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Twins in Mesoamerica as a Symbol of Contrasting Duality

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Twins in Mesoamerica as a Symbol of Contrasting Duality

Benjamin Rideout

In cultures across the Mesoamerican subcontinent, there are examples in the archaeological and ethnographic record of myths concerned with twins and sibling pairs (Minnecci, 1999). Twins in particular are seen as potent mythic pairs; however, both twins and other pairs of siblings are utilized in iconography and mythology to represent connected opposites. The idea of contrasting duality, where the two halves of each pairing are independent and yet connected to one another, is vital to the Mesoamerican way of thinking. Cultures such as the Maya and the Aztec used spouses and siblings, twins in particular, to embody contrasting counterparts of duality and completion, an idea that structures the worldviews of these two cultures. For the Maya, the most prominent example of mythic siblings would be the Hero Twins in the *Popol Vuh*. Mythology of the Aztec Empire includes the twins of *Quetzalcoatl* (meaning “Feathered Serpent” in Nahuatl, a language used by the Aztec People of Central Mexico) and *Tezcatlipoca* (“Smoking Mirror”), in addition to the siblings of *Huitzilopochtli* (“Hummingbird on the Left”) and *Coyolxauhqui* (“Face Painted with Bells”). These mythic examples found in the archaeological record shape the pan-Mesoamerican worldview, centered on contrasting duality and paradoxical pairings.

Background

The importance of duality and contrasting pairs has been a vital part of the Mesoamerican way of thinking from the beginning of the Pre-Classic Era, from 2500 BCE to about 200 CE. One early example of this is Stela 2 from the Pre-Colombian site

of Izapa, which can be interpreted as one of the earliest depictions of the Mayan Hero Twins in their defeat of *Vucub Caquix*, the monster Seven Macaw. Mesoamerican iconography and mythology often also utilize pairs of individuals to represent complementary opposition and duality. These pairs are often associated with creation, cosmic order, and the act of creation through the joining of a man and a woman. For the Quiche Maya, the world was created in the beginning by The Begetter, known as “Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth”, a dual-sexed deity whom is both mother and father to all of the world’s inhabitants (Tedlock 1985, 72, 76). The Aztecs had a similar deity, *Ometeotl*, the God of Duality, who is both a single entity and a male-female pair, known as *Ometeuctli*, the Lord of Duality, and his female counterpart, *Omecihuatl*, the Lady of Duality (Haly 1992, 272); this dual-gendered entity, whose name *Ometeotl* is translated from Nahuatl to mean “Place of Duality, God of Two”, was the source of all things, the well from which creation springs for all life (Leon-Portilla 1999, 133).

Creation, in the Mesoamerican worldview, depended on a pair of entities coming together in a union; this was often, yet not always, male and female pairs. The obvious pairing is male-female, with the creation act being that of sexual union. However, for deities such as the Aztec *Ometeotl* and the Mayan Begetter, that union of male and female was not solely sexual in nature, but the binding of male and female into a single, cohesive whole: the joining of opposites. For example, the concept of complementary opposites is exemplified in Venus, which was seen by the Mesoamericans as a dual celestial body, being both the morning star, and the evening star. Mesoamerican groups, the Maya in particular, followed Venus closely, recording the cycle of the star; for 236 days, Venus would appear in the morning, then a 90 day period of its absence, and then it

would appear as an evening star for 250 days before disappearing for another 8 (Thompson 2006, 165). The Feathered Serpent entity represented the dual aspects of Venus.

Venus in its dual form as the feathered serpent entity is found during the Early Classic period at Teotihuacan. For instance, in the Palace of Atetelco, the feathered serpent appears on an altar mural, carved with scales decorated with quincunx symbols, where each symbol consists of five parts, one in each corner and one in the center (Sugiyama 2000, 122-123). These symbols bear a striking resemblance to the Mayan glyph *Lamat*, or rabbit, which represented the star Venus (Figure 1). In addition to Atetelco, the lower and upper *taluds* of the Ambassador's palace at Teotihuacan have the symbols for both the morning and evening star, respectively (Thompson 2006, 168). There is also an anthropomorphic feathered serpent face decorating the side of the Venus Platform in the Great Plaza at Chichén Itzá (Thompson 2006, 170). Thus, the archeological record of monumental artwork and iconography reflects the contrasting yet complementary dualities characteristic of the Mesoamerican worldview, occurring in a variety of contexts.

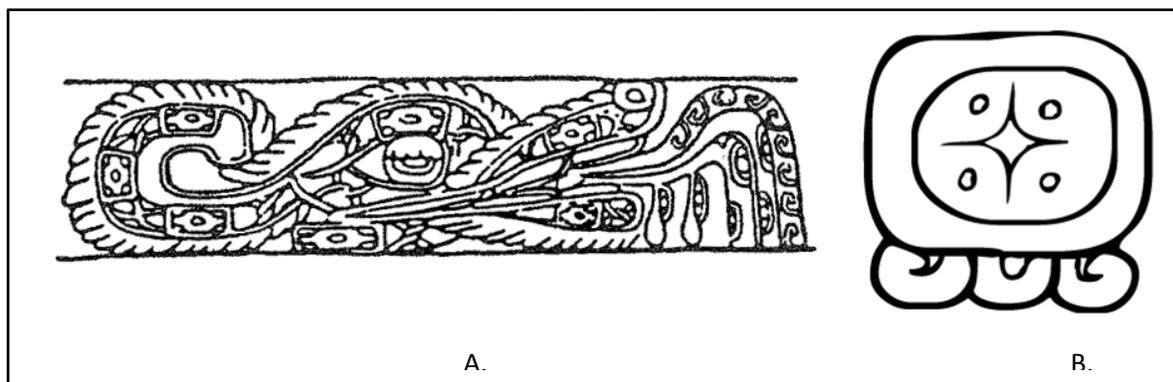


Figure 1. Comparison of Glyphs representing the star Venus; A. Mural on the Altar at the Palace of Atetelco, depicting quincunx scales on the Feathered Serpent entity (from Sugiyama 2000, 120); B. Mayan glyph *Lamat*, the 8th of the 20 day glyphs in the Mayan *Tzolk'in* Calendar.

The Hero Twins in the *Popul Vuh* Myth

The Hero Twins of the Mayan *Popul Vuh* descend to Xibalba to defeat the Lords of Xibalba (The Death Lords) in order to avenge their father and uncle, *One Hunahpu* and *Seven Hunahpu*, the divine sons of *Xpiyacoc* and *Xmucane*, the primordial mother-father pair. At the crossroads of Xibalba, the Hero Twins must work together, sending forth a mosquito to bite the Lords of Xibalba so that their names and locations would be revealed, which would in turn diminish the power of the Death Lords. Where the original set of twins was tricked, the Hero Twins worked together to overcome the obstacles created by the Lords of Xibalba. The Lords then send the Hero Twins into the Houses of Xibalba, where they are confronted by a number of challenges. In the last house, the House of Bats, the Twins come against their worst challenge yet. The bats of the House keep them up all night while the Twins hide in their blowguns, and when Hunahpu looks out to see if dawn has arrived, the bats cut off his head. Xbalanque summons the animals to help him replace his brother's head while the Lords of Xibalba use the severed head as a ball. The Hero Twins trick the Lords of Xibalba into chasing a rabbit instead of the ball, which Xbalanque places upon his brother's shoulders, restoring his head, and the Hero Twins, now whole, defeat the Lords of Xibalba in the Ballgame. Once defeated, the Lords of Xibalba are sacrificed by the Hero Twins, ending their reign in Xibalba.

The Complementarity of Siblings in Maya Archaeology

It is only through the combined strength and skill of the Hero Twins that they are able to overcome the Lords of Xibalba. One setback occurs when Hunahpu's head is stolen in the fifth house, the House of Bats, and the Twins are essentially separated. Xbalanque has to rebuild his twin in order to defeat the Lords of Xibalba, for he cannot

defeat the Lords of Xibalba alone. After calling the animals to bring possible replacements for his brother's head, Xbalanque chooses the squash bought by Coati, a medium-sized mammal similar to a raccoon, using a squash brought to him by the coati as the face (Tedlock 1985, 143-145). The necessity of replacing Hunahpu's head proposes the idea that twins are two halves of one whole, for Xbalanque cannot avenge his father without his brother. The idea of using a head as a rubber ball for the ballgame is a potent image found carved in the reliefs of the Ball Court of Chichén Itzá (Figure 2), where the ball in the relief has a skull motif at its center. The Lords of Xibalba can interpret that skull as a reference to the head of the decapitated Hunahpu, used as a ball before being reattached. In addition, the Chichén Itzá relief has a decapitated ball player, from whose neck sprouts both snakes and a vine with flowers and a squash; this may be a reference to Hunahpu's head, simulated by the squash until it could be retrieved by Xbalanque. It is only through their combined intellect that the Twins can defeat the Lords of Xibalba, for neither twin could do it by himself.



Figure 2. Ball Court Relief from site of Chichén Itzá, showing a pair of ballgame players on either side of a ball. The ball in the center has a skull at its center, and the player on the left has been decapitated, with snakes and a vine coming out of his neck wound. The flowering vine has fruit growing off it, interpreted here as a squash. Photo taken by Scott Holcomb (from www.flickr.com/photos/scottholcomb/5175220791/in/photostream/).

There is a second myth in the Popol Vuh about the Hero Twins, where Hunahpu and Xbalanque defeat the monster known as *Vucub Caquix*, or Seven Macaw. On their way to Xibalba to play the ballgame with the Lords, the Hero Twins come across the monstrous bird; Vucub Caquix has a metal nose and jewel-like teeth that shine like the sun, giving him false pride enough to think himself the Sun. With this false sun illuminating the Mayan world, the real sun would not rise (Tedlock 1985, 86). Thus, the world was not ordered as it should be. The divine Hero Twins see this, and must again work in accordance to defeat the monstrous entity of Vucub Caquix. The Twins work in tandem, using their blowguns to injure the creature while it perches in its tree, but it bites off Hunahpu's arm. Once Vucub Caquix retaliated, they are no longer able to fight the creature (Tedlock 1985, 90-92). Once that arm is lost, the whole, which is made up of both twins, is broken, rendering them ineffective, similar to when Hunahpu's head is taken in Xibalba. The Twins send their grandparents, the divine Xpiyacoc and Xmucane – themselves another divine contrasting duality of primordial mother and father – to 'heal' Vucub Caquix, actually removing his teeth and eyes, the sources of his power. The creature's power is diminished, and he is vanquished. Upon his death, the world is returned to order, with the real sun rising and falling, as is ordained. The grandparents reattach Hunahpu's arm, and the twins carry on to Xibalba (Tedlock 1985, 92).

Stela Two from Izapa (Figure 3) depicts the defeat of the monstrous Vucub Caquix by two figures interpreted as the Hero Twins. Another stela at Izapa, Stela

Twenty-Five, also has a possible representation of Vucub Caquix perching in a tree with one of the Hero Twins standing beneath it. These two stelae, both from a Pre-Colombian site, predate most representations of the Hero Twins in Mesoamerica; this shows not only the symbol's vitality and timelessness, but also the early start to the pan-Mesoamerican idea of contrasting, yet complementary twins.



Figure 3. Stela 2 from the site of Izapa, depicting two individuals, interpreted here as being a representation of the Mayan Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, on either side of a falling, winged figure. The middle entity is interpreted here as being that of Vucub Caquix, the monstrous bird vanquished by the Hero Twins in the Popul Vuh (from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Izapa).

Paired Siblings in Aztec Myth

For the Aztec people, there is a selection of myths that are relevant to the idea of complimentary opposites. The first is that of the Five Suns, the creation myth concerning the Twins Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. As put forth in the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, a post-contact document of Spanish creation, the Five Suns begin with the first world, the Sun of Wind, created by Quetzalcoatl (Minnecci 1999, 154). However, this sun was only a half-sun, and therefore not bright enough to illuminate the world; to remedy this, his twin Tezcatlipoca makes himself the sun, completing the creation of his twin brother (Minnecci 1999, 155-6, 159). The world goes through three other ages, each destroyed, before it comes time for the fifth and final Sun. The Fourth Sun, the Sun of

Water, ended in flooding, which caused the heavens to crash into the earth and, as a result, everything had to be recreated, including the Earth's inhabitants. Tezcatlipoca made fires for a festival dedicated to the gods, but his fires did not produce enough light to illuminate the world. Quetzalcoatl has to complete his twin brother's age by making the Fifth Sun (Minnecci 1999, 161).

The second of the two Aztec myths concerning the interactions of siblings who embody complimentary opposites is that of the birth of Huitzilopochtli. *Coatlicue*, or "One with the skirt of Serpents", first gave birth to the maiden Coyolxauhqui and her four hundred brothers, who represent the stars in the Southern sky (Moctezuma 1985, 810). Afterwards, Coatlicue gives birth to Huitzilopochtli without a father, having been impregnated by a ball of hummingbird feathers which fell from the heavens. Coyolxauhqui and the four hundred are enraged by their mother's pregnancy, and set out to kill her for what they see as her indiscretion (Moctezuma 1985, 810). Huitzilopochtli is born just at the right moment to save his mother, killing his half-sister and many of their four hundred brothers. Coyolxauhqui is cut into pieces, and her body is rolled down the side of *Coatepec*, the "Serpent Mountain" sacred to the Aztecs as the birthplace of Huitzilopochtli (Moctezuma 1985, 811).

Interestingly, Quetzalcoatl is said to have another brother who is possibly a twin: the dog-like creature Xolotl. They are said to be the sons of the goddess Coatlicue, and, in some versions, journey together to *Mictlan*, the Aztec underworld, to retrieve bones of giants from which to make the human race. In both myths we see that creation takes the opposing twins working in conjunction with one another. Only through the combined

forces of seemingly opposite forces can the suns be created, and for the world to be set in order for its mortal inhabitants.

The Complementarity of Siblings in Aztec Archaeology

In Aztec mythology, pairs are often framed in opposition, but are complimentary to one another, where two contrasting entities form a whole. Therein lies the paradox of these dualities, often where the individuals that form the pairs are mutually independent, and yet both are needed for the pair to be completed. Creation is the typical goal for these pairings, which indicates that, in Mesoamerican thought and worldview, contrasting pairs were needed for creation. For the Aztec, these include Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl and Xolotl, and Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopochtli. Each of these pairings is evidenced in the archaeological record, often through carved iconography and architecture, presented below.

Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca

The Aztec twins Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, akin in some ways to the Mayan Hero Twins, also had to work together in order to achieve world order. However, the Aztec set of twins embodies polar opposites who must work in conjunction in order to create the world. Among the Mexica prayers, Tezcatlipoca is referred to as a black-hearted sorcerer; he who looks upon the world of men as his toy, “serv[ing] as a laughing stock for your amusement,” and is sometimes referred to in Nahuatl as *Necoc Yaotl*, or ‘sower of discord’ (Minneci 1999, 153). He often is seen as the opposite of his twin brother, the benign Quetzalcoatl, yet it is in this opposition that balance is achieved and creation of the world is successful. The twins are counterbalanced; one cannot exist

without the other, and neither can fulfill his divine duty without the action of the other. In having to work together, the twins can also be seen as two halves of a whole, similar to Quetzalcoatl and Xolotl (See Below). In the Codex Borgia, a Mesoamerican ritual manuscript, there is a figure repeatedly shown on Plates 35 and 36 who combines the attributes of both Tezcatlipoca and Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl (Figures 4 and 5). The figure, referred to as ‘Wind Mask’ by Díaz and Rodgers (1993), has the facial coloring of Tezcatlipoca, the snout and jaw of Quetzalcoatl’s mask, the missing foot and back mirror of Tezcatlipoca, and the sacred bundle and conch shell pectoral associated with Quetzalcoatl. Thus, the individual known as Wind Mask appears to be a conflation of Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, coming together to form a single, all powerful creator deity (Díaz and Rodgers 1993, 42-43).



Figure 4. This shows a section of the upper left-hand corner Plate 35 in the Codex Borgia, depicting the taking of the sacred bundle to a shrine in the next plate by a pair of individuals. The individuals are moving along the blue road, signified by the footprints heading towards their destination. The leading figure is that of ‘Wind Mask’, who combines the attributes of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca.



Figure 5. This is a closer image of the individual referred to in the Codex Borgia as ‘Wind Mask’, provided so as to clearly depict the merging of features associated with both Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. Attributes of note include the mask associated with Quetzalcoatl, his conch shell pectoral in white, and the bundle, which is typically carried by the feathered serpent deity. In contrast, however, his painted face, back mirror, and severed foot all are reminiscent of depictions of Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl’s twin.

Quetzalcoatl and Xolotl

In Aztec Myth, Quetzalcoatl is described as having another companion, a twin: Xolotl. These two are seen as the manifestations of the morning and evening Venus star, where Xolotl represents Quetzalcoatl’s twin, or shadow, a dark, nighttime aspect of the deity. Xolotl is interpreted here as being both separate from Quetzalcoatl (as his dark, evening aspect), but inherently interconnected to him as his twin. The name Quetzalcoatl itself can be taken to mean ‘precious twin’ in Nahuatl, as the word *coatl* can mean both ‘serpent’ and ‘twin’, and the feathers of the quetzal bird were seen as extremely precious in the Aztec culture (Thompson 2006, 178).

Xolotl can be seen as Quetzalcoatl’s *nahualli*, the Nahuatl word for ‘double’ or spirit co-essence, which reinforces the idea that, although they are depicted as separate entities, the twins of Quetzalcoatl and Xolotl are not two different individuals, but two

halves of a single whole. This idea is reinforced in iconographic depictions of Xolotl in the Codex Borgia (Figure 6), where he shares the conch shell pectoral ornament typically associated with Quetzalcoatl. In addition, the figure following ‘Wind Mask’ on Plate 35 of the Codex Borgia, (Figure 4) can be interpreted as a ‘Dark Quetzalcoatl’, again sharing the emblem of the conch shell pectoral. Thus, this depiction of Xolotl could be a more anthropomorphic version of Quetzalcoatl’s shadowy Nahualli. In addition, Xolotl is described in the Codex Borgia as the ‘God of Twins’ (Díaz and Rodgers 1993, XXIX-XXX), possibly alluding to his status as Quetzalcoatl’s Nahualli.



Figure 6. A portion from the upper section of Plate 65 of the Codex Borgia, depicting the seated entity Xolotl, as patron of one of *trecentas*, or groupings of 13 days, in the 260-day *tonalpohualli*, or Ritual Calendar. Both here and in his other depictions in the Codex Borgia, Xolotl is seen wearing Quetzalcoatl’s conch shell pectoral, a symbolic link, perhaps, between the two deities.

Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopochtli

For the Aztec, other pairs that are not twins, but siblings, also play an important role in the cosmological ordering of the world. Like other cosmic pairs, Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopochtli embody opposition, but appear to function as two halves of a single

whole, where each half is needed for a cosmic act of creation. However, in this case it is more a relationship of conflict than of cooperation. Coyolxauhqui is the water to the fire that is her brother Huitzilopochtli, who slays her with a weapon known as a ‘fire serpent’ and is the embodiment of the newborn sun. This dichotomy is seen clearly carved out on the “Coyolxauhqui Head” (Figure 7) discovered at Tenochtitlan near the Templo Mayor, which now can be found in the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City. On the underside of the stone head are clearly inscribed the symbols of water and fire, intertwined with one another almost in a dance. Fire and water are the primordial conflict to the Aztec, the opposites that are connected with creation. The natures of their respective relationships with Coatlicue also reflect their opposition. Coyolxauhqui is the architect behind the attempted murder of her mother Coatlicue, while her son Huitzilopochtli is her savior and redeemer. At Huitzilopochtli’s birth, he slew his sister Coyolxauhqui in order to save his mother Coatlicue. The cosmic warfare between Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopochtli embodies the cycle of life and death, day and night. The sibling pair functions as two halves of creation, and their conflict, the clashing of fire and water, was seen as an essential relationship in the form of the sun for the Aztec, therefore making Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui’s complementary opposition a microcosm of the Aztec worldview.

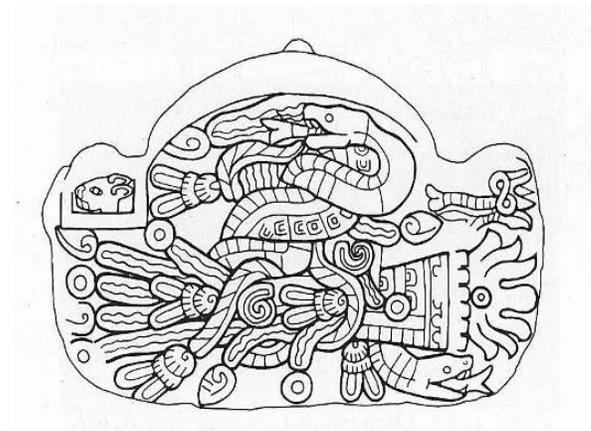


Figure 7. The Coyolxauhqui Head, found at Tenochtitlan; On the left is the Coyolxauhqui Head as seen from the front, clearly showing her characteristic bells painted on her face, and eyes closed in death (From www.mexicolore.co.uk); on the right is a drawing detailing the carved symbols on the bottom of the stone, which shows the symbols for water (left) and fire (right) intertwining (from http://www.elegua.com/Objects/Stephen_Clarke/RSMM-2.htm)

The Dark Twin Syndrome: Hunting and Sacrifice in Duality

In the dualities of the Mesoamerican worldview that are characterized in the pairs of twins discussed above, there is often a stark difference between the two individual entities. They are complementary, often times even inseparable, and yet are so vastly different in depiction and persona. In many cases, one twin is seen as the benevolent, ‘good’ twin, while the other is associated with darkness, death, hunting, and death. This is seen in the pairing of Xolotl and Quetzalcoatl as the Venus in the evening and morning, respectively. Xolotl as the Evening Venus is depicted as inferior to his twin, the morning Venus Quetzalcoatl. In the Aztec myth of the Five Suns, all the gods must be sacrificed by Quetzalcoatl to set the Fifth Sun into motion; however, Xolotl flees from his twin and Quetzalcoatl must hunt him down and sacrifice him. This presents a paradoxical situation for Quetzalcoatl, for he is hunting and sacrificing his own Nahualli, his double, thus making this both an instance of hunting self-sacrifice. The association with hunting is promoted in Xolotl’s mammalian appearance, as seen in the Xolotl carved head of Tenochtitlan (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The Xolotl Head, excavated from the ruins of Tenochtitlan in Mexico City, showing Xolotl in his animal form, a dog (From en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xolotl). Another prominent example of the dark and light twins manifests in the deities Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, respectively. Tezcatlipoca is the Lord of Darkness, the 'Sower of Discord', and he is associated with hunting and death, wandering about the world during the night, much like a jaguar, surprising night travelers (Minnecci 1999, 153). It is also Tezcatlipoca that is associated with sacrifice and blood, for his image is painted in murals on the sides of sacrificial altars, such as Altar A. at Tizatlan (Figure 9). While Tezcatlipoca is presented as the more destructive of the two, Quetzalcoatl is inseparable from his Dark Twin Tezcatlipoca; dark and light, order and violence, both are needed for creation to occur.



Figure 9. A Comparison of Tezcatlipoca Imagery from various sources; A. Mural on the side of Altar A at Tizatlan, clearly depicting Tezcatlipoca with his back mirror and headdress visible; B. Plate 17 from the Codex Borgia showing Tezcatlipoca for emphasis of similarity in features to the Altar mural.

Duality in Architecture: The Templo Mayor

The Aztec worldview of contrasting, yet complementary, siblings is played out in the architecture, caches, and sculptures associated with the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. This pyramid is a prime example of duality in Aztec thought, split into two structures, twin temples dedicated to another dual pair of deities who are vital to the Aztec world: *Tlaloc* and *Huitzilopochtli*. The respective natures of this pair of deities also reflect that overall duality of the Aztec world. The temple dedicated to *Tlaloc* *Tlamacazqui* is on one side; he is the deity of rain, fertility, agriculture, and the regenerative liquid of water. Sitting opposite him atop the sacred mount was the temple of *Huitzilopochtli*, patron god of the Mexica people associated with the sun, war, and human sacrifices (Moctezuma 1985, 799-800). In this pairing, *Huitzilopochtli* becomes the dark twin associated with hunting and war, while *Tlaloc* is the light twin associated with agriculture and birth.

This duality and the joining of opposites atop the Templo Mayor is very characteristic of the Aztec religious thought. Agriculture and bloodshed, the foundation of the light and dark twins, respectively, are two very opposing ideals and form the two halves of the fundamental base of Aztec society and economy. Agriculture brought in the food that was needed to maintain the lives of the people, while war brought in the tribute from subjugated groups which kept the upper class in power; war also brought in the human sacrifices needed to keep the Aztec world in balance (Moctezuma 1985, 800). In the beginning of the Aztec world, the gods sacrificed themselves to ensure the human race would flourish, and in return require sacrifice; this is mirrored by the Aztec Empire's economic structure based in both conquest tributes and agriculture. The agriculture keeps the people alive, while the sacrifices keep the gods and the universe running in order.

The temples atop the Temple Mayor were oriented so that Tlaloc's sanctuary was on the north side, and Huitzilopochtli's was to the south, and their adornments reflected the dual thought as well. The Tlaloc side had a statue known as a *chacmool*, associated with religious ceremonies and water. Chacmoos served as an intermediary between the shaman-priest and the gods, and was used to hold the ritually extracted hearts of sacrificial victims. On the side of the temple of Huitzilopochtli, there is a sacrificial altar stone used to sacrifice war captives; both the act of sacrifice and the stone itself were the very symbol of the power of the Aztec Empire, and are situated in the exact same spot relative to the temple (Moctezuma 1985, 804-805). These two ritual elements, the chacmool and the sacrificial altar, create the connected dichotomy of war and religious ritual, where contrasting ideas come together in a cohesive whole.

On the south side at the base of the Templo Mayor's staircase is the Coyolxauhqui Disk (Figure 10), a stone carved with the likeness of Huitzilopochtli's dismembered sister. That disk is situated on the site so that, once severed, the heads of sacrificial victims would tumble down the side of the pyramid and land atop this stone in a lifelike reenactment of the death of the goddess Coyolxauhqui at the hands of Huitzilopochtli. Opposite that, on the north side there is an altar dedicated to Tlaloc, which housed offerings of the bones of human children, including 42 skulls, covered masks, and funerary urns depicting the god Tlaloc, which were full of sea shells (Moctezuma 1985, 806). The dichotomy here is not in the type of offering, but in its presentation. Tlaloc's offerings are much less dramatic, being placed with reverence inside the altar dedicated to the god, while Huitzilopochtli's are much more showily presented to the public – head rolling down the south staircase to splash blood across the Coyolxauhqui Disk in a recreation of the myth of the god's birth. The Temple itself is a reflection of Aztec worldview: It is a sacred mountain Coatepec, birthplace of the Aztec patron deity Huitzilopochtli, bridging the gap between the earth and the heavens, the most central duality to the world of the Aztecs.



Figure 10. The Coyolxauhqui Disk found at the foot of the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan, depicting the goddess Coyolxauhqui in her dismembered state. (from www.mexicolore.co.uk)

Conclusion

From the case studies presented above, it is clear that duality structures the Mesoamerican worldviews of both the Aztec and Maya. It is evidenced not only in their myths, but also in their iconography and architecture. Both the Maya Hero Twins and Quetzalcoatl embody the two halves of a whole that are needed to create and to bring order to the world. Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca symbolize complementary oppositions working in conjunction with one another to achieve creation and the cyclical movement of the cosmos. As the fire and water of creation, Huitzilopochtli and his sister Coyolxauhqui symbolize that conflicting opposites bring about the cosmic cycles of life and death, which are the seeds of creation and order in ancient Mesoamerica.

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