sacrificed.” The close association of tunas with human sacrifice would have been highly appropriate in the context of an ancient woman who gave up her life so the world could have light. The “hearts” in the Yolotlicue statue’s skirt therefore may allude to, if they do not actually represent, reddish nopal tunas, or *nochtli*, that identify her not

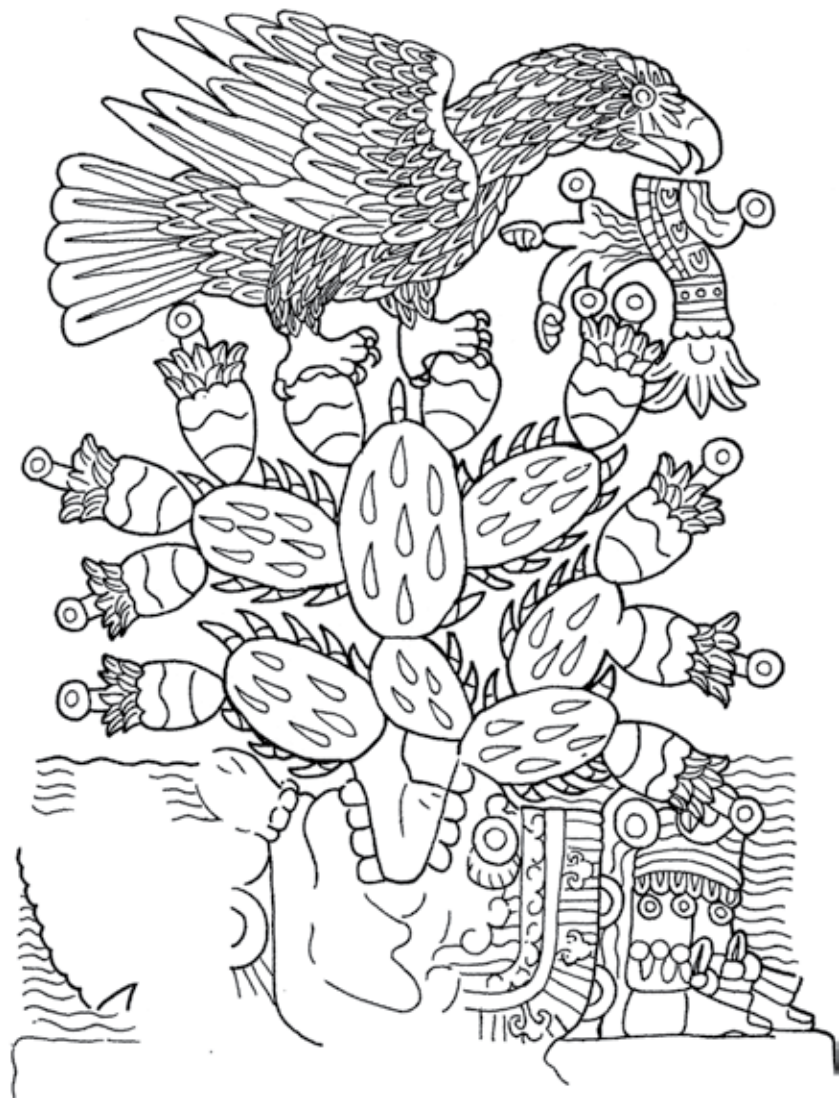


Figure 6. Relief of eagle on nopal cactus with heart-tunas, on back of El Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada. Drawing by Eulogio Guzman.

as Yolotlicue, a name never seen in the chronicles, but as Nochpalliicue, the third woman identified in the *Leyenda de los soles* to have been voluntarily sacrificed in order to put the sun in motion.

The *Leyenda de los soles*'s identification of the remaining woman as Xochiquetzal, in turn, can be linked to the statue representing Coatlicue. The commentator of the relatively late *Codex Ríos* (Corona Nuñez 1967: 3:26) says that the Aztecs, of whom the Mexica were the principal group, spoke of a woman at Tula named Chimalman, "Shield," who had two sisters named Xochitlique and Conatlique. These spellings surely represent mangled renderings of the names Xochiquetzal and Coatlicue, and Tula in this story, like the setting recounted in the *Leyenda de los soles*, represents an ancient era prior to the arrival and rise to power of the Aztecs. Given that, as in the story in the *Leyenda de los soles*, this story refers to an event in the distant past, it is notable that the two sisters are said to have died of fright when an ambassador sent by Citlalantonac, identified here with the Milky Way, descended from the sky. Although Coatlicue in this account appears to have died in vain, this is probably a greatly truncated and garbled version of the same creation story recounted in the *Leyenda de los soles*. If so, it supports my hypothesis that Coatlicue was one of the goddesses who sacrificed themselves to put the sun in motion.

There is additional evidence for this hypothesis. To begin with, we find Coatlicue again associated with Xochiquetzal in Sahagún's (1950-82: 2:5) description of the rites conducted at the end of the month of Tlacaxipehualiztli and the beginning of its successor, Tozoztontli. According to the Franciscan, at this time of the year, when the Mexica offered the first flowers of the year, the keepers of the flowers, who were called *xochimanque*, "celebrated a feast to their goddess, named Coatlicue, or by another name, Coatlán tonan." The participants were the Coateca, the people of the *calpulli* (barrio) named Coatlan, who, writes Sahagún (1950-82: 2:57), "placed their trust in her; she was their hope; they depended upon her; she was their support." That Coatlicue reappears in this report in association with flowers reinforces the likelihood that was she was conceived as being in some way related to Xochiquetzal. This link strengthens the probability that Coatlicue, like Xochiquetzal and the two other goddesses with the word *skirt* in their name, was one of the goddesses who sacrificed themselves to help the sun.

Secondly, according to *Codex Ríos*'s (Corona Nuñez 1967: 3:26) account of the death of Xochiquetzal and Coatlicue, Chimalman—specified to have been a virgin, as was Huitzilopochtli's mother in the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950-82: 3:1-5)—survived her sisters to conceive and give birth to the deified culture hero Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. She did so at the

request of the heavenly ambassador sent by Citlalantonac, god of the Milky Way. Here, then, it is Chimalman, rather than Coatlicue, who gives birth to a god, whereas Coatlicue and her other sister, like the three goddesses in the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 241), die prematurely. I am aware of Diego Muñoz Camargo's (1978: 40n) claim that, in Tlaxcala, it was Coatlicue, as the wife of Mixcoatl Camaxtli, a creator god identified, like Citlalantonac, with the Milky Way, who was said to be the mother of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. This could be construed as support for the notion that the Coatlicue statue represents the goddess as Huitzilopochtli's mother. However, my thesis that the Mexica statue of Coatlicue represents her as one of the women who died to put the sun in motion is supported by the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 241). In its account of the five women who sacrificed themselves to give birth to the sun, that document gives the name of one of these women as Cuatlique (Coatlicue), "Snakes-Her-Skirt."

This could explain the enigmatic date, 12 Reed, that appears on the upper back of not only the Coatlicue statue, but the companion figure wearing a skirt of human hearts as well. The presence of this date on both statues has long posed a problem for scholars trying to identify the Coatlicue statue as Huitzilopochtli's mother. Boone (1973) originally suggested that the date refers here to a historical disaster that took place in the year 1481, which in the Aztec calendar was a 12 Reed year. She pointed out at the time that, according to the *Codex Aubin*, locusts descended upon Central Mexico during the year 12 Reed. More recently, however, she (Boone 1999: 204) has related the 12 Reed date to a passage in the *Anales de Quauhtitlan* (Bierhorst 1992a: 25). There we read about the creation and destruction of the four suns, or eras, which preceded the birth of the fifth and present sun.⁶ The date 12 Reed is identified as the name of the first year of the second solar era. This is problematic because each solar era drew its name from the name of the year in which it was expected to end, not the year in which it began. Boone (1999: 204) points out, however, that the *Anales de Quauhtitlan* (Bierhorst 1992a: 25) says that the second era was "told and related to the fifth sun, or age." In other words, the second sun was in some way related to the fifth sun. It is therefore possible that the date 12 Reed either connoted the beginning of a new solar epoch in general or was in some way associated with the beginning of the fifth era and the birth of the present sun. Either would account for the date 12 Reed appearing on the statues of primordial women who had sacrificed their lives to set the fifth sun in motion. It is also possible, of course, that the carver simply made a mistake in the second digit and the date should read "13 Reed." The *Anales de Quauhtitlan* gives 13 Reed as the year in which the fifth and present sun



Figure 7. Relief on the underside of the Coatlicue statue, Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico. Photo courtesy of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

was born. The date 13 Reed would have been entirely appropriate on statues representing ancient women who gave their lives in the year that the fifth and present sun was put in motion.

An interpretation of the statue as a sacrificed creator goddess would also fit with the usual reading of the date 1 Tochtli, or “1 Rabbit,” which appears on the underside of the Coatlicue and Yolotlicue statues (fig. 7). The date is set within the headdress of a large figure, carved in low relief, of the personified earth. Although a terrible famine is known to have ravaged central Mexico in “1 Rabbit” 1454, raising the possibility that the date here

refers to that event (Umberger 1981: 78), 1 Rabbit is given in the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 234) as the name of the year in which the sky and earth were separated by the gods to create the universe. In the *Anales de Quauhtitlan* (Bierhorst 1992a: 25), 1 Rabbit is not only the name of the first year of the fifth and present era, but also the name of the fifth solar era itself, when the earth and sky were “established.” Both 13 Reed and 1 Rabbit, then, can be tied to the Creation, whereas neither bears any known relation to Sahagún’s version of the events that took place at Coatepec.

The statue representing Yolotlicue, “Hearts-Her-Skirt,” who wears a skirt of human hearts, can also be tied to the Mexica creation myth. Although no source, to my knowledge, ever mentions a goddess of this name,⁷ the Nahuatl text of the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950–82: 2:138–40) states that at the end of the rites conducted during the month of Quecholli, which overlapped the first day of the next month, Panquetzalitzli, two women representing Coatlicue were sacrificed along with one, possibly two, other women named Yeuatlicue (Yeuhautlicue). As spelled by Sahagún, the name eludes translation, but when pronounced, it sounds much like Yolotlicue.⁸

Both Boone (1973, 1999) and I (Klein 2002) have presented lengthy cases for regarding these statues as representing members of the Tzitzimime (singular Tzitsimitl), a group of stellar beings dating back to the Creation who appear in Mexica imagery with similar attributes, including a star skirt like that hanging down the lower back and legs of the Coatlicue and Yolotlicue statues. Boone (1973, 1999) has suggested that the Museo Nacional’s statues of Coatlicue and Yolotlicue, as well as those of which only fragments remain in the bodega, are those mentioned by Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc and Diego Durán in their histories of the Aztec people. According to these chroniclers (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1975: 486; Durán 1994: 328), both of whom seem to have drawn upon the same now-lost prototype, the Mexica ruler Ahuitzotl commissioned two large statues called Tzitzimime, which he described as “gods, signs and planets,” which were to be set up on the main temple. Durán (1994: 227; cf. Alvarado Tezozomoc 1975: 358) also mentions a stone statue finished during the earlier reign of Motecuhzoma I that belonged to the class called “*Tzitzimime yllhuicatzitziquique*, angels of air [and] sustainers of the sky,” and “*Petlacotzitziquique*, sustainers of the cane mat.” Similar sculptures of Tzitzimime representing “gods of the air who brought the rains and water, the thunder and lightning” were placed around Huitzilopochtli’s main temple during Tizoc’s reign as well (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1975: 451). The similarities in iconographic detail and basic form among the statues and fragments still in existence suggest,

as Boone (1973, 1999) notes, that they formed a set of the kind described by Alvarado Tezozomoc.

However, because she subscribes to the traditional view that the Tzitzimime were regarded as dangerous and destructive “man-eaters,” and therefore universally feared, Boone (1999: 204) has to admit that the decapitated and dismembered condition of the Coatlicue and Yolotlicue statues is, to use her word, “puzzling.” She tries to account for it by comparing these two statues to the giant relief of Coyolxauhqui, which as we have seen, depicts that legendary woman as decapitated and dismembered. Since Coyolxauhqui had met her fate at the hands of an angry Huitzilopochtli, Boone hypothesizes that Coatlicue and Yolotlicue must also have been believed to somehow have run afoul of, and consequently been defeated by, the god. Although I agree with Boone that Coatlicue and Yolotlicue were originally counted among the Tzitzimime, there is no record of Huitzilopochtli ever having gone to battle against the Tzitzimime. The god was, in fact, originally included in a list of “those who fell from heaven,” the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* commentator’s euphemism on folio 18v for the Tzitzimime, although his name was later crossed out by another hand (Quiñones Keber 1995: 265). According to the *Anales de Quauhtitlan* (Bierhorst 1992a: 149), Huitzilopochtli was among the deities who sacrificed themselves to put the sun in motion, a role that would have made him their collaborator rather than their enemy. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the women’s physical condition in our monuments reflects any hostility on the part of Huitzilopochtli.

In a previous study, I presented evidence that the Tzitzimime were ambivalent beings who, although feared at certain times of the year, were also frequently petitioned for medical assistance and honored for their extraordinary generative powers (Klein 2002). It would also have been entirely appropriate for statues depicting these martyred women to surround the temple of the nation’s patron deity. Coatlicue would have appeared there, however, not as the patron’s mother, but rather as one of a group of heroic women whose collective death not only enabled the creation and survival of the universe, but the government as well. In this case, Coatlicue and Yolotlicue’s dismembered and decapitated appearance in these statues makes perfect sense.

If I am correct in suggesting that the famous statue of Coatlicue represents one of the women who sacrificed themselves to put the sun in motion, the special artistic emphasis placed on her braided skirt—as well as the emphasis on the skirts of the other statues in the set—can be explained. The *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 241) states that, at a mountain near Tula called “Coatebeque” (Coatepec), the

ancient Mexica migrants “held in great veneration the mantas of the five women whom Tezcatlipoca had made, and who died the day the sun was created.” The text adds that “from these mantas the aforesaid five women came again to life, and wandered in this mountain.” Since skirts among the Mexica were made of the large rectangular panels of cloth that the Spaniards called mantas, it is logical to conclude that the sacrificed women returned to life in the form of their skirts. These skirts not only figuratively spelled out their names but also epitomized their feminine powers of creation. If this is the case, then all of the statues in the group we have been discussing represent those legendary women who, having long ago sacrificed themselves on behalf of the sun, later reappeared at Coatepec in the form of their anthropomorphized skirts.

The *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*’s (García Icazbalceta 1891: 241) report resonates with Jerónimo de Mendieta’s (1971 [1770]: 79–80; cf. Torquemada 1975: 2:78) claim that the mantas of the gods who had allowed themselves to be sacrificed during the Creation were wrapped around bundles of sticks, provided with new hearts of greenstone, and given the name of the deity they represented.⁹ According to Mendieta (ibid.), Andrés de Olmos reportedly found one of these sacred bundles (*tlaquimilolli*) wrapped in “many mantas.” The gods that had sacrificed themselves long ago, Mendieta (ibid.) explains, left their clothing behind so that people would have something to remember them by. The larger-than-life stone statues of the reanimated skirts of these primordial heroines, I propose, manifest this ancient belief that the original generative powers of these valorous women were contained—and retained—in their skirts.

For this reason, graven replicas of these women’s skirts, as well as the statues representing those skirts in personified form, could be forever petitioned for assistance. This belief in the generative powers of certain garments was probably widespread in Mesoamerica before the Conquest and survives to this day in some relatively rural communities. For example, in the highland Tz’utujil Maya community of Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, an old, disintegrating cloth apron is kept on the altar of the Cofradía San Juan, where it is still petitioned by midwives and healers seeking cures for sick children. The apron is said to have been worn long ago by a woman with the power to help other women in childbirth by facilitating an easy delivery. This notion that garments contain the essence and powers of their original wearers underwrote Aztec religious beliefs at the time of the Conquest. Of the skirts worn by the Aztec deities who had sacrificed themselves to create the sun and moon, Mendieta (1971: 79–80) specifically says that they had left them behind for their people to remember them by. Those who possessed or had access to those magical garments in Aztec

society were able to tap into the powers of their original, but long absent owners.¹⁰

Even the faces of three “corn girls” decorating the magical apron at Santiago Atitlán embody the essence of the beings they represented. When the apron is placed front side down over the abdomen of a pregnant woman, the unborn child in her womb is believed to assume the identity of one of the “corn girls.” The concept is very old. Like the faces on the Tz’utujil apron, designs on Aztec women’s skirts were believed to have magical properties. The Dominican Diego Durán (1971: 454), for example, writing in the second half of the sixteenth century, says that during the month festival called *Tepeilhuitl* or *Hueypachtli*, women wore tunics “adorned with hearts and the palms of open hands” because “they besought a good crop . . . since the harvest was upon them.” I have elsewhere (Klein 2002) suggested that the stone skull-and-crossbones “altars” found at several Aztec sites represent the magical skirts of female deities who had participated in, and died on behalf of, the creation of the world. The altars served as places where people could make offerings in exchange for the gods’ assistance.

By tying the famous Coatlicue statue to a different set of mythohistorical accounts, thereby releasing our hold on Sahagún’s rendition of what occurred at Coatepec, I have presented an interpretation that, to my mind, fits much better with the statue’s iconography and original context. Coatlicue is here not (just) Huitzilopochtli’s mother, but rather a grand creatrix, the mother of all beings and objects that inhabited the Aztec universe. This reading of the statue’s meaning matters greatly to our understanding of the original meanings of all Aztec art works that today still instill awe in their viewers. If I am on the right track, we now have a better grasp of the beliefs that lay behind the decapitated and dismembered form of the Coatlicue statue, as well as the formal and technical emphasis placed there on the figure’s distinctive skirt. More importantly, our new awareness of the statue’s message complicates our understanding of the political function of images of women in the political arena. Unlike the famous relief of Coyolxauhqui, whose image epitomizes the use of female imagery to symbolize all that was antithetical to the goals and values of the state, the Coatlicue and its companion statues celebrate primordial women as the selfless donors of everything the Aztecs had cause to treasure.¹¹ Rather than dying as an enemy in battle, Coatlicue sacrificed herself voluntarily to provide the Mexica with the warmth, light, and changing seasons that brought them crops, food, and good health. If this reading of the Coatlicue statue is correct, women’s powers to generate new life on every level were, among the Mexica, very great indeed.

Notes

This argument was first presented in a paper read at the III Mesa de Estudios de Género, Primera Reunion Internacional, 28–30 April 2003: “La condición de las mujeres y las relaciones de género en Mesoamérica prehispánica.” I am grateful to María Rodríguez-Shadow for her invitation to participate and her good counsel. I am also indebted to Elizabeth Boone for sharing her photographs of the Yotlotlicue statue and fragments of two related statues. Angel González López was kind enough to share his observations, photographs, and drawing of the “Yotlotlicue” fragment in the Museo Templo Mayor, and Eulogio Guzman’s suggestions and knowledge of Nahuatl substantially enhanced my argument in this essay. Finally, special thanks go to my research assistants Angélica Afanador and Janet Stephens for their unflagging trips to and from the library. Research on this topic was funded by a UCLA Academic Senate Committee on Research grant.

- 1 The first scholar to write about the Coatlicue statue, Antonio León y Gama (1832 [1792]), identified it as a supernatural being named Teoyaomiqui, a goddess of warriors and death. Subsequent writers have preferred to identify the stone as Coatlicue, although León y Gama’s position has been defended in recent times by Beatriz Barba de Piña Chan (1987). For a summary overview of colonial-period references to the identity of the being portrayed in the statue, as well as an alternative reading of the image, see Doris Heyden (1998). A sensitive history of the changing reactions to the image over the past two centuries pegged to their sociopolitical contexts can be found in Michael J. Schreffler’s master’s thesis (1994).
- 2 In 2006, Eulogio Guzman called my attention to a stone sculpture fragment in the Museo Templo Mayor that clearly includes depictions of two human hearts in a row. I am grateful to Angel González López for providing me with digital photographs of this fragment, which measures ca. 30 inches at its widest point. González López reports that it is made of a gray basalt and contains traces of red pigment between the hearts. He doubts, however, that the fragment comes from the same set of sculptures as that comprising the Coatlicue and Yotlotlicue statues, since the density of the stone and the scale of the imagery in the Templo Mayor fragment are not as great as those of the statues in the Museo Nacional de Antropología. Moreover, the carving of the area below the hearts on the fragment does not resemble what is seen in the hem of the Coatlicue and Yotlotlicue statues’ skirts.
- 3 In other versions of this event, this action was taken by male deities, one of whom first sacrificed the others by removing their hearts with a knife and then killed himself; see Mendieta 1971: 79 and Torquemada 1975: 2:78.

Like me, Graulich (1991) has argued that the colossal statue of Coatlicue should be seen as a testament to her positive, life-giving abilities rather than her destructive powers. Graulich, however, does not mention the story of the reanimated mantas, and for him, the importance of the statue lies with Coatlicue’s role of earth mother and her own birth at the beginning of time, rather than with her sacrifice to get the sun to move. While he acknowledges the existence of the second full-figure statue resembling Coatlicue’s (the Yotlotlicue) and cites Boone’s (1973) unpublished paper, Graulich never mentions the fragments of similar statues in the museum’s storeroom that she discusses there.

- 4 Siméon (1977: 162, 347) defines *yapalli* as “Negro, color negro” (Black, color black), and *nocheznopalli* (which means “red nopal cactus”) as *cochinilla* (red). Among the deities present at the creation of the sun and moon, Sahagún (1950–82: 7:3–7) identifies only two—Nanauatzin and Tecuciztecatl—who sacrificed themselves to become the sun and moon respectively. He does, however, mention four women who were among those who watched for the sun to rise in the east. These goddesses were named Tiacapan, Teicu, Tlacoyehua, and Xocoyotl. Siméon (1977: 545, 548, 574, 775) gives the definitions “first born, oldest son” for Tiacapan; “the second of the four sisters of the goddess of carnal pleasures called Ixcuina or Tlazolteotl (Sah.)” for Teicu; “second child in a family of three or four children” for Tlacoyeua (Siméon’s spelling); and “the last, the youngest of the children” for Xocoyotl.
- 5 Sahagún (1950–82: 11:122–23, 217) describes the tunas of the nopal cactus in some detail but nowhere mentions their association with the human heart.
- 6 The state assumed the obligation to provide the present sun with the nourishment needed to prevent the final cataclysm that would bring it and the world to a horrific end. For this purpose, human and self-sacrifice were regarded as necessary. The names of the four previous suns and the causes of their demise, albeit in different orders, are detailed in the *Leyenda de los soles* and the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*. Ross Hassig (2001: 63–65) has proposed that the Aztecs added the fifth sun, which they expected to end violently on a “4 Ollin” day, to an earlier schema of only four solar epochs.
- 7 Sahagún (1950–82: 2:98–99) mentions skirts decorated with hearts that were worn by certain women participating in the ceremonies of the month Huey tecuilhuitl. These women were the special “courtesans” and “pleasure girls” who were provided to the highest ranking warriors and nobles.
- 8 Eulogio Guzman suggested to me in 2006 that the root *yeuatli* in Yeuatlicue derives from *yeualyuaa*, “evening,” and that her name meant “Evening [Stars]-Her-Skirt.”
- 9 For more on sacred bundles, both in Central Mexico and elsewhere in Mesoamerica, see Stenzel 1970. Stenzel (349) cites Pomar’s (1975) report that the two most sacred bundles in Texcoco, which contained relics of the gods Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli, were wrapped in “many mantas.”
- 10 For more on the supernatural powers of divine garments in Aztec religion and ritual, see Klein (1986, 2000).
- 11 For a reading of the female gender of Coyolxauhqui in the large, circular relief known as Coyxauhqui 3 as a pictorial metaphor for antisocial behavior, see Klein (1988, 1994).

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