

SCORPIO AND LONG-DISTANCE TRADE IN MESOAMERICA

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RESUMEN

En este trabajo se relaciona al grupo astronómico de la Ciudadela en Teotihuacan con la constelación del Escorpión, y con los mercaderes que surtían a la ciudad con productos traídos del Sureste. Para ello se acude a las imágenes prehispánicas del alacrán y al contexto en que éstas aparecen. Destacan las figuras humanas con cola de alacrán, que al parecer se asociaban al culto de Venus y a los mercaderes. Dicho astro entra en la iconografía mesoamericana con distintas modalidades, algunas de las cuales se relacionaban con la guerra. El origen de esta simbología se encuentra en la costa sur de Guatemala, de donde salía el cacao que se distribuía en Oaxaca y el Altiplano. Durante el Postclásico el Soconusco fue una de las regiones que más interesaron a los aztecas, cuyos *pochteca* no sólo se dedicaban al comercio sino también a resolver o promover conflictos diplomáticos.

ABSTRACT

This paper establishes a relationship between Scorpio and the astronomical group of the Ciudadela at Teotihuacan, linking them to the city's merchant elite. Its argument is based on a brief discussion of the *alacrán* and the context in which it appears in Prehispanic documents and art. Human figures with a scorpion-tail are emphasized because of their association with the merchant class and Venus. The iconography used to represent this star takes on many shapes, some of which were related to war. The origin of this symbol can be found on the southern coast of Guatemala, from where cacao was distributed to Oaxaca and the highlands. During the Postclassic the Soconusco was one of the most cherished domains of the Aztec, whose *pochteca* not only carried out long-distance trade but also had the power to solve or promote diplomatic conflicts.

Key Words: archaeoastronomy

Two decades ago archaeological work at Tikal shed new light on a building complex known as Mundo Perdido. Its resemblance to Group E in Uaxactun led Vilma Fialko to believe that it served a similar purpose, though its orientation was a little different (Fialko, 1988). After realizing that many other cities in the Peten shared the same pattern, she called it Astronomical Commemoration Complex, a term that transcends its individual connotations and yet distinguishes it as the site where ancient Maya elites performed particular rituals. When compared with the building complex on the eastern side of the Ciudadela at Teotihuacan, however, she admitted a more extensive distribution than previously considered. Contemporary work at Monte Alban revealed the existence of another commemoration complex on the hill's main plaza (Fahmel, 1991). When the iconography of the Temple of the Plumed Serpents and the associated burials were analyzed it became clear that Teotihuacan and Monte Alban developed strong cultural ties over the centuries. Though for climatic and astronomical reasons their commemo-

ration complexes look in opposite directions, in both cases the ritual cycles and associated dates relate to Mesoamerican most important agricultural deities: Xipe and Tlaloc-Cocijo (Fahmel, 1995).

Over the years a series of excavations at the Ciudadela disclosed numerous constructions and building phases which have not yet been well correlated. Their alignment and use are therefore still debated (Fialko, 1988; Fahmel, 1995; Morante, 1996). Nonetheless, astronomical observations and calendrical data leave no doubt that by 200 AD there existed an assemblage to watch the movement of the sun along the eastern sky. In 1995 Bernd Fahmel designed two circular diagrams to depict the relationship between what was probably the original group, two calendar cycles of 260 days each and the eighteen Aztec months recorded by Bernardino de Sahagún. The spring and summer cycle he appointed to Xipe-Mictlantecuhli, considering various activities which were performed during the solar visit to the northern horizon. The autumn and winter cycle was dedicated to activities related to Tlaloc-Ehecatl-Cocijo, as the sun moved along the southern horizon. The lines between the Temple of the Plumed Serpents

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and the three buildings on the eastern platform mark important dates within the Aztec calendar. For the southern building no significant event was posited, though suspicion rose that it had something to do with Scorpio and the early winter morning sky.

Whether the third century inhabitants of Teotihuacan saw in Scorpio the outline of an animal of this kind we will probably never know. Spanish as well as native languages make a clear distinction between the *escorpión* and the *alacrán*, though for practical reasons they can be considered the same. Their association with metaphysical and astronomical entities, however, would suggest that they were thoroughly studied before their icon was put in use within ancient social institutions.

In Borgia Codex, Fejervary-Mayer, Laud and Nuttall the *alacrán* is associated with Xiuhtecuhtli and self-sacrifice due to the burning pain its sting inflicts on the victim (Baus, 1995). Among the Mexican people it was related to Tlaltecuhltli and Mictlantecuhtli because of its nocturnal habits, being a symbol of darkness, earth and death. In Borgia Codex and Vaticano B, on the other hand, it appears next to Tonatiuh, Tezcatlipoca as the Lord of Time, and Centeotl. Since all of these deities are linked with light and shadow, time, agriculture and death it would appear that the *alacrán* fits well into the autumn and winter cycle developed for the Ciudadela at Teotihuacan. When the sun reaches its lowest point on the horizon the days grow shorter and much of the highland's vegetation seems to die. At the same time Scorpio enters the eastern sky, where it occasionally meets Venus as the morning star.

Now then, around 350/400 AD a group of Teotihuacan priests travelled to Monte Alban and introduced a symbol known as the 'knot headdress' among the Zapotec. First depicted on the Tlaloc masks of the Temple of the Plumed Serpents, this motif quietly made its way to the Postclassic codices of the Yucatec Maya (Caso and Bernal, 1952; Fahmel, 2003). As an example of *longue durée* within Mesoamerica's civilization, it allows to think of still other symbols that might have persisted in time - among them a human figure with a scorpion-tail as represented in Cacaxtla and Codex Madrid. In the latter these figures were identified with a Maya hunting god and Ek Chuah, god of cacao and the elite's merchant-class (Thompson, 1950; Baus, 1995).

Let us remember that astronomical commemoration complexes originated in the southeastern lowlands, and that by 200 AD Mesoamerican rulers had consolidated several trade routes to exchange a se-

ries of luxury goods, including cacao. During the third century people at Teotihuacan saw the arrival of earthen effigy-vessels which antecede the Classic Zapotec urns (Caso and Bernal, 1952; Urcid, 2003). Some of these vessels were probably traded at Las Guié, a large market city located in the eastern section of Oaxaca's central valleys in charge of almost all economic transactions between the highlands and the southeast² (Fahmel, 2005, 2009). Built during centuries on a strategic spot, it is still known by its neighbours as 'land of the *alacrán*'³.

1. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the information set forth previously, it may be suggested that the Ciudadela at Teotihuacan was not only the showcase for agricultural rituals but also the site where caravans to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec were planned and organized. If René Millon was right and the Great Compound across the Avenue of the Dead was the city's largest marketplace (Millon, 1973), then the conjunction of Scorpio with the sun lowest rising point on the eastern horizon may have been the moment for the elites to celebrate the departure and/or arrival of its state-sponsored merchants⁴.

As an extension of this model the Ciudadela probably staged many other caravans, with diplomats and warriors to fend off any assaults. Curiously enough the lines over the central and northern buildings on the eastern platform point toward places on the Gulf coast, the Peten and Yucatan which also were of interest to the Teotihuacan elites. As the trajectory of each caravan had to be scheduled so as to avoid climatic hazards it is no surprise that in some codices the *alacrán* was associated with Tezcatlipoca, the Lord of Time. If the road to Oaxaca was taken at the end of December, the *tameme* were assured a safe crossing of the Tehuantepec river. The road to Xicalango, on the other hand, was accessible once the winter rains stopped and remained open until the summer storms began.

²Nowadays the ruins of this important city are located in the county of San Dionisio Ocotepec.

³The image of the ancient Maya hunting and trading gods is characterized by a coat of black paint over their whole body (Thompson, 1950). Durán, on the other hand, mentions that among the Aztec the *alacrán* was one of several poisonous animals used to prepare teotlacualli or 'food of the gods'. Priests probably smeared this drug-like substance on their bodies to numb their senses (Baus, 1995). Some modern Zapotec communities associate the *escorpión* with a black vegetable die, cacao and trade.

⁴The idea of a state-sponsored merchant-class was first discussed by Anne Chapman (1959), and later reconsidered by Frances Berdan (1978).

Another element of Mesoamerica's elaborate astronomy lends support to the argument that Scorpio was linked to the ancient merchant elites and the road to Tehuantepec, i.e., the heliacal rise of Venus and its related imagery. According to Baus (1995) the origin of the Venus icon can be traced to the southern coast of Guatemala. Set in the middle of extensive cacao orchards, the stelae of Santa Lucía show a flaming figure falling from the sky, wrapped within a lobular or an angular symbol of Venus. A similar figure is shown in Cacaxtla, albeit with a scorpion-tail behind its legs. No scorpion can be seen on the Santa Lucía stelae, but in Mitla, very close to Las Guié'e, Venus appears next to a realistic representation of this animal (Flores, 2005; Galindo, 2005). Long ago, Eduard Seler interpreted the association of a scorpion with the maya symbol *lamat* on a stone from the Nunnery at Chichen Itzá as the conjunction of Scorpio with Venus. Although several authors have spoken of Venus as a symbol of war and sacrifice (Baus, 1995), no consensus has been reached as to the meaning of the different icons that represent it. All we know is that the *pochteca* or elite merchants of the Aztec were in charge of long-distance trade. Their activities included diplomacy, and when need be, they also had the power to declare war.

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