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The Climactic Self-Analysis of the Aztecs Through a Coronation Stone

Many civilizations have seen themselves as then center of the universe, praised their leader as the paramount being, and believed that they were living in the most important era. Few cultures, however, match the intensity behind the beliefs of the Aztecs of Mesoamerica. The Aztec world view is haunted by a tension that calls for rituals such as blood sacrifice, war, and the election of a king who is in alignment with an otherwise unstable universe. The Coronation ritual, where the elected king would go through the stages of “Separation and Retreat, Investiture and Coronation, Coronation War, and Confirmation”¹, as outlined by Richard F. Townsend, reflects the brutal nature of the Aztec belief system and the religious history of Ancient America. The religious importance of Aztec Coronation is evidenced by the *Coronation Stone of Moctezuma II*, or the *Stone of the Five Suns*. The square stone presents several images, shallowly carved and strategically positioned, to make a statement about the king, nation, and time it represents. A deeper understanding of the *Stone of the Five Suns* should be pursued through an analysis of the stone’s main glyphs (4 Jaguar, 4 Wind, 4 Rain, 4 Water, and 4 Movement)², a comparison between coronation and other Aztec rituals, and a discussion of Moctezuma II as a historical figure. A contextual investigation shows that the Aztecs saw themselves as the axis of the volatile world in three dimensions: the Aztec empire existed during the most climactic era of

¹ Richard F Townsend, “Coronation at Tenochtitlan,” in *The Aztec Templo Mayor: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks* edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Trustees for Harvard University, 1987), 391

² Art Institute of Chicago, Coronation Stone of Motecuhzoma II (Stone of the Five Suns), 1503. Entry, *Essential Guide*, 2009, 24

time, ruled from the position of axis mundi at the Templo Mayor, and operated under the leadership of a coronated ruler who was fit for this divine arrangement.

The dimension of time seems to permeate most aspects of the Aztec religion and is the most essential theme of the *Stone of the Five Suns*. Wayne Elzey finds a common thread between the differing accounts of the Mesoamerican religion: the “Suns” are representative of cosmic ages and the world is in the fifth age.³ Although the order of the ages and their exact description is not agreed upon, they are generally in alignment with the carvings on the *Stone of the Five Suns*, hence the name. Elzey makes two great points that help to explain why the glyphs are present on a coronation stone and meaning behind their organization. Firstly, the five ages are not necessarily a linear, growing history of time. Rather, each age is “autonomous and apparently without internal change or development until it is destroyed and another takes its place.”⁴ The *Stone of the Five Suns* indeed places each Sun in its own quadrant. The only line that can be drawn is a cycle between each age; none of the previous four Suns eclipse each other. An analysis of a similar work, the *Aztec Calendar Stone*, confirms the cyclic nature of the Suns and their relationship to the Aztec organization of days and years.⁵

If the previous four Suns are autonomous and equal, then why is the carving of the fifth sun, Movement, placed in the center of the stone? Elzey argues that fifth and current Sun is special because it is the climax. It is not just the end of existence, but the culmination of the previous four eras. In other words, the fifth Sun relates to the four others “as a whole does to its parts.”⁶ It would not make sense for anything to exist after the fifth era because it represents

³ Wayne Elzey, “The Nahua Myth of the Suns: History and Cosmology in Pre-Hispanic Mexican Religions.” *Numen* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1976): 117

⁴ Elzey, “The Nahua Myth of the Suns” 123

⁵ Elzey, “The Nahua Myth of the Suns” 128

⁶ Elzey, “The Nahua Myth of the Suns” 127

order and all of existence. From this perspective, the Aztecs see their era as a central, binding force. The *Stone of the Five Suns* indeed places the fifth Sun in the center. Further, the Motion glyph representing this Sun is placed above the “11 Reed” sign, which represents the year 1503.⁷ Possibly, the central Sun is connected, through the present year, to the protruding border of the stone, encapsulating the entire composition. Although the concept of these ages is complex and easy to misunderstand, its depiction on the stone is consistent with other works and makes sense. If the primary subject matter of a coronation stone is the ages of time surrounding the current, all-encompassing age, then the Aztecs must have been extremely mindful of this “history” when initiating some event, such as a coronation. Therefore, time is not just a facet of the Mesoamerican religion, but a most crucial element. Additionally, the Aztecs see themselves as the keepers of this era, constantly trying to preserve it through rituals and organization.

Because this stone is dedicated to a ruler of a nation, the orientation of that society in space can be compared to the geometry of the stone’s composition and possible location. The Aztecs placed a lot of spiritual meaning in astronomy, as shown by the five Suns and suggested by the round “star” shapes on the coronation stone. David Carrasco argues that the Aztecs paid most attention to the stars along the horizon and the rising of the Sun (the all-important fifth), which fed their superstitions about the instability of the world, ordering and reordering society and architecture.⁸ It is reasonable to conclude that this society was obsessive about order and strived to be the axis mundi. In fact, they placed the fate of the universe in the hands of rituals and the alignment of the city to the rising sun where “a symmetry was sought between the horizon equinox sun, the orientation of Templo Mayor, the sacrificial festival, and the king's own

⁷ Art Institute of Chicago, Coronation Stone of Motecuhzoma II (Stone of the Five Suns), 24

⁸ David Carrasco, “Star Gatherers and Wobbling Suns: Astral Symbolism in the Aztec Tradition.” *History of Religions* 26, no. 3 (Winter 1987): 290

authority.”⁹ The Templo Mayor was rebuilt many times in the effort to be properly aligned. The Aztecs decided that they existed in the climactic fifth era, but their positioning in relation to the stars had to be executed. The symmetry of Tenochtitlan can be translated to the symmetry on the *Aztec Calendar Stone* as noted by Elzey, and, as an extension, to the *Stone of the Five Suns*, where the four lesser ages correspond directly with the four spatial directions.¹⁰

Descriptions of the Aztec system of time through five ages and their attention to spatial order explains the subject matter of the *Stone of the Five Suns* quite harmoniously (despite the fearful tension behind those beliefs). There is still a missing element that has only been discussed briefly so far: the position of the ruler, Montezuma II. His role as the axis of society reflects the climactic view of time and space, and it must be executed perfectly to avoid disaster. Thus, the coronation ceremony and the coronation stone are full of meaning. In the ceremony, the Aztec ruler is separated from society and humbled before nature and the gods, made responsible for the prosperity of the society and the preservation of the world, and enthroned as a governing, divine force.¹¹ The anthropologist Barry L. Isaac describes how Aztec rulers like Ahuítzotl and Moctezuma II invited enemy rulers to impressive ceremonies, such as their coronation, to show the position of Tenochtitlan and themselves as the center of the Earth.¹²

Much like their Mesoamerican predecessors, the Olmecs, the Aztecs had a strong relationship with the Earth. The ground was worshipped because it “not only represents a sacred entity but also the concrete world, the land of the imperium: *Cem Anahuac Tenochca Tlalpan*

⁹ Carrasco, “Star Gatherers and Wobbling Suns”, 293

¹⁰ Elzey, “The Nahua Myth of the Suns” 127

¹¹ Townsend, “Coronation at Tenochtitlan” 400

¹² Barry L. Isaac, “The Aztec ‘Flowery War’: A Geopolitical Explanation.” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 419

(The Earth, Tenochca [Mexica] Land).”¹³ This is relevant to the coronation stone because the Earth is what connects the physical world and society to the gods and time. Perhaps that is why many Aztec rituals, including coronation and the New Fire Ceremony, involved cave temples. The coronated ruler is meant to hold together the rigid world with the spiritual world (a connection that is still volatile), so the Aztec perception of time and space is engraved in basalt, the Earth, as a dedication to that ruler. The metaphysical responsibility of Moctezuma II is confirmed by the aforementioned rebuilding of the Templo Mayor. Here, the Aztec ruler as an axis of society is directly dependent upon the Aztec city as an axis for the world: “Moctezuma is not a king if the temple is out of line. So, in an act of immense responsibility, Moctezuma orders the temple reoriented between the equinox sun and his own perspective.”¹⁴ The tremendous spiritual weight attributed to the symmetry between a ruler and his kingdom might reveal something about the design of the coronation stone. The *Stone of the Five Suns* is indeed balanced. The unstable universe and fifth Sun is positioned carefully between the four previous Suns just as the Templo Mayor is placed carefully between the gaze of Moctezuma and the rising sun.

The stone synthesizes the Aztec interpretation of the past (the four lesser Suns) with the present (the fifth Sun and the date of Moctezuma’s Coronation, July 15, 1503).¹⁵ The *Stone of the Five Suns* also interlaces the rock of the Earth, basalt, with depictions of the divine. The symmetry of the stone is explained by the Aztec fear of cosmic disorder. The controlling forces of society: leadership, spatial order, and time, are all dependent upon the same balance

¹³ Townsend, “Coronation at Tenochtitlan” 399

¹⁴ Carrasco, “Star Gatherers and Wobbling Suns”, 294

¹⁵ Art Institute of Chicago, Coronation Stone of Motecuhzoma II (Stone of the Five Suns), 24

represented by the coronation stone, a work of art that is perhaps a display of confidence in the new ruler as the preserving force of the Empire.

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Figure 1 - Stone of the Five Suns



Figure 2 - Aztec Calendar Stone