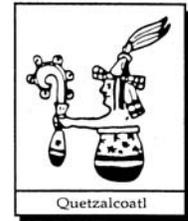


THE NAHUA NEWSLETTER

A PUBLICATION OF THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY
 CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STUDIES
 ALAN R. SANDSTROM, EDITOR
 WITH SUPPORT FROM THE ANTHROPOLOGY PROGRAM, INDIANA UNIVERSITY-PURDUE UNIVERSITY FORT WAYNE



NOVEMBER 2004

NUMBER 38

ISSN 1066-0089

Aztec Materials in Museum Collections: Some Frustrations of a Field Archaeologist

by

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In writing up the artifacts from my excavations in Morelos (Smith 2004a, b), I have run up against a roadblock in scholarship in Aztec archaeology and art history. Aztec objects are scattered in museums throughout the world, and there are few catalogs or comprehensive studies of particular classes of object (Smith 2003:6). This makes it difficult to find relevant comparative examples for my fragmentary artifacts, hindering efforts to interpret their forms, uses, and meanings. Most of the attention given to Aztec art focuses on a small number of fine objects, ignoring the range of variation in particular material categories. In this paper I provide a few examples of this problem with the hope that some colleagues will join me in finding a way to better publicize and study the many collections of Aztec artifacts and art.

Stone sculpture, for example, is one of the most widely known and best published genres of Aztec art. Figure 1 shows a small human figure of basalt from the Aztec town of Cuexcomate in western Morelos (Smith 1992). One of several stone sculptures from the site, this piece was discovered on the surface of the ground, face down among rocks and debris, some distance from the nearest structure. It probably dates to the Aztec period (the only occupation at Cuexcomate), although it could be an Epiclassic sculpture from the nearby site of Xochicalco that was looted in Aztec times. I have looked in vain for similar stone sculptures from other Aztec sites, but nearly all of the published works on Aztec sculpture focus on the finest examples. My modest figure is certainly not in their league, however. There is not even a definitive analysis of Aztec stone sculpture that can serve to document the styles, techniques, materials, subjects, and contexts of sculptures. Felipe Solís Olguín's (1976) catalog of the sculpture from the Santa Cecilia museum is notable for its inclusion of a much wider variety of objects than most studies, including many smaller and cruder sculptures. This was the only place I was able to find examples similar to several other small stone heads from Cuexcomate. But I have yet to find anything similar to the piece shown in figure 1.

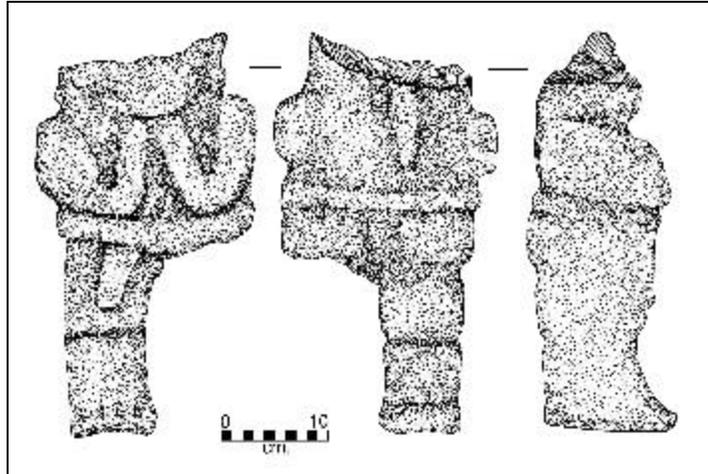


Figure 1. Stone sculpture no. SS-5 from Cuexcomate.

Ceramic sculpture is another genre of Aztec art that lacks comprehensive study. I recently received an e-mail communication from a colleague at a museum in Tehran, Iran. The museum has in its collection a large hollow Aztec style ceramic sculpture of a seated skeletal figure, probably the deity Mictlantecuhtli. This piece was donated to the museum by the Shah of Iran [1]. The museum staff was trying to identify the piece. I replied that it looked like an Aztec sculpture and referred them to several colleagues more expert in this area than I. But I could not recommend any publications, because there are none that survey known Aztec ceramic sculptures.

This problem also hinders interpretation of ceramic sculpture fragments I excavated at Yauhtepec (Figure 2). We found a foot with a sandal (A), two hands grasping objects (B, C), a biconical fragment (D), a possible solid foot (E), and what may be an elbow (F). These fragments are from domestic trash deposits of commoner houses, seemingly unlikely contexts for large ceramic sculptures. If I had a better idea of the range of variation of Aztec ceramic sculptures, it would help me to reconstruct the original forms of the objects from these (and other) fragments. It might also help me to determine the uses of such sculptures and perhaps provide clues as to why such pieces turn up in commoner trash heaps. A number of individual ceramic sculptures, such as the eagle warrior and two death gods found at the Templo Mayor, are well described and well analyzed (e.g., López Luján and Mercado 1996). Others, like the large Xipe Totec figures in the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are reproduced in many books. But like stone sculptures, the range of variation of this category is not well known, and there are probably numerous examples in the collections of museums around the world that might help me to interpret the enigmatic fragments from our excavations.

Small ceramic figurines are much more common in Aztec excavations and museum collections than ceramic sculptures, and they are much better published (see citations in Smith 2002). Nevertheless, the absence of a catalog or corpus of these objects, and the lack of a comprehensive published analysis, makes it difficult to interpret the fragmentary examples from my excavations. Two of the more complete figurines from Yauhtepec are illustrated in Figure 3 (A, B). The three small, crude figurines © are of a form rarely published (probably because publications tend to focus on the finest art objects). Brumfiel and Hodge (1996:432-433) report several figurines of this type from Xaltocan in the Valley of Mexico, and in the absence of comparative data they suggest that this type might have been a local form unique to that site. Now Yauhtepec can be added to the list of sites with these figurines, bringing the grand total

to two sites. I suspect that such figurines were much more widely distributed, but without access to numerous museum collections, one will never know.

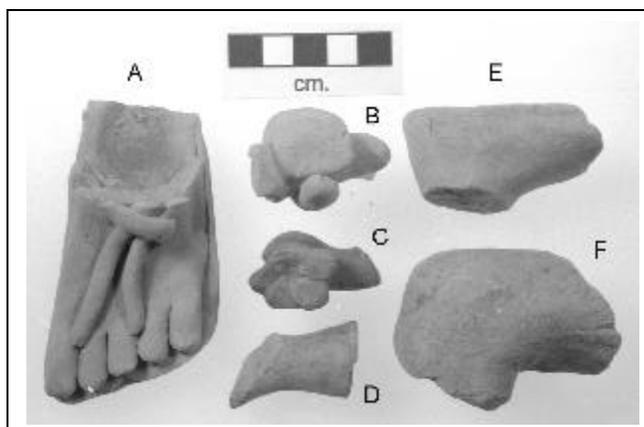


Figure 2. Ceramic sculpture fragments from Yautepec.

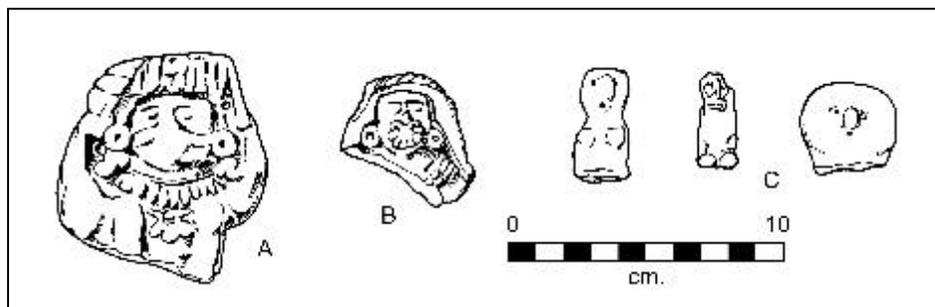


Figure 3. Ceramic figurines from Yautepec.

The standard Aztec style figurines shown in Figure 3 (A, B) illustrate yet another problem in the interpretation of remains from Aztec sites: the lack of a good work on Aztec iconography. I can recognize the cut conch shell pendant and the buccal mask of the figurine in Figure 3 (A) as emblems of the deity Ehecatl. But the nose ornament of the figurine in Figure 3 (B) does not ring any bells (I readily admit to being among the iconographically challenged). Unfortunately there is no comprehensive work on Aztec iconography that would enable scholars and students to easily determine the significance of an element such as this nose ornament.

My Mayanist colleague Marilyn Masson recently asked me what the standard source is for Aztec iconography. She wanted to know the symbols and elements of the major deities, and was looking for an Aztec version of Karl Taube's (1992) enormously useful book, The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan. I told her that the only course of action was to read all of the publications of Eduard Seler and H. B. Nicholson, as well as relevant articles by Cecelia Klein, Leonardo López Luján, Eloise Quiñones Keber,

Karl Taube, and other scholars, and of course the important new book on Tezcatlipoca by Guilhem Olivier (2003). I wish someone would publish a guide to iconography more systematic and comprehensive than these works, but perhaps less detailed and more easily comprehended than Bodo Spranz (1973) or Anne-Marie Vié-Wohrer (1999). In the meantime, publication of the collected works of H. B. Nicholson on Aztec iconography would be very useful.

A final example is notched human femurs. Figure 4 shows samples from a secondary burial excavated by José García Payón (1941) at Calixtlahuaca. There is a literature on these objects, and aspects of their symbolism and use are relatively well understood (e.g., Beyer 1934; Carballal Staedtler, et al. 1993; García Payón 1941; Seler 1992). Nevertheless, their geographical distribution is not well known. Numerous examples are known from Late Postclassic sites in the Toluca Valley (and from Michoacán), but only one fragment has been found at contemporaneous sites in Morelos. Is this difference in occurrence culturally significant, or is it an accident of excavation and publication? I am sure that if the various examples of notched bones in museums were recorded and studied, patterns of their distribution — and their cultural significance — would become much clearer. The Morelos fragment is from my excavations at Yautepec, but I have no idea whether this find is unique and surprising, or whether it is just one more example of a widespread, but poorly documented, distribution.



Figure 4. Secondary burial with notched bones from Calixtlahuaca (from García Payón 1941:67).

What can be done about this situation? I am sure that I am not the only scholar frustrated by the lack of systematic information about the collections of Aztec objects in various museums around the world. I have done research on collections in a number of museums in the U.S. and Mexico (Smith 2001; Smith, et al. 2003a), and in every case I have found museum staffs very helpful, making available not only the collections but also their databases, paper records, and personal expertise. But few of us can afford the time or expense to visit hundreds of museums in Mexico, the U.S. and Europe. We need to be able to use museum collections for research without visiting all of the collections in person [2].

A number of illustrated catalogs of key categories of artifacts in individual museums have been published (e.g., Baer and Bankmann 1990; Baquedano 1984; Carrandi, et al. 1990; Castillo Tejero and Solís Olguín 1975; Sodi Miranda and Herrera Torres 1991; Solís Olguín 1976, 1981; Solís Olguín and Morales Gómez 1991). But these vitally important works cover only a small portion of the relevant collections and objects. Research into the histories of individual museum collections is also essential (e.g., Feest 1990, 1993; Florescano 1993; Heikamp 1976; Heikamp and Anders 1972; Hocquenghem, et al. 1987; König and Kröfges 2000; McVicker 1989; Meslay 2001), but much more work of this nature remains to be done.

Collections from modern excavations need to be researched as well. For example, in 1937 Eduardo Noguera excavated the so-called "Volador" deposit in Mexico City, perhaps the most important Aztec ceremonial deposit outside of the Templo Mayor and Sacred Precinct excavations (Noguera 1968). More than 1,000 ceramic vessels were recovered, of which nearly 900 are curated in the Museo Nacional de Antropología (MNA) and have been published (Solís Olguín and Morales Gómez 1991). But many of the vessels were sent to other museums in Mexico, the U.S., and perhaps elsewhere. Volador pots have been published from the Field Museum of Natural History (McVicker 1992:45,54,55), the Milwaukee Public Museum (Parsons 1974:132), and I have seen examples (or photographs of examples) from other museums as well. My colleagues and I recently published an interpretation of the nature of the Volador deposit based upon the frequencies of ceramic vessel forms in the MNA collection (Smith, et al. 2003b). It would be nice to know if the 100 additional vessels in other museums support our interpretations.

Today museums are busily cataloging and documenting their collections with computer databases and digital imagery. Given the size of many collections and the declining budgets of museums, however, it may be a long time before such projects are completed. Once museums have electronic databases that include digital images, however, the various catalogs will need to be coordinated and organized to facilitate comparative research projects. This raises a host of difficult issues of logistics, access, and intellectual property. But at some point in the future, the possibility of constructing comprehensive illustrated digital catalogs of Aztec objects in numerous museums may be realized. My purpose here is to urge colleagues concerned about this issue to do whatever they can to facilitate the production and exchange of information on Aztec art and artifacts. Perhaps an international committee of scholars — museum professionals, archaeologists and art historians — could be convened to help speed this process along. It will be a long and difficult endeavor, but the potential rewards for scholarship and research are great.

Notes

1. A brief search on the Internet suggests that the Shah (Muhammad Riza Pahlavi, who ruled 1953-1979) had various contacts within Mexico. He had received an award from the Mexican government, and after he fled Iran in 1979, he lived in Cuernavaca for several months.
2. I do not advocate research on looted materials or collections held by private collectors. The validation of ancient objects in the commercial domain by scholars contributes to the continuing destruction of the archaeological record (Renfrew 2000) and goes against the ethical principles of the Society for American Archaeology (Society for American Archaeology 1996). This is a contentious issue that divides archaeologists and art historians (Dorfman 1998; Wylie 1995). Although many museum collections established before the mid-twentieth century were obtained through methods that may qualify as looting, these materials are appropriate for research if they are not part of the commercial domain (i.e., if they are not in danger of being deaccessioned and sold commercially).

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