

AZTLAN, TAMOANCHAN, AND THE HUASTEC CONNECTION

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Introduction¹

The ultimate ethnic origins and cultural affinities of the Mexica Aztec have long perplexed scholars seeking answers in the epic ethnohistorical accounts that record an Aztec emergence from Chicomoztoc, and a subsequent departure from the legendary place of origin, Aztlan (Seler 1967, 1985; Kirchhoff 1976). According to ancient accounts, the Aztec emperor Moctezuma Ilhuicamina sought answers to the question of Mexica Aztec origins, and did so by way of ancient traditions -- both oral and written narratives -- as well as by way of the work of soothsayers, sorcerers, and magicians (Duran 1967).² Recent scholarship, which at times is seemingly little different than the work of soothsayers where Aztec origins is concerned, indicates an Aztlan migration point of departure closely identified with ancient Tollan, and by extension, the Huastec region of northern Mexico and the Gulf lowlands. The evidence for a Tollan-Toltec (Hers 1989; Corona S. 1990) or Huastec (Mendoza 1993) point of origin for the Aztec migrations provides an ever more compelling challenge to longstanding questions concerning the ethnic and cultural affinities of the Mexica Aztec culture complex (Grove 1983; Odena Guemes 1990).

I approach this review from the standpoint of challenging the key interpretive weaknesses inherent in traditionalist perspectives that have forced us to entertain a host

of questionable assumptions regarding the Aztlan migration theme and its ultimate byproduct, the genesis of Mexica Aztec society. As such, we will proceed from an overview of the history of scholarship on the Aztlan migration theme, move to a consideration of recent evidence that challenges prevailing perspectives, and culminate with a reassessment of Aztec origins.

Given the current state of our knowledge concerning Aztec origins, my intent here is geared to introducing alternative interpretations that I have posed in other contexts (Mendoza 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1992d, 1993). I will argue that these alternative interpretations -- which draw on recent evidence pertaining to the cultural and social dynamics of the central highlands in the Epiclassic era -- hold greater promise for resolving the question of Aztec origins and affinities than do prevailing ideas and interpretations introduced from a variety of perspectives (i.e. art history, ethnohistory, linguistics, and archaeology). Ultimately, I contend that recent evidence linking Epiclassic period (A.D. 750-950) Huastec developments to the central highlands is key to our understanding of the social and cultural origins of the Mexica Aztec

Legendary Points of Departure

Much of what we know about Aztec origins derives primarily from a host of contact-period chronicles commissioned by such colonial-era Spanish clergyman as Fray Bernardino de Sahagun (1950-1969; 1988; original manuscripts, 1547-1577) and Diego Duran (1967), as well as from a variety of native chronicles including the Anales de Cuauhtitlan (1975) and Tlatelolco (1948), the Historia de los Mexicanos (1941), the

Codice de 1576 (Codice Aubin 1963), the Boturini (1975), Azcatitlan (Barlow 1949), Ramirez (1944), Chimalpopoca (1975), and Mexicayotl (1949) codices, the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (1976), and the works of Chimalpahin (1965), Ixtlilxochitl (1965), and Munoz Camargo (1892). Taken together, these sources provide an invaluable perspective on the eclectic social conditions and ethnic origins of Basin populations in the period just prior to European-Mesoamerican contact. More significantly, these sources provide a variety of narratives centered on the epic migrations that drew many different tribes and clans into the Basin of Mexico in the Epiclassic (A.D. 750-950) and early Postclassic (A.D. 950-1250) periods of Mesoamerican prehistory (Carrasco 1971).³ While the Mexica Aztec (or Aztlanecas-Tenochcas, according to Ixtlilxochitl 1:295) are accorded prominence in post-conquest ethnohistorical accounts, it should be remembered that the Aztec Triple Alliance dominated and controlled, and thereby politicized, the vast majority of central highland peoples (and their respective histories) of the Late Postclassic era (A.D. 1428-1521). As such, the Mexica Aztec or Aztlaneca place in such histories must be weighed carefully against other forms of evidence, including that derived from regional ethnohistories, archaeology, and linguistics.

The Aztlan Migration Theme

The traditional origins scenario, which is based on a patchwork reconstruction of Aztlan migration chronicles, portrays the Aztec as relative newcomers who, in following the dictates of their god or clan totem, Huitzilopochtli, were led on an epic

migration into the Basin of Mexico where they founded the city and capital of Tenochtitlan. By this accounting, the primordial homeland of the Aztecs was a legendary place located to the north, and referred to as Aztlan -- Place of Herons, Place of Whiteness (Macazaga Ordoño 1979), or White Land (Davies 1987:16-17). As to the basic descriptions and character of Aztlan scholars are in agreement, however, the specific location of Aztlan, and thereby, the original point of departure, is what has been thrown into question time and again.

Two schools of thought concerned with the veracity of the Aztlan migration theme have emerged in the literature (Olmedo Vera 1989:142). On the one hand are those scholars who believe that Aztlan represents a specific geographic locality, and therefore, their respective approach has been to identify the pertinent sites and regions in question. This perspective has resulted in the identification of specific sites or precontact polities with the legendary Aztlan, including Metzcaltitlan, Nayarit (Chavero 1887); Lake Yuriria, Michoacan (Kirchhoff 1961); and Aztatlan, Sinaloa (Jimenez Moreno 1972). The second major approach has been that which interprets the Aztlan migration legend as little more than a body of allegory fashioned to the ends of political expediency -- both ancient and modern (Boone 1991).⁴ Ultimately, this perspective does not allow for the identification of Aztlan with a specific geographical or political entity (Olmedo Vera 1989). As such, the migration legend is seen as a tool for uniting the disparate and potentially divisive ethnic and political factions that bore the banner of the Aztec Triple Alliance (Nicholson 1988). Works representative of this school of thought have been introduced by Seler (1967) and Nicholson (1988), and more recently

by Corona S. (1990) and Weigand (1991). In these and other such studies, Aztlan -- particularly as described in 16th century chronicles -- is interpreted as little more than the mirrored image of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (Nicholson 1988). In such a context, past is clearly prologue, and Aztlan serves to legitimize the ascendancy of Tenochtitlan, and thereby, the Mexica Aztec empire.

The specific dates ascribed to the Aztlan migrations are a major point of controversy. Whereas descriptions pertaining to Aztlan, Chicomostoc, and the seven tribes, are relatively consistent from chronicle to chronicle, no such consistency is evident in the pattern of dates ascribed to the chronological ordering of the migrations themselves (Smith 1984). Recent efforts to reconcile chronology with specific migration events has only served to further cloud the question of Aztec origins.

The Aztlan migrations are generally thought to encompass the 10th through 14th centuries A.D., with the Mexica migration encompassing the period between A.D. 1111 and the founding of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in A.D. 1325 (Davies 1987:16). The specific date identified with the settlement or founding of the Aztec capital of Mexico-Tenochtitlan is open to interpretation, but is thought to be either A.D. 1325 or 1345 (Olmedo Vera 1989:146; Davies 1987:25). The date given for the Mexica departure from Aztlan is the calendrical year count date of 1 Flint, which recurred every 52 years in the Mesoamerican Tonalpohualli or sacred count. Hence the traditional interpretation or departure date of A.D. 1111 may well be substituted for A.D. 1059 or A.D. 1163. Critical to the interpretation of which date is ultimately selected-for is the comparative analysis of events and personalities detailed in the associated narratives (Smith

1984:167). For the Mexica, time, especially sacred time, was relevant only in so far as the anchoring and designation of sacred events was concerned (Davies 1987:25). Both the cyclical nature of the year count, and the tendency for individual ethnic groups to anchor time to different mythico-religious and political events, has resulted in a great deal of uncertainty where the specific chronology of the Mexica migration is concerned.

Despite the broad span of dates identified with the Aztlan migration theme 10th through 14th centuries A.D. -- scholars continue to exclude dates thought not to correspond to the traditionalist paradigm (Smith 1984).⁵ A recent reassessment by Smith (1984), based on date clusters and migration themes, has attempted to establish the 12th and 13th centuries as the principal focus of the Aztlan migrations and Nahua settlements of the Basin of Mexico. While Smith (1984) presents compelling evidence for a chronology of peoples and events pertaining to the Aztlan migration theme, his attempt to correlate the Aztlan migrations with 12th and 13th century events in the Basin are problematic at best. Specific ethnohistorically-derived dates ascribed to the Aztlan migrations, and recently cited by Weigand (1991:1), include A.D. 902 (Codice Ramirez), A.D. 1069 (Cronica Mexicayotl), A.D. 1090 (Codice Chimalpopoca; Anales de Cuauhtitlan), or A.D. 1155 (Anales de Tlatelolco). Smith (1984:174) has isolated three Aztlan migration clusters for the central highlands, and these he suggests center on the years A.D. 1195 for the Basin of Mexico (Xochimilca, Chalca, Tepaneca, and Acolhua groups), A.D. 1220 for the surrounding highland valleys (Tlaxcala and northern Puebla groups), and A.D. 1248 for the Mexica settlement of the Basin. In order to support the thesis that three distinct Aztlan-based migrations account for the

data, Smith (1984) inexplicably excludes earlier dates as anomalous, and avoids consideration of earlier Nahuatl-speaking groups such as the Olmeca-Xicalanca who may well have swept into the highlands -- out of the Gulf lowlands -- by the 7th century A.D. (Munoz Camargo 1892; Mendoza 1992a).

Having reviewed the essential facts surrounding the Aztlan migration legend, we now turn our attention to traditionalist interpretations regarding the whereabouts of Aztlan, and thereby, recent perspectives regarding the ethnic affinities of the Mexica Aztec.

Geography, Semantics, and Migration

The Aztlan migration theme has led a variety of prominent Mesoamericanists to search for the specific geographical location of the legendary Aztlan (Acosta Saignes 1946). The rationale behind this venture has been the quest for the ethnic affinities and origins of the Mexica Aztec. The quest for Aztlan and Chicomostoc has predictably led scholars to search Mesoamerica's far flung northern frontiers for evidence of Mexica origins.⁶ As such, the origins question has led to the emergence of several schools of thought focused on diverse regions or localities, including (a) west Mexican origins in or at the isle of Janitzio in Lake Patzcuaro, Michoacan (Davies 1987:17); Lake Yuriria, Guanajuato⁷ (Kirchhoff 1961); Mexcaltitlan, Nayarit (Chavero 1887; Davies 1987:17; Weigand 1991); or associated with the west coast polity of Aztatlan, Sinaloa (Jimenez-Moreno 1972; Weigand 1991), (b) a Northern Frontier point of departure potentially including the sites of the Chalchihuites-Malpaso region of Zacatecas, Mexico (Davies

1977), and (c) a Tula-Toltec point of departure centered on southern Hidalgo, Mexico (Corona S. 1990). One final theme, and one acknowledged and espoused more recently, is that which identifies Aztlan, and Chicomoztoc, with the Basin of Mexico (Nicholson 1988; Gillespie 1989; Weigand 1991).

Where west Mexican origins are concerned, the site of Mezcaltitlan, Nayarit, has long been identified with Aztlan (Chavero 1887). Much of this identification stems from the existence of the pre-contact polity of Aztatlan which once encompassed the region of northern Nayarit and southern Sinaloa (Jimenez Moreno 1972; cf. Weigand 1991:3), and the proposed -- but dubious linguistic association between the toponym Mezcaltitlan and that of Mexica (Robelo 1951; cf. Weigand 1991:3). Archaeologist Phil Weigand (1991) has recently demonstrated that Mezcaltitlan, and thereby Aztatlan, was not the legendary Aztlan (Weigand 1991). Again, the linkage of Mezcaltitlan, and the Aztatlan polity, with Aztlan, is not borne out by the ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence. The linguistic argument, and the existence of the ancient polity of Aztatlan are considered an insufficient base of evidence, in and of themselves, to support the attribution of Mezcaltitlan with Aztlan (Weigand 1991). In fact, Phil Weigand (1991) argues that the idea that Aztlan is Mezcaltitlan is fueled more by tourism, and a New Age quest for spiritual origins, than by any real concern with Aztec origins (Weigand 1991:12).

In Paul Kirchhoff's (1961) review of the question of Aztec origins, an alternative location for Aztlan was proposed. Employing ethnohistorical accounts, town names or toponyms, and questionable linguistic-toponymic identifications, Kirchhoff

(1961) traced the Aztlan migration backwards into the area of Lake Yuriria, Guanajuato. Key to Kirchhoff's (1961) interpretation was the assumption that an early 13th century Toltec-Chichimec account of conflicts with the Historic Olmec, and a related attempt by Toltec-Chichimec to obtain warriors from the west, provided an alternative migration route from Aztlan and Chicomoztoc. Moreover, the account in question may well document politically motivated population movements that followed the grand migration out of Aztlan (Kirchhoff 1940:96-104; Smith 1984).

Another location traditionally identified with Aztlan and Chicomoztoc is the Chalchihuites-Malpaso culture area of Zacatecas and Durango, Mexico. This attribution stems from the longstanding association of the ancient site of La Quemada, Zacatecas with the name Chicomoztoc, or Place of Seven Caves. While Davies (1977) and others have discussed the Toltec connections to the acropolis center of La Quemada, Zacatecas, recent reinvestigations of the site have resulted in an Epiclassic, and thereby pre-Toltec, dating of the principal monuments at that site (Trombold 1990; Nelson 1990). Because nahuatl scholars, both ethnohistorians and archaeologists, considering the question of Aztec origins continue to hinge their investigations and interpretations on a 12th and/or 13th century journey for the Mexica Aztec migration (Smith 1984), there has been a general reticence to consider sites or regions that either pre- or post-date the 12th or 13th centuries. As such, the site and region of La Quemada has received little attention where the question of Mexica origins is concerned.

Both ethnohistorically and archaeologically, the Late Classic through Early Postclassic acropolis center of Tula, Hidalgo, is the one locality for which we have a

convergence of several lines of evidence to indicate a probable point of departure for the Mexica migrations (Diehl 1983; Corona S. 1990). First, as noted, the ethnohistorical accounts trace a migration specific to the region of Tula, or southern Hidalgo. Second, the hill of Coatepec (Serpent Hill), is located just outside of Tula, Hidalgo. It will be recalled that Coatepec is identified with the sacred mountain attributed to the great cosmic battle that gave birth to the power and might of Huitzilopochtli, the deified warlord of the Aztec legends. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (personal communication, 1987) now believes that the great battle that took place at the hill of Coatepec is symbolized in the monumental architecture and sculpture of the great temple of the Aztec, the Templo Mayor (see also Mendoza 1975, 1977). From this perspective, the Templo Mayor is taken to symbolize the great cosmic hill of Coatepec. Third, investigations at the site of Tula, Hidalgo appear to confirm that the Aztecs (based on the presence of Aztec II ceramics) buried their dead within the ruins of ancient Tollan after the collapse of that ancient center in A.D. 1175 (Davies 1987). Tollan was in addition a target of looting by the Aztecs, as well as by other Chichimec immigrant groups, perhaps so that they might recover heirlooms or icons to legitimize their linkages to the legendary Toltec legacy. The temporal proximity of the Aztec burials at Tollan to the fall of that great center have led to speculations that the early Mexica may have had something to do with the collapse of ancient Tollan (Davies 1977; Corona S. 1990). Ultimately, for the Aztec, Tollan and its immediate environs particularly as this pertains to the hill of Coatepec, represented the location of the great battle which spawned the birth and death of the Mexica Aztec pantheon of benevolent

and malevolent deities. For it was at the place of the serpent hill of Coatepec that the great deities, including the Mexica earth mother goddess Coatlicue, the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui, the star warriors known as the Centzonhuitznahuac, and the divine warrior, Huitzilopochtli, waged the first battle for the fate of the Mexica cosmos (Townsend 1979). Coincidentally, this is as far north as we can trace the Mexica Aztec migration route by any stretch of the imagination (Seler 1967; Corona S. 1990).

Grand Migration or Ritual Perigrination?

In his early summary of the question of Aztec origins, Eduard Seler (1967) sought to refute turn of the century indications that Aztlan, and thereby Aztec origins, should be sought as far afield as Puget Sound in North America (Wickershan 1893; cf. Seler 1967, 1985:31). While Seler (1967) effectively refuted the Puget Sound identification with Aztlan, he was unable to provide an alternative location for the ancestral home of the Mexica Aztec. Seler (1967) did, however, suggest that Mexica accounts placed both Aztlan and Chicomostoc at the Twisted Hill of Colhuacan, located near Chalco within the Basin of Mexico.⁸ Because of a probable Mexica association with ancient Tollan, Seler (1967) was unable to reconcile his views on the location of Colhuacan, and thereby Aztlan, with the Aztec presence at Tollan. As a result of the confused state of the ethnohistorical record, Seler (1967) concluded that Aztlan might just as well be identified with Puget Sound (Wickershan 1893; cf. Seler 1967, 1985:309).

A recent trend in the literature has begun to reexplore Seler's (1967) notion that

the question of origins will need to be reexamined with respect to the Basin of Mexico (Nicholson 1988; Olmedo Vera 1989; Corona S. 1990; Weigand 1991). This view presents a radically differing perspective from prior approaches that attempted to trace specific routes of migration from the north (Jimenez-Moreno 1972), or west (Kirchhoff 1961). As noted by a number of preeminent Mexican ethnohistorians, including Henry Nicholson (1988), Phil Weigand (1991), and a whole host of recent Mexican scholars (Monjaras-Ruiz 1976; Hers 1989; Olmedo Vera 1989; Corona S. 1990), Aztlan and Chicomostoc may well have nothing at all to do with western Mexico or the Northern Frontier.

More recently, Corona S. (1990) has employed Seler's (1967, 1985) Basin of Mexico identification for Aztlan as the basis for his interpretation that the Aztecs were ultimately Toltecs, or at the very least, a tributary political or military arm of the Toltec state. The many archaeological and ethnohistorical linkages that have been demonstrated to have existed between the Toltecs and the Aztecs are providing evidence for a level of interaction that support recent claims such as those marshalled by Corona S. (1990).

Aztlan as Mirror over Tenochtitlan

The chronicles that have been employed as a guide to seeking the isle of Aztlan, and the grotto of Chicomostoc, appear to more effectively corroborate the claim that Colhuacan, and the adjacent hill of Uixachecatl, was in fact the Aztlan of Mexica legend.⁹ The evidence, especially as seen through the eyes of Eduard Seler's (1967)

earlier assessment, provides strong indications that Aztlan was located at the Basin locality today identified with the Ixtapalapa peninsula and Cerro de la Estrella. Of course, the identification of Aztlan with a site in the Basin of Mexico does not ultimately resolve the question of Aztec origins. However, in retracing the specific settlements through which the Mexica trekked on their legendary pilgrimage to the Basin of Mexico, one is left with the makings of a circuitous route that extends to and from Colhuacan and the ancient settlement of Tollan, or Tula, Hidalgo. As such, it may well be that the Aztlan migration theme documents the makings of an ancestral homeland no further afield than the ancient Toltec-Nonoalca center of Tollan, or Tula, Hidalgo, Mexico (Corona S. 1990).

The Aztlan Chronicles

A reconsideration of the ethnohistorical descriptions of Aztlan is clearly in order. Ironically, despite Eduard Seler's (1967) insightful recounting and review of migration legends and their respective interpretations, we have succeeded in moving full circle about the issue and the point of departure identified with Aztlan and Chicomostoc. What then do the sources tell us of the ancient settlement of Aztlan itself? The Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (Kirchhoff, et al., 1976) describes Aztlan in very specific terms:

Here was the crooked mountain, the place of the extensive emerald waters, where the white tules grow, where the white reed is found, where the white willow stands upright, where the white river sands lie, where differently colored

species of cotton grow, where the multicolored waterlilies live, where the magic ball court lies, where the yellow puma lies outstretched.

In addition to the descriptions from the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (Kirchhoff, et al 1976), Fray Diego Duran's (1967) account provides further details regarding Aztlan and the Aztec place of origin. Duran's (1967) recounting includes relatively detailed descriptions of the flora, fauna, and topography of the legendary Aztlan:

In that place there is a great hill in the midst of the waters, and it is called Colhuacan, because its summit is twisted; this is the Twisted Hill. On its slopes were caves and grottos where our fathers and grandfathers lived for many years...There they had at their disposal great flocks of ducks of different kinds, herons, water fowl, and cranes. They also possessed many kinds of large fish. They had the freshness of groves of trees along the edge of the waters. They had springs surrounded by willows, evergreens and alders, all of them tall and comely. Our ancestors went about in canoes and made floating gardens upon which they sowed maize, chili, tomatoes, amaranth, beans and all kind of seeds which we now eat and which were brought here from there.

(Duran 1967; cf. Weigand 1991:5)

The foregoing accounts support the identification of Aztlan with the Basin area of the Iztapalapa peninsula and Cerro de la Estrella -- the purported burial place of the Tolteca-Chichimeca warlord, Mixcoatl. In this context it should be noted that Mixcoatl is said to have led his people into the Basin from the Rio Panuco of the Huastec region, and who, according to legend, took a Huastec woman as his wife (Davies 1977). The

descriptions given for the Twisted Hill of Colhuacan accurately describe the Basin peninsula of Ixtapalapa and Cerro de la Estrella. Having personally explored Cerro de la Estrella, or the Uixachtecatl (Seler 1985:316), I have a firsthand perspective on some of the numerous caves and grottos that pockmark the hill upon which the New Fire ceremony of the Aztec was once performed. Local legend has it that the caves are bottomless and that several unwary caving enthusiasts have entered the caves never to return.

Interestingly, Doris Heyden (1981) has recently reported on the existence of a Chicomostoc, or Place of Seven Caves, located below the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, where she has identified the existence of an artificially modified grotto with seven subdivisions. While it is not my intent to suggest that Teotihuacan has anything to do with either Aztlan, or Chicomostoc, it is my intent to illustrate that all of the salient characteristics of the legendary Aztlan are most readily identified with ancient, sacred, and legendary locations within the Basin of Mexico, and not areas to the north or west. Weigand (1991) notes that the descriptions in question bear a better fit with the Chalco and Xochimilco areas of the Basin of Mexico, and do so "more closely than that area near and around Mexcaltitan and the swamps of Nayarit" (Weigand 1991:5).

In addition to those descriptions that provide guidance for our identification of the Twisted Hill, and thereby, Aztlan, the descriptions of wildlife, and specifically, waterfowl, further support the contention that the Basin of Mexico is the hearth-place of Aztlan. Foremost among the relevant observations is the fact that the Basin of Mexico

is a stopping point along the Canadian flyway. As such, the Basin is an area with abundant waterfowl, including ducks, herons, geese, and cranes. Nayarit and Michoacan, on the other hand, are not representative of the great diversity of waterfowl identified in the ethnohistorical accounts, and known from the Basin of Mexico (O'Mack 1991).

The foregoing accounts also claim that the ancestral peoples of Aztlan engaged in agricultural pursuits centered on the cultivation of maize, chili, tomatoes, amaranth, beans and a variety of other seed crops adopted by the later peoples of Mexico Tenochtitlan. Chinampas, or floating gardens like those of Xochimilco in the Basin of Mexico, are said to have been constructed and used by the peoples of Aztlan. The use of canoes, both in Aztlan and in the Basin of Mexico, adds one additional point of information concerning similarities between Aztlan and Basin modes of transportation. Interestingly, only two specific regions of Mesoamerica have borne archaeological or ethnohistorical evidence for the existence of chinampas, or floating gardens. One of these locations is Lake Texcoco (Xochimilco, Chalco, Texcoco), and the other is within the Valley of Teotihuacan very near the ancient metropolis of Teotihuacan. Where Lake Texcoco is concerned, chinampas have been documented as early as the late 12th and early 13th centuries A.D. (Turner 1983).

Depictions of Chicomostoc, the Place of the Seven Caves and by extension, the Seven Tribes, are to be had from the pages of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (Kirchhoff, et. al., 1976). Images of Chicomostoc illustrate a place beneath a twisted hill upon which may be identified a variety of cacti; the implication being that at the

very least Chicomostoc is identified with a semi-arid region. The presence of cacti in a Mexican location do not assist our effort to narrow the scope of our search; the whole of the Northern Frontier and the central highlands could very well be indicated. However, I might add that Tenochtitlan in fact signifies Cactus Stone. And, of course the Place of the Seven Caves and as many tribes is replete with cacti, caves, a twisted hill, all of which are identified with an isle in the middle of a lake. Clearly, the coincidence of these features occurs in no other place but the Basin of Mexico at Lake Texcoco and Chalco.

Having turned our quest for Aztlan origins back to a focus on the Basin of Mexico, what then accounts for the many and varied ethnohistorical narratives that document epic migrations spanning centuries and the whole of Mesoamerica's northern frontier? And, if in fact, Aztlan and Chicomostoc are located within the Basin, what then is the antiquity of the Mexica presence in the Basin of Mexico? Recent archaeological evidence recovered by Elizabeth Brumfiel (1992) from the Basin area of Lake Xaltocan may as yet provide answers to the antiquity of Mexica settlement within the Basin of Mexico.

The Antiquity of the Mexica Occupation

Located at the northeastern margin of the ancient system of lakes identified with Texcoco was a portion of the lake known as Xaltocan. Recent research by Elizabeth Brumfiel (1992) has resulted in the identification of Aztec I ceramics in one of the earliest contexts thus far identified. Radiocarbon determinations now place Aztec I

ceramics at A.D. 750; a period coinciding with the collapse and abandonment of the ancient center of Teotihuacan. The ceramics in question were recovered from a trash midden that formed an isle on the margins of Lake Xaltocan in the north-central portion of the Valley of Mexico (Brumfiel, personal communication, 1992). Interestingly, the ceramics in question were recovered from within contexts associated with Cholula polychrome ceramics (Brumfiel 1992). Despite the early dates, and their immediate implications, scholars see little significance in this finding for the interpretation of Aztec origins; due in large part to the continuing tendency to place the Aztecs in the Basin no earlier than the 12th century A.D.

As previously noted Aztec scholars continue to work from the assumption that because the ethnohistories indicate a 12th century migration into the Basin, Aztec I and II ceramics do not actually have anything to do with the Aztec tradition. These traditions are touted as pre-Aztec, and it has been suggested that the ceramic types in question simply represent an ancient Basin tradition that the Aztec ultimately borrowed upon their arrival within the Basin in the 12th century A.D.

Do we in fact know when the Mexica Aztec first settled the Basin? Clearly, we do not have such information readily at hand. However, it will be remembered that the Codex Ramirez places the migration into the Basin at A.D. 900 (Weigand 1991). So again, I would be rather more cautious in assuming that the ceramic traditions in question (i.e. Aztec I) do not in fact provide concrete indications of a much greater antiquity for the Mexica Aztec presence in the Basin of Mexico. I believe that the recovery of Aztec I ceramics from 8th century Basin contexts provides but one more

point of corroborating evidence for linking the Aztec to an 8th and 9th century occupation of the Basin of Mexico.

If in fact the Aztec presence may be traced to the the 8th and 9th centuries A.D., then the Aztec settlement of the Basin coincides with recent indications regarding a massive influx of Huastec and Otomi-Huastec (Garcia Cook and Merino Carrion 1979; Garcia Cook 1981; Merino Carrion 1989) peoples into Basin and circum-Basin subregions of the Mexican highlands in the aforementioned period (Mendoza 1992a). Recent studies indicate, as John Fox (1978:272) has noted, that

"Beginning in the Epiclassic, the Gulf Coastal groups expanded with a kind of sociocultural "hybrid vigor," probably motivated by the acquisition of goods for internal growth, commercial exchange, and simply territorial expansion. [and] it is becomming increasingly clear that this expansion had militaristic as well as economic underpinnings."

Whereas Fox's (1978) observations were intended to account for the impact of the Mexican Gulf Coast on highland Guatemalan culture and society -- such as that pertaining to the migration accounts and settlements of the Quichean peoples (Fox 1978, 1987). Following on the heels of these observations, Garcia Cook and Merino Carrion (1979), Garcia Cook (1981), and Merino Carrion (1989) have examined a similar Gulf Coast-Huastec impact on the ancient societies of northeastern Tlaxcala, Mexico. The character of Gulf Coast or Huastec influence (Garcia Cook and Merino Carrion 1979) manifest in northeast Tlaxcala has been identified as a hybrid melding of Huastec and Otomi (or Otomi-Huastequizado) that envelopes the region in the period

after A.D. 750 to 850. Thereafter, Tlaxcala was dominated by Huastec, Otomi, and Gulf Coast influences in its material culture and social makeup (an observation reenforced by the significant presence of Huastec ceramic types and hybrid variations extending into the Late Postclassic era (Merino Carrion 1989)

Given the implications of such findings, and our proposed re-reading of the ethnohistorical accounts, I now turn to a consideration of one other potential point of origin for the Mexica migrations -- mainly, Panuco, Panotlan, or the great Huasteca region of the north-central Gulf Coastal plain.

Cuextecatl Ichocayan and the Huastec Connection

If in fact the Mexica migration, and the larger pattern of Aztlan migration legends are examined closely, we get a relatively consistent pattern of references to Huastec and Gulf Coast towns or toponyms encountered enroute from Aztlan. Huastec toponyms such as Tamoanchan (We Seek Our Abode) or Cuextecatl Ichocayan (Place Where the Huastec Cried) are specifically related to the Mexica and Chichimeca routes of migration, and in turn, to the Huastec themselves (Kirchhoff 1961:315-316). In turn, the specific nahuatl toponyms identified with the Aztlan migrations, and thereby, the origins of the Mexica people, are the same names identified with dozens of ancient settlements in the Huastec region of northern Veracruz and southern Tamaulipas. Ancient Huastec settlements identified with nahuatl place-names include, Coatepec, Atzatlan, Tenoxtitlan, Xicalango, Tepetipac, Acatlan, Acultzingo, Xico, Pantepec, Panuco, Panotlan; all names cited in varying contexts with respect to the Aztlan

migrations (Garcia Payon 1971:506-511; Seler 1967; Kirchhoff 1961). Interestingly, a number of these place-names or toponyms were lent to the naming of towns and regions within the Basin of Mexico and vice versa. If, as Smith (1984) argues, ethnic-group names were derived from the toponyms of existing towns settled by immigrant groups, or by contrast, ethnic identity underlies the naming of specific towns, then in this instance, we may well have additional evidence for a relatively direct linkage between the Mexican Gulf coast and central highlands.

Ironically, despite the sophistication and elaboration inherent in the Mexica use of the nahuatl language, scholars continue to assume that the language was simply adopted by the Aztec upon their arrival in the central highlands. This characterization of the Aztecs neglects the fact that while nahuatl has no immediate associations with western or northwestern Mesoamerica (Price 1980), it was used intensively over an extensive area of the Huastec region to the north and east (Garcia Payon 1971:506). In fact, Garcia Payon (1971:506) has mapped 16th century Huastec distributions of regional variants of the nahuatl language for northern Veracruz; including Nahua Mexican, Nahua Huastec, Tepehua Otomi, Tepehua Nahua Otomi, Tepehua, Totonac-Otomi-Tepehua Nahua, Nahua-Totonac-Otomi, Totonac, and Totonac Nahua. Similar identifications of the Huastec region with nahua speakers -- including Olmeca Xicalanca or Historic Olmec -- has been examined ethnohistorically by Kirchhoff (1961).

According to recent interpretations of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (Kirchhoff 1971), the Toltec conquest of the Historic Olmec of Cholollan resulted in an Olmec diaspora towards the Mexican Gulf Coast, and specifically to areas of northern

Veracruz, southern Tamaulipas, and the Sierra de Puebla. According to legend the Historic Olmec groups of the diaspora sought to return to an ancestral homeland in the Huasteca; with destinations that included such towns as Zacatlan and Panteppec, Puebla, and the ancient Huastec settlements of the Panuco River.

Huastec Ethnogenesis

The expansion of the Huastec style, and its bellicose manifestations in the central highlands (Garcia Cook 1981; Merino Carrion 1989), has resulted in considerable speculation on the role of the Huastec and other Gulf Coast groups in greater Mesoamerica (Delgado de Cantu 1977; Fox 1978, 1980, 1987; Garcia Cook 1981; Diehl 1983). Recent reviews, such as that of David Grove (1983), acknowledges the dominance of Huastec themes in the art and iconography of Postclassic central highlands.

According to Ochoa (1984:67), evidence for increased commerce between the Huastec region -- consisting of the eastern portion of the Sierra Madre, northern Veracruz, the southern half of Tamaulipas, southeastern San Luis Potosi, portions of the Altiplano Potosino, and portions of Hidalgo, Puebla, and Queretaro -- and central Veracruz, appears in Late Classic Huastec material culture and architecture (Michelet 1986).

According to Krotser (1981:178-179), beginning at A.D. 600, Gulf lowland population increased dramatically. This increase clearly manifests itself in site size, artifact densities, and the distribution and total numbers of sites identified along the

north-central Gulf Coast. Whereas, few Early Classic sites have been identified, Late Classic sites abound along the coast and adjacent valleys. Site density and areal coverage suggest that such sites maintained substantial populations (Krotser 1981:179). The patterns indicated continued into the Early Postclassic, at which time, we see the expansion of the Huastec into highland basins; in a pattern that coincides with ethnohistorical accounts of the Aztlan migrations.

Panuco and the Rio Tula

Just north of Colhuacan was ancient Tollan, identified by the great ethnohistorian Wigberto Jimenez Moreno (1941) with the site of Tula, Hidalgo. If one follows the Rio Tula (which flows at the foot of the acropolis complex of Tula, Hidalgo) to the north, it becomes patently clear that this ancient waterway was a key corridor of communication and interaction linking southern Hidalgo with the whole of Mesoamerica. The Rio Tula empties into the Rio Moctezuma, which is in turn linked to the Rio Panuco, and thereby, the Huastec region of the Mexican Gulf Coast. This water-borne corridor served as a vital link between southern Hidalgo and the Basin of Mexico, and the heart of the Huastec region of northern Veracruz, southern Tamaulipas, northern Puebla, Queretaro, and portions of several adjacent states including San Luis Potosi. The Huasteca, in turn, was a culturally distinctive region marked by the defined ubiquity of Huastec masonry platforms mounds constructed on a circular floorplan, distinctive ballcourts, large and slab-like tabular sculptures of individuals, deities, and other personages executed in a style later employed or adopted

by the Aztec (Miller 1986:169; Trejo 1989), iconographic motifs (Ochoa 1984), and a major cult complex centered on deities purportedly introduced into the central highlands by way of Toltec and Aztec migration events (Davies 1977, 1987; Delgado de Cantu 1977; Sullivan 1982). And so it is that we must follow the waterways, and thereby, the natural corridors of communication linking the central highlands and thereby the Toltecs and Aztecs -- with the Huastec region of the Mexican Gulf Coast. More than likely, it was this source of ancient interactions between the Mexican Gulf Coast and central highlands that served as the stimulus and the path followed by the peoples of the Aztlan migrations.

Huastecs in Aztlan

When pressed for answers to the question of Aztec origins, scholars continue to recite the prevailing, and unfounded, notion that the very core of Aztec civilization was little more than the result of syncretic adaptations and cultural borrowings that span centuries and the whole of Mesoamerica (Miller 1986:169; Porter Weaver 1981:385-387). From this perspective it is assumed that upon their arrival in the Valley of Mexico in the 13th century, the Aztecs simply adopted the existing traditions of the Basin of Mexico, including Coyotlatelco-related and Aztec II period ceramics, Toltec-like sculptural and architectural conventions, Huastec ritual and religious practices, and Mixteca-Puebla iconographic and artistic motifs and designs. From this perspective the Aztecs are likened to so many Romans borrowing from the cultural traditions of their Greek progenitors.

Ultimately, we are left to assume that both Toltec and Huastec traditions so dominated the central highlands that it was a simple matter of imitating the extant culture of the Basin. What is not explained, especially when given the intense regionalism -- both political and stylistic -- of the Basin of Mexico, is why the Aztecs singled-out Toltec and Huastec traits and elements for their chosen cultural inventory.¹⁰ While we know that the Toltecs were the superpowers of the time, and therefore worthy of emulation, we are left with no explanation as to why the most conservative dimensions of both Toltec and Aztec society -- especially its pantheon of major gods and rituals -- are drawn directly from Huastec religion and its attendant ritual system (Davies 1977).

Preliminary assessments of the material, social, and ritual dimensions of Aztec society inevitably encounter a significant bias toward Toltec and Huastec themes and traditions. When considering the potential factors underlying such dominant influences on Aztec culture, it would be well to go to the source of these interactions. Recent reappraisals of the Toltec-Aztec connection have come far closer to concluding that the Aztecs were vassals, and possible mercenaries, of the Toltec state and may well have had a hand in the destruction of the Toltec capital of Tollan (Corona S. 1990). If such were the case, and we do know that the Aztecs coopted and layed claim to the Toltec heritage and dynastic tradition, we can readily explain the extent of Toltec influence on the Aztec. This does not, however, provide a ready answer to the Huastec impact on the most conservative dimensions of Aztec society -- mainly, its ritual, religious, symbolic, and utilitarian traditions. Inevitably, when we look to the Huastec culture

area (Ochoa 1984, 1989), we are confronted by the very same constellation of social and ritual trappings that formed the nucleus of Aztec tradition and civilization (Stresser-Pean 1971).

Conclusions: The Mexica-Huastec Cultural Pattern in Retrospect

Having reviewed the Aztlan migration theme, as well as the linguistic connections between nahuatl language use in the central highlands and on the Mexican Gulf Coast, the use of Huastec toponyms in Mexica migration accounts, and finally, the routes of communication and exchange linking ancient Tollan to the Huastec heartland, we now turn our attention to the Huastec themselves Ochoa 1984, 1989; Trejo 1989). Because it was not the intent of this essay to provide an exhaustive recounting of Mexica-Huastec cultural connections, the remainder of this discussion provides an abbreviated overview of cultural elements inherent in each society -- mainly, monumental art and architecture, religion, and social diacritics or diagnostics such as clothing. In other words, those aspects of Mexica culture and society that may bear witness to the Huastec connection in Aztec origins

The Cosmopolitan Origins of Tribes and Empires

In our quest for answers to the question of Aztec origins we must look to other

ancient societies. We must also be prepared to ask informed questions regarding the causes and consequences of human migrations -- especially the sort of epic migrations that characterize the Aztlan chronicles. One Old World analog for migration and tribal formations like that that characterized the evolution of Mexica Aztec society is that identified with the ancient Hebrews of the Near East. In an effort to reconcile and unify the makings of what was essentially a multi-ethnic, multi-tribal grouping of peoples, ancient Hebrew leaders introduced religious doctrines, codified mandates, laws, sanctioned rituals, and a migration legend that served to unify and homogenize the cultural and social composition of early Hebrew society. Clearly, the religious doctrines of the Hebrew -- embodied in the Torah and in other sacred bodies of arcane doctrine -- served both spiritual, as well as sociopolitical, ends. These doctrines served to create a social and spiritual history intended to promote unity among the tribal factions that formed the Hebrew confederacy. Like the Aztec, the Hebrew are said to have rewritten their respective histories so as to politically correct and engender a new and cohesive history.

According to early 16th century chronicles, the Aztec destroyed their ancient historical traditions so as to avert impending political and social fissioning and factioning (Leon-Portilla 1979). They themselves claim that they burnt their ancient histories, and these were in turn rewritten to accomodate a new world order centered on human heart excision and Mexica-centered imperial expansion. According to the Mexica chronicles of Sahagun (Leon-Portilla 1979:251-252; cf. Weigand 1991:7):

Se guardaba su historia. Pero, entonce fue quemada...Los senores mexicas

dijeron: no conviene que toda la gente conozca las pinturas. Los que estan sujetos (el pueblo), se hechan a perder y andara torcida la tierra, porque alli se guarda mucha mentira y muchos en ellas han sido tenidos por dioses.

What is indicated by this account is that the Aztec political and ritual specialists of the time carefully guarded the histories of the Mexica nation, and ultimately, burned these histories in an effort to avert the social chaos and political upheaval that would ensue if the truth were revealed. According to this accounting, if the truth were revealed, the Mexica Aztec histories would engender civil war and strife in the Valley of Mexico.

Clearly, we can only speculate on the content of the ancient chronicles that were destroyed, and ask, what potentially dangerous "lies" comprised the Mexica histories?

What was the nature of these "lies" -- these evil portents -- that could so rend the earth and lead to civil unrest? Interestingly, the aforementioned Aztec histories were destroyed and rewritten at the very moment that Aztec armies prepared to march on the cities and towns of the southern Huasteca.

1. This paper is based on both a presentation for the World of Moctezuma Lecture Series of the Denver Museum of Natural History, Denver, Colorado, December 2, 1992 (Mendoza 1992b), and a conference paper presented before the 1993 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C. (Mendoza 1993)

The perspectives developed here arise from ideas that I have espoused among my students for the past several years (Mendoza 1993). In each instance, I have pushed my students (Eidlen 1992) to explore non-traditionalist perspectives that have nothing at all to do with West Mexico (Kirchhoff 1961), or an Aztlan origin in Mexico's Northern Frontier (Jimenez-Moreno 1972). Mine is a point of view tempered by the frustration that we are no closer to resolving the question of Aztec origins than we were when Eduard Seler (1967) examined these issues at the turn of the century.

2. According to the Spanish chronicler, Fray Diego Duran (1967), in the mid-1400's the great Aztec king Moctezuma Ilhuicamina, with the assistance of his principal military advisor, the Serpent Woman Tlacaelel, sought the advice of soothsayers in his quest for the legendary home of the Aztec, Aztlan. The soothsayers described Aztlan and Chicomostoc -- the grotto of the Seven Caves -- in great detail to their sovereign Moctezuma Ilhuicamina. Obsessed with their descriptions, Moctezuma ordered his soothsayers and magicians to relocate Aztlan and thereby the legendary place of emergence. The soothsayers and magicians set about this task and soon found themselves magically transported to the region of the ancient city of Tollan, to the site of the legendary serpent hill of Coatepec. At Coatepec, the soothsayers and magicians were transformed into eagles and jaguars, and other creatures of the day and night. At the hill of Coatepec they came before the primordial mother goddess Coatlicue and her son Huitzilopochtli, "Left Hand Like a Hummingbird" (O'Mack 1991:23). The soothsayers and magicians listened intently as Coatlicue recounted the legend of how Huitzilopochtli had departed the hill of Coatepec and embarked on his momentous journey to the Valley of Mexico. There Huitzilopochtli sought his fortune, the conquest of cities, and a great earthly kingdom that was to become the empire of the Mexica Aztec.

3 Many theories exist with regard to Aztec origins. One can sum these theories into several major themes pertaining to points of departure identified with the 10th through 12th century migrations of the Mexica Aztec people. Such themes encompass a diverse array of origin points, ethnic groups and affiliations, and routes -- even as these are reconstructed by a variety of ethnohistorians (Congres International des Americanistes 1897; Corona S. 1990; Davies 1977; Jimenez-Moreno 1972; Kirchhoff 1961; Monjas-Ruiz 1976; Nicholson 1988; Seler 1967; Smith 1984; Weigand 1991).

4 By this accounting, the Aztecs literally created a parallel or circular history to explain their present world, and did so by way of projecting into the past their present history. If one subscribes to the notion that Aztlan is little more than allegory, then Aztlan was in all probability a manifestation of a forgotten history that the Aztec sought to resurrect by way of projecting their contemporary reality into the mythic past.

5 As such, dates extending prior to the late 12th century A.D. have been questioned.

and thereby, systematically excluded from consideration. Much of this tendency is clearly a byproduct of the confusing array of ethnically and politically-based calendrical counts encountered by the Spanish in the central highlands in the early 16th century (Smith 1984). A number of scholars have employed a comparative approach to this problem, often aligning their perspectives with those dates that appear to cluster in time. Such a strategy, when not weighed in terms of the ethnic and political rhetoric of the times, has tended to obscure the existence of dates that clearly anticipate by centuries the traditionalist dates ascribed to the Mexica migrations from Aztlan. Despite the confusion, the migrations in question are documented in a variety of sources, and dates ranging from A.D. 902 (Codice Ramirez) to A.D. 1155 (Anales de Tlatelolco) are presented to account for Mexica origins (Weigand 1991:1). Smith's (1984) recent essay on the Aztlan migration theme serves to illustrate the confusion. Despite an attempt to restrict the focus of the Aztlan migrations to the late 12th century A.D., Smith was forced to contend with dates that fell into the period of the early 10th century. His strategy was to segregate out these early migrations into a non-nahuatl theme, while at the same time attempting to conjoin the 12th century migrations to a nahuatl-only contingent -- an effort that avoided consideration of the nahuatl-speaking Olmeca and Xicalanca groups that have now been reinterpreted (on the basis of recent findings from the sites of Cholula and Cacaxtla) to represent the product of a 7th through 9th century conquest movement into the Puebla Basin and the region of Chalco-Amecameca (Mendoza 1992).

6. Chicomoztoc was a toponym identified with the founding of many towns in the Mesoamerican Postclassic; especially as this regards the Aztlan migrations into the central highlands. Ultimately, Chicomostoc has been identified, in varying contexts, with La Quemada, Zacatecas; Teotihuacan in the Basin of Mexico (Heyden 1981); and with Colhuacan (Seler 1967).

7. It should be noted that Lake Yuriria straddles the border between Michoacan and Guanajuato, and that San Isidro Culiacan lies squarely within the modern state of Guanajuato, Mexico. While Kirchhoff (1961) interpreted San Isidro Culiacan, Guanajuato, to be the legendary Colhuacan or Teocolhuacan of the Mexica migrations, he nevertheless believed that Aztlan itself lay some distance north and west of San Isidro Culiacan. This particular interpretation did not present a major conflict or challenge to Jimenez Moreno's (1972) perspective that Mezcaltitlan, Nayarit, was Aztlan.

8. Oddly enough, if one retraces the footsteps of the original lost tribes that composed

the Mexica Aztec polyglot, one is left with the impression that the original homeland was located at Colhuacan in the Basin of Mexico; a settlement identified with the island-hill and grottos of Cerro de la Estrella.

9. If we take the accounts to represent actual events and localities, then in all likelihood, Aztlan can most specifically be identified with a host of ancient sites and events in the Basin of Mexico. It has been demonstrated in other contexts (Smith 1984) that migrants of the Aztec era took the names or toponyms of the towns or regions that they settled. As such, the ethnic names attributed to many an Aztec period group were largely related to their ultimate destinations, and not their particular origins. If this is in fact the case, then the Aztec account of origins, with its many and sundried legends, best lends credibility to the migration as little more than a pilgrimage circuit.

10. Richard MacNeish's (1954) dissertation examined the Panuco region of Veracruz for the origins of Mesoamerican interactions with the Caddoan peoples of the Texas Gulf

Coast. Recently, Gloria M. Delgado de Cantu (1977) reexamined the role of the Huastec in the elaboration of the prehistoric societies of the Southeastern United States. In turn, recent excavations at Balcon de Moctezuma, Tamaulipas, Mexico (Narez 1990; Peña and Narez 1990) have resulted in the recovery of a significant body of evidence in support of the Huastec connection -- and the emergence of a prehistoric "gateway community" -- to the Southeastern United States.

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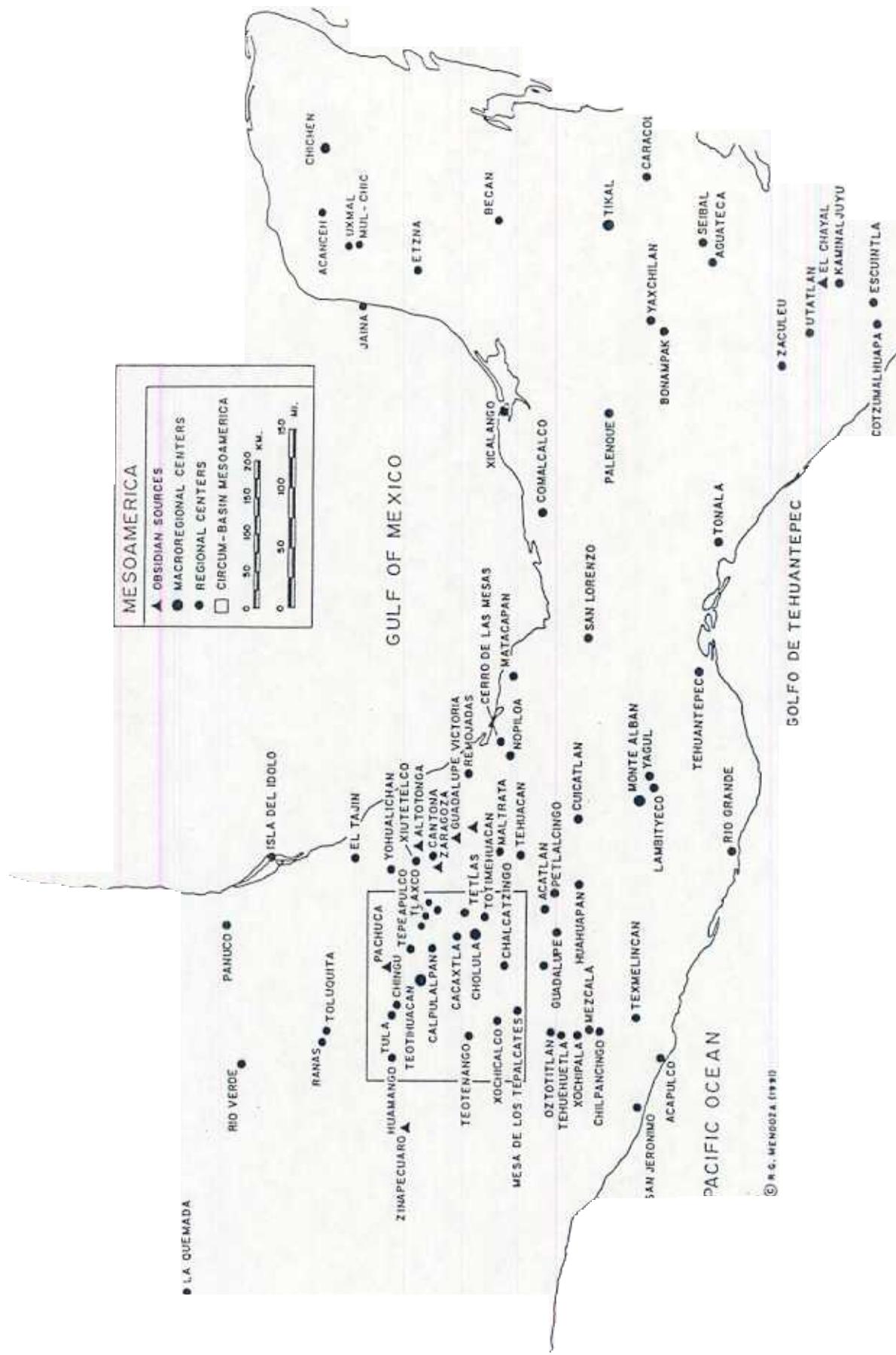
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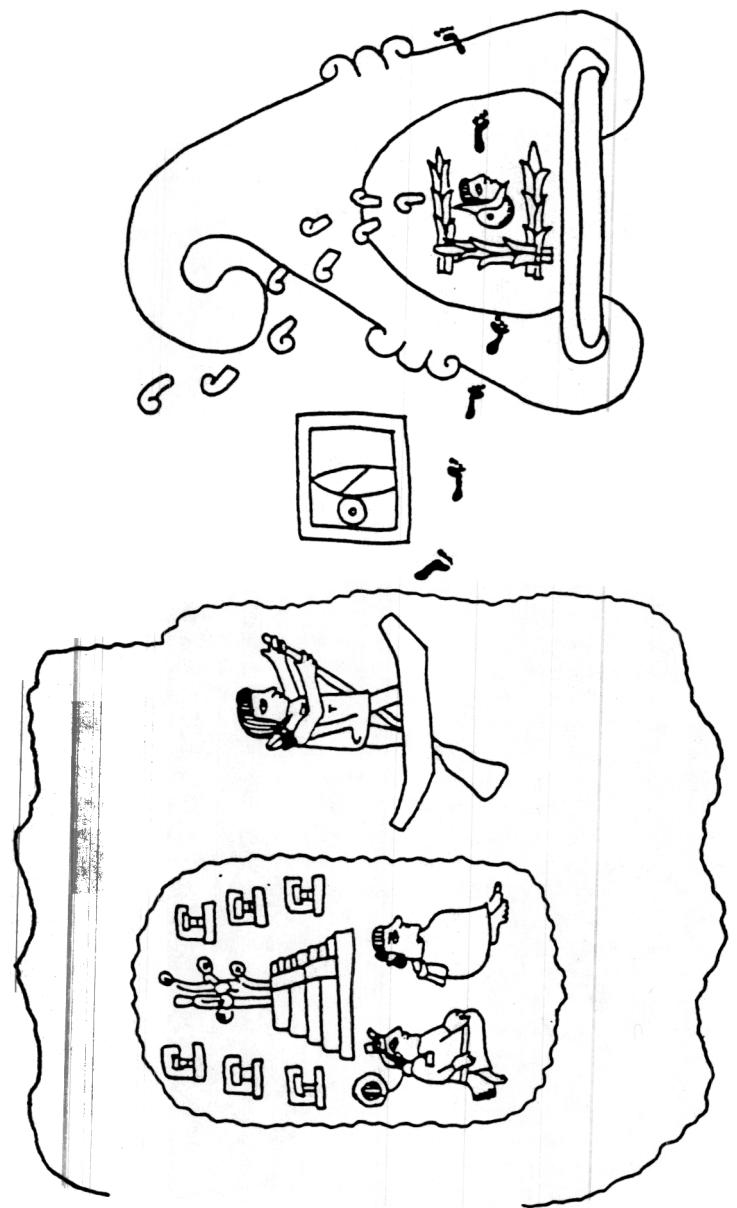
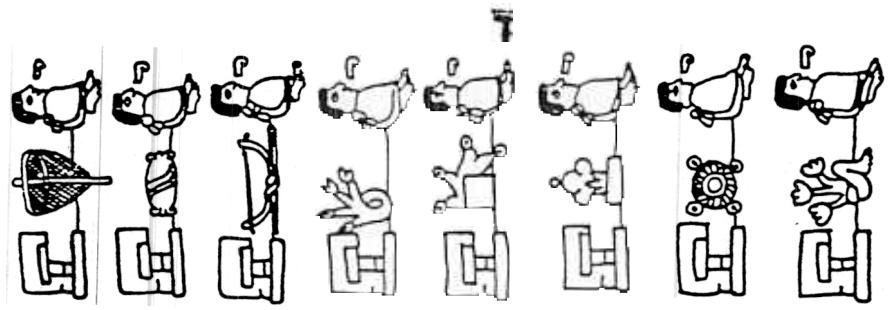
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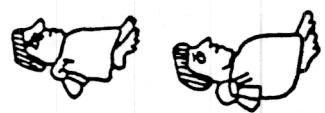
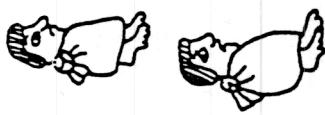
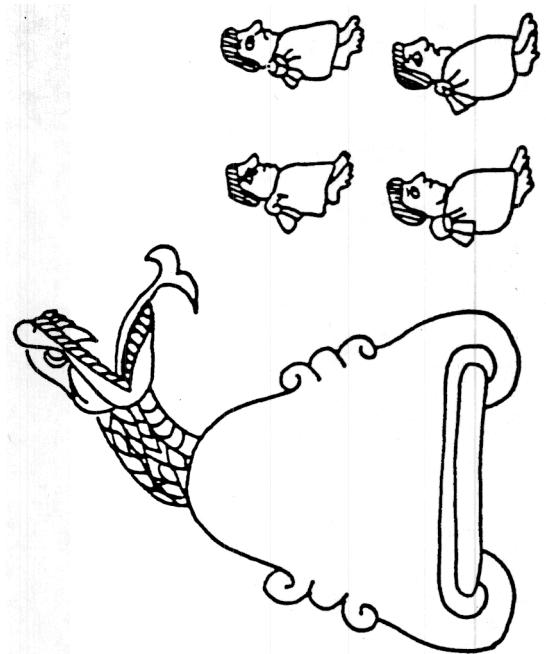
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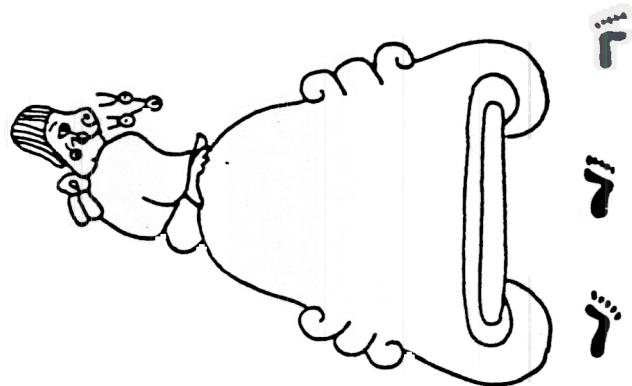
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