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STORM-GOD IMPERSONATORS FROM ANCIENT OAXACA

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Abstract

This paper analyses the imagery on two different Zapotec ceramic forms: an open-ended cylinder and an effigy vessel, both from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. In this study, I propose that the figures on these objects represent impersonators of the Zapotec storm god Cocijo. The impersonators would probably have been rulers playing the role of this god and are carrying out a ritual associated with the agricultural cycle of corn. A comparative method that combines historical archaeology, ethnography, and iconographic analysis reveals clues to the function and significance of the vessels. The study leads to the conjecture that these objects were used in connection with blood offerings during corn-harvest rituals. These conclusions address the nature of ancient Zapotec religion and cosmology and provide evidence that the Zapotec performed rain and fertility rituals associated with the corn harvest similar to those of other cultural groups in Mesoamerica.

Clay effigies of all sorts and sizes accompany burials in many pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures. The diversity of the figures, from different contexts, horizons, and cultures, has given rise to a number of interpretative frameworks to explain their meaning. John Scott (1987:14) broadly summarized three main currents of thought: (1) that they represent deities; (2) that they represent participants in rituals, sometimes including deity impersonators; and (3) that they represent shamanic spirits. All of these interpretations are currently in use in the mainstream literature. However, the second option has attracted the most scholarly attention in recent years, with a particular emphasis on the role of the ancestor in funerary customs, a concept introduced by Peter Furst (1975) to explain the significance of western Mexico shaft-tomb effigies.

Ancient Zapotec effigy vessels from Oaxaca, the focus of this study, also have been explained as royal ancestors impersonating supernaturals (Marcus 1978, 1983a, 1998; Marcus and Flannery 1996), marking a sharp break with the earlier paradigm of deity complexes as argued by Alfonso Caso and Ignacio Bernal (1952) and later by Frank Boos (1966). The existence of deities among the ancient Zapotec has been consistently questioned in the works of Joyce Marcus, who prefers instead an animistic model that emphasizes the spirit world and the presence of supernaturals. However, in my opinion, Caso and Bernal's deity model should be modified rather than completely discarded. My research has shown that the entities mentioned in the Zapotec calendar lists are similar to those known in other Mesoamerican cultures that are considered fundamentally pantheistic, suggesting that these entities may be considered deities (Sellen 2002). Building on Javier Urcid's study (1992, 2001) that asserted a link between the iconicity of some of the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic calendar glyphs and attributes found on effigy vessels, I was able to correlate a series of nine calendar deities with the forms displayed on the figures. Further, the multiplicity of deity masks and costumes found on the effigies, and the fact that a few mask types are interchangeable, supports the view that they are worn by people—probably ancestors, as proposed by Marcus. My conclusion, therefore, is that these hypothesized ancestors are impersonating deities represented in the ancient calendar; they are not supernaturals, as Marcus suggests. This finding supports Caso and Bernal's pantheistic interpretation over an animistic approach; however, I do not believe that these views are necessarily mutually exclusive, as will be shown.

One of the impersonated deities found on effigy vessels and represented in the calendar lists is a Zapotec god associated with rain and storms who is often represented in rituals relating to the agricultural cycle of corn. This ritual is of great antiquity, and there are records of its performance throughout Mesoamerica for more than two millennia.

The object of this paper is to explore the imagery of these deity impersonations and their relationship to the corn ritual. To elaborate on this theme, I will compare two objects with similar effigies from classical Zapotec culture (ca. A.D. 550–750) and relate this imagery to indigenous ritual and cosmology. Before examining the imagery and its significance, I will discuss the background of the objects in question and lay to rest questions about authenticity surrounding one of them. For the purposes of the argument, it is also necessary to reconstruct the original sets to which these pieces belonged in antiquity.

The two artifacts in discussion are both housed in the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto and form part of what is known as the Rickards Collection. One of the objects is a standing figure with a vessel attached, 43.2 cm high, and the other is an open-ended cylinder carved in relief, 42 cm high with a 20 cm diameter (Figure 1). Despite the obvious differences in form, the imagery represented on the two artifacts is closely related.

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Figure 1. The artifacts. (a) Effigy vessel (Royal Ontario Museum, Cat. 1399, 43.2 cm high, Santo Domingo Jalieza, Oaxaca); (b) open-ended cylinder (Royal Ontario Museum, Cat. 1435, 42 cm high, 20 cm diameter, Cuilapan, Oaxaca).

HISTORY AND PROVENIENCE OF THE OBJECTS

The objects were acquired around the turn of the century by Constantine Rickards, at that time the British vice-consul in Oaxaca, who sold them to the ROM along with his entire collection in 1919 (Sellen 2000). The reports of their discovery are apparently based on his eyewitness accounts. However, some doubt remains about whether Rickards was present when the pieces were found.

Rickards published a photograph of the effigy vessel in 1938, along with a brief description:

> Pl. V, A. Standing. Very elaborate ornaments on the head and face which bears a mask, and on the body, fine necklaces and girdle. On both hands are placed emblems of office. There are few idols found standing compared to the great number of these found sitting. It has pure Zapotec features. Height 17 inches. Found at Santo Domingo Galiesa, Dist. of Ocotlan [Figure 2. Today the town's name is spelt: Santo Domingo Jalieza]. Four idols exactly the same were found in the grave [Rickards 1938:164].

Rickards gave no information about the exact location of this grave. However, because Zapotec tombs are often found in close proximity to ceremonial centers and elite residences (Kowalewski et al. 1989: 281), it is possible that the effigy came from a grave on one of the upper terraces surrounding the archaeological site of Jalieza, located on the hill near the present-day town. After the monumental site of Monte Albán, Jalieza is one of the largest pre-Hispanic settlements in the central valleys of Oaxaca. It has two centers that were occupied at different times in the Early Classic and Early Postclassic periods (Blanton et al. 1982:118; Finsten 1996).

The type of standing effigy that Rickards described and illustrated appeared in a number of twentieth-century catalogues and monographs (Boos 1964:Plate XI [the provenience and catalogue number for the ROM piece are incorrect]; Lehmann 1959:51; Mongne 1987:25–26, Figure 10; Réal 1923:Plate 16; Rickards 1938:Plate V; Schuler-Schömig 1970:8, Plate II, Plates 114a, Plate 114b). Therefore, it would be logical to assume that the four pieces extracted from the tomb have been dispersed to collections throughout the world. However, a total of six pieces are known to be in three museums. One is in the ROM; one is in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin; and four are in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. All of these mentioned have been tested using the thermoluminescence dating technique, and only the one in the ROM has

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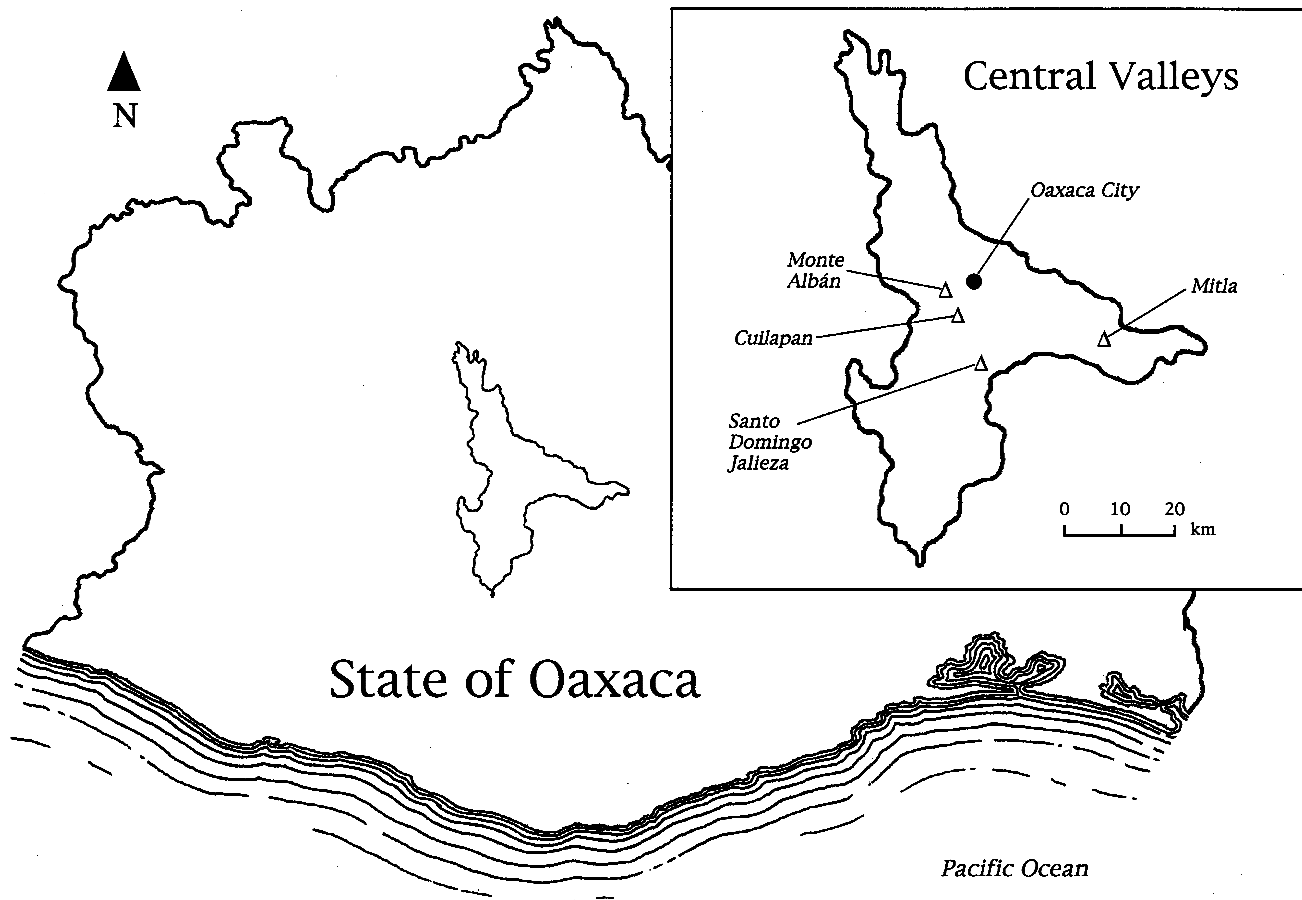

Figure 2. Map of Oaxaca.

been found to be authentic (Toronto: Shaplin and Zimmerman 1978:Test No. 21; Paris: unpublished results reported in Mongne 1987:26; Berlin: Goedicke et al. 1992:Test no. 117). If the information about the number of pieces taken from the tomb in Santo Domingo Jalieza is indeed correct, then there are three other originals whose whereabouts are unknown.

In his 1938 publication, Rickards presented a picture of the piece along with the description and provenience of the Santo Domingo Jalieza urn set. The photograph does not show the original piece he sold to the ROM in 1919; rather, it shows a copy of the piece that is similar to those now in the Paris collection. Rickards must have known that the piece was a copy, because at one point he possessed the original: A photograph in the ROM's archives of his collection in Oaxaca, taken around 1911, shows the authentic piece sitting on a shelf in Rickards's house. Based on the chronological order of the evidence, it appears that the original piece in the ROM may have served as the model for the copies now stored in European museums. Also, the fact that the Paris museum has four identical fakes could mean that the forger, whoever he or she was, copied the original set of four mentioned by Rickards.

Although the identity of the forger is unknown, Rickards is a likely candidate. He may have been directly involved in generating the copies or in some way associated with the "fakes" industry. The supposition that Rickards was a falsifier has also been made by Bernal and Gamio (1974:8) and by Pascal Mongne (1987:45), but apparently without hard evidence. My research with the ROM collection has uncovered a number of disturbing patterns (Sellen 1998). First, Rickards may have copied component parts of original pieces, then stuck these on credible forms to create a type of pastiche. I strongly suspect he knowingly sold a number of these fantastic creations to unwitting museums and collectors. He certainly duplicated some of his authentic material, but it is not clear whether these were sold as duplicates or as originals. Although the extent of these deceptions may never be fully understood, the revelations of his sketchy past make one wonder about the veracity of his statements about his collection. However, as will be shown, some of this information has held up well under scrutiny.

The second item to be discussed is the ceramic cylinder. This item presents a similar problem, because at no point does Rickards make clear whether he was an eyewitness to its discovery. According to Rickards, two identical cylinders were found in 1899 at Cuilapan, Oaxaca (Figure 2). The discovery was made at a depth of two meters, and the pieces were found connected together and lying on their sides. Other fragments of cylinders were reported, but apparently only two were recovered intact (Rickards 1922:51). Based on how the cylinders were arranged and the fact that more fragments of similar forms appeared to be present in the discovery, Rickards (1922:49) speculated that they may have been used as drain pipes (for more on this excavation, see Urcid 2002).

Rickards acquired the pieces in 1917 and sold one of them to the ROM two years later. What happened to the other cylinder is

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not known at present; however, photographs published by the collector and a photo in the ROM archives confirm that these two pieces were essentially identical.

A close examination of the cylinder revealed a coating of salts transversely covering half of the object, perhaps indicating that the piece had been lying on its side partially immersed in water. This fact corroborates the information given by Rickards regarding its position when unearthed and demonstrates that some of the information he gave about his collection is true. The cylinder also shows some signs of wear on the upper rim. Conversely, the condition of the bottom rim is almost pristine, implying that the cylinder was used only in one position. The piece is not tapered at either end; thus, its form does not lend itself to being fit with another cylinder to create a watertight seal. This belies Rickards's hypothesis that the cylinders were used as drainpipes. Also, the intricate carving on the pieces seems out of place had their primary function been plumbing. At present, one can only guess at the function of the piece. Perhaps it served as a stand for another object or as a sleeve for a post. It is worth noting, however, that a number of other cylinders of this type have been recorded, including one with complex hieroglyphic inscriptions (Urcid 2002).

INTERPRETATION OF THE FIGURES

The two pieces under discussion present different views. The figure on the effigy vessel is sculptured in three dimensions and presents a frontal view, whereas the dual figures on the cylinder are carved in profile in two dimensions. A comparison of the specific details of the two artifacts' figures confirms that their iconographic programs have a great deal in common (Figure 3).

The figures on the objects can be identified as representing Cocijo, the Zapotec word for lightning and the name of a deity who commanded the forces of lightning, rain, and thunder (Balsalobre 1892 [1656]; Córdova 1987 [1578]; Espíndola 1905 [1580]). Information from these early Spanish sources has been used to support the idea that the imagery in the Zapotec corpus, especially that found on effigy vessels, represents deities from a very complex pantheon (Caso 1927; Caso and Bernal 1952; Saville 1904; Seler 1904a, 1904b). However, there have been dissenting views. Marcus has argued that many Zapotec effigies are venerated royal ancestors, sometimes wearing the guises of great supernatural forces, such as earthquakes or lightning (Marcus 1978, 1983a; Marcus and Flannery 1996). Marcus's argument is underlined by an insistence that Zapotec religion is animistic and lacks a pantheon of gods as understood in Greco-Roman religious traditions.

In particular, Marcus took exception with Caso and Bernal's interpretation of Cocijo as a rain deity: "*Pitào Cocijo* was not a deity in charge of rain, but the 'great spirit' or 'innerlife' within the lightning" (1983b:349). She goes on to say, "Lightning did have power to cause rain (by splitting the clouds to release it) or withhold rain, but it is stretching the point to consider *cocijo* a 'rain god' analogous to the Nahuatl *Tlaloc*" (Marcus 1983b:346).

Despite Marcus's objection, I think that the comparison of Cocijo to Tlaloc, a very old deity in Mesoamerica, is appropriate. Her own ethnographic evidence demonstrates the similarities. In a Zapotec story she republished from Wilfrido Cruz (1946), there were four "lesser lightnings" in the service of Old Lightning of Fire, a lord who lived on the summit of a mountain and possessed four large clay jars, each holding an element of the weather (Marcus 1983b:347). These characters have many parallels in other cultures in Mesoamerica. For example, the four "lightnings" correspond well with the four *Tlaloques* who were Tlaloc's helpers (Ruiz de Alarcón 1953 [1629]:80; Sahagún 1979 [1560]:28, 30)—and, for that matter, the four *Chacs* of the Maya area (Sharer 1994:531). Although the entities mentioned have some differing characteristics, they all share the quadripartite division of the cosmos. Further, in many Mexican myths one finds Tlaloc living on the summit of a mountain in a palace divided into four parts. In the middle patio he keeps four large basins of water, each possessing the benevolent and malevolent characteristics of rain (Seler 1904a:267–268). This configuration is repeated in the belief structure of the southern Zapotec (Weitlaner and De Cicco 1962:703). These details are not coincidences; rather, they reflect a deep-rooted Mesoamerican cultural unity that was observed early on by Eduard Seler (1904a, 1904b).

Further evidence of this continuity can be seen in the lists of the Nine Deities, a subdivision of the ritual calendar for augural purposes. I have opted to use this terminology rather than the designation "Nine Lords of the Night," from Ulrich Köhler's (2000) convincing arguments that these calendar divinities were not associated with the night; they were meant to accompany the day glyphs. There are several such lists from Oaxaca written in Zapotec, some of them dating from the sixteenth century. Recently, another has come to light (cf. van Meer 2000). What is significant about these lists is that Cocijo, or "El Rayo" (his equivalent in Spanish), always appears in the ninth position, coinciding with the position of Tlaloc in Nahuatl sources (Table 1).

Gonzalo de Balsalobre's informant, the *maestro* Diego Luis, confirmed this information when he referred to the ninth god as Loçio, "the god of lightning that sends the water so that the fields will produce" (Berlin 1981 [1957]:12). This evidence reaffirms that Cocijo and Tlaloc are truly counterparts but also underscores the immutable order of these gods within the calendar context.

It is possible that these calendar lists were contaminated by Postclassic or even Colonial belief structures and therefore do not faithfully reflect the ideas of earlier periods. However, at times the Zapotecs also substituted Cocijo for Tlaloc in the iconography of Classic-period effigy vessels (A.D. 100–600). Two examples in the Frissell Museum in Mitla, Oaxaca, illustrate this. One effigy was depicted in the form of Tlaloc, and the other wears his mask in a headdress (Figure 4). The vessel with the Tlaloc mask in the headdress is a specific type that normally bears a representation of Cocijo (Figure 5). This last example demonstrates that the Zapo-

Table 1. Comparison of lists of the nine calendar deities

Calendar from San Antonio Huitepec	Calendar from San Agustín Loxicha	Nine Calendar Deities from Nahuatl Sources
1. Natoriño	Ndozin	Xiuhtecuhtli
2. Lguachoriñe	Ndoíyet	Itztli or Tecpatl
3. Oguilo	Beydo	Piltzintecuhtli
4. Osucui	Ndubdo	Centeotl
5. Natobilia	Kedo	Mictlantecuhtli
6. Bichana	Ndan	Chalchiutlicue
7. Bexu	Mse	Tlazolteotl
8. Yuache	Mbaz	Tepeyolohtli
9. Yocio	Mdi (El Rayo)	Tlaloc

Note: Modified from van Meer (2000:43).

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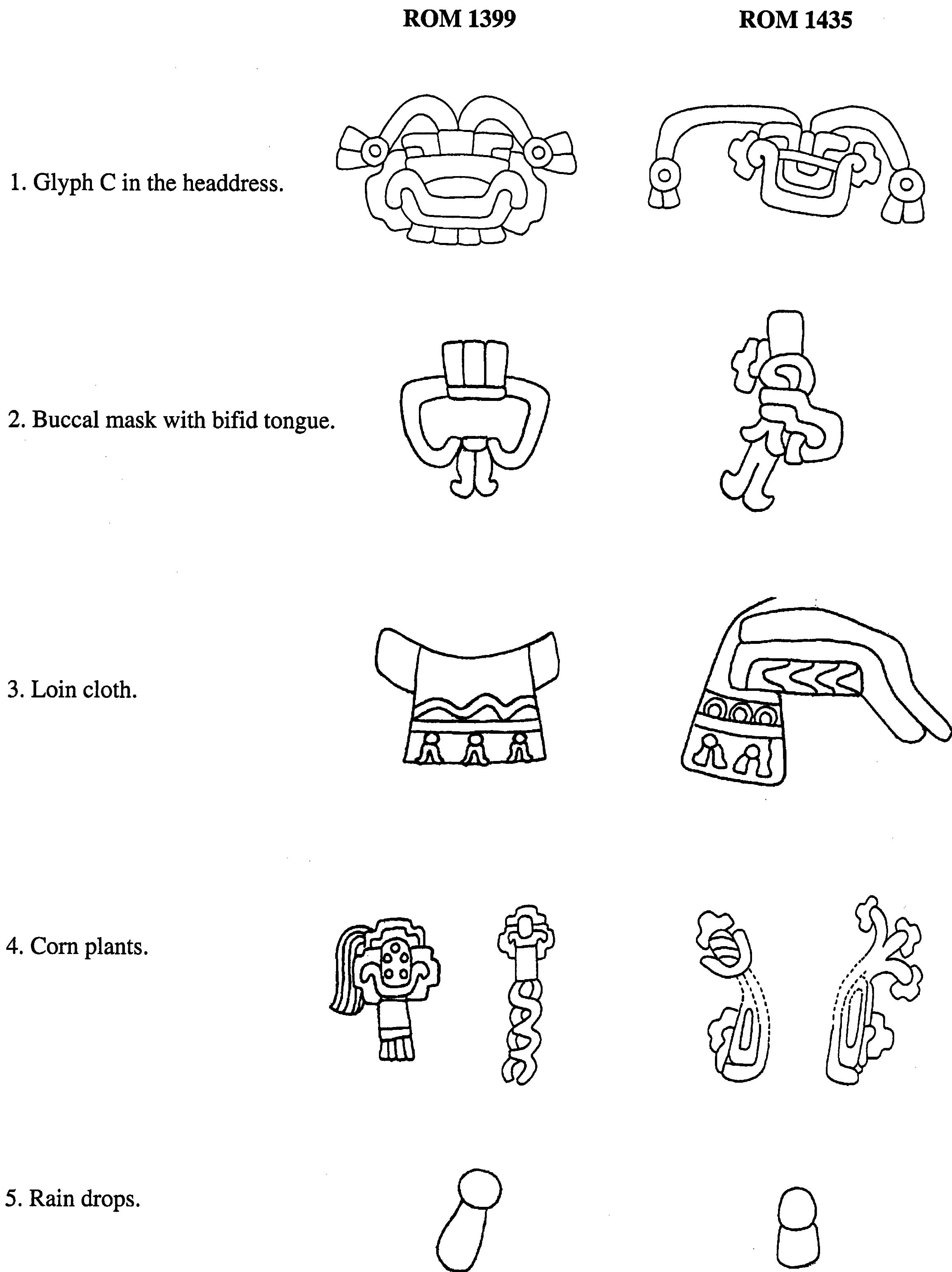

Figure 3. A comparison of the iconographic elements from both objects.

tec were able to interchange images of the two deities in specific instances in the iconography of the effigy vessels without altering the other meaningful parts. The reason for these substitutions is unclear, but their existence underscores the important cultural contacts between the Zapotecs and the highland peoples (Kowalewski and Truell 1970).

It is important to mention that this substitution does not occur with the glyphs from the 20-day list of the calendar, where glyph M

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Figure 4. Two Zapotec effigy vessels with Tlaloc masks in Central Highland style. (a) Frissell Museum, Mitla, provenience unknown; (b) Frissell Museum, Mitla, provenience unknown.

(Cocijo) occupies the second position and glyph Gamma (Tlaloc) occupies the nineteenth position (cf. Urcid 2001:252). However, I have argued elsewhere that the glyph C may represent an emblem or insignia of Cocijo (Sellen 2002). Urcid's placing glyph C in the nineteenth position of the day list, alongside the glyph Gamma, makes it possible for me to maintain an association, albeit an indirect one, between the glyphic forms for Cocijo and Tlaloc.

It would appear that Tlaloc, or his counterpart, is manifest in almost all Mesoamerican cultures. In Teotihuacan, where much of the iconography is analogous to that found in Oaxaca, one finds goggle-eyed entities in mural painting who have been compared to Cocijo (Covarrubias 1957:Figure 22). Unfortunately, there is little consensus regarding the identity of this Teotihuacan figure or the terms used to describe it. Pedro Armillas (1945) and Alfonso Caso (1966) defined the goggle-eyed entity in Teotihuacan as a precursor to the Mexica deity Tlaloc. However, many subsequent studies have tried to avoid the problem of associating Mexica deities with earlier manifestations by neutralizing the labels. George Kubler (1967:12), for example, preferred the term "rain figure" to "Tlaloc," and René Millon (1988:100) has defined this same entity as a "storm god," a term he coined because the figure often includes important attributes other than rain, such as lightning bolts. By contrast, Esther Pasztory (1974:6) was comfortable with the designation of those figures as Tlaloc but emphasized that not all figures associated with water represent this deity.

Hasso Von Winning (1987:154) has supplied a different interpretation of these figures. In particular, he referred to the goggle-eyed figures holding stalks of corn, similar to images of Cocijo from Oaxaca, as ritual images combining the various attributes of the "God of Rain" in association with the sustenance of corn. Further, Von Winning maintained that the figures represent the priests of Tlaloc. Examples of the Teotihuacan images can be seen repeated on the walls of the ruins of the apartment compounds of Zacuala and Techinantitla (Figure 6). Von Winning's interpretative framework therefore views the figures as impersonators of gods, not as the gods themselves, a position corroborated by this study.

Maarten Jansen (1986:282) has pointed out that the concept of a "god impersonator" came about because the categories of what is human and divine in indigenous thought do not correspond to European usage. In ancient cultures, these two categories are often collapsed into one, where sacred and secular subject matter coexist. Traces of this indigenous perspective were recorded by the Spanish missionaries and support the view that many of the images from the Postclassic period are men and women who assume "likenesses" of the divinities. These acts are carried out by the supreme devotee, who both serves god and embodies the god he serves, similar to the Hindu tradition of *aksara*, in which the human being can be considered equivalent to the material image of a deity (Williams 1984:145). One striking example are the Mexica actors who assumed costumes and symbols of their gods during the monthly festivals of the ancient calendar. The Spanish priest Diego Durán stated: "When the sacrifice had ended, another slave was dressed and purified to represent the goddess Chicomecoatl. She was given ornaments, a tiara on her head, ears of corn on her neck and hands" (Durán 1971 [c. 1579]:223). Another chronicler, Bernardino de Sahagún (1979[1560]:Chapters 1–18), corroborates this practice in his description of the same festivals.

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Figure 5. Five Zapotec effigy vessels of the same type showing Cocijo and Tlaloc masks in the headdresses. (a) Museo Nacional de Antropología, Cat. 6-6351; (b) Cleveland Museum of Art, Cat. 44.78; (c) Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna, Cat. 55.158; (d) Frissell Museum, not catalogued; (e) Dolores Olmedo Museum, Cat. 32.

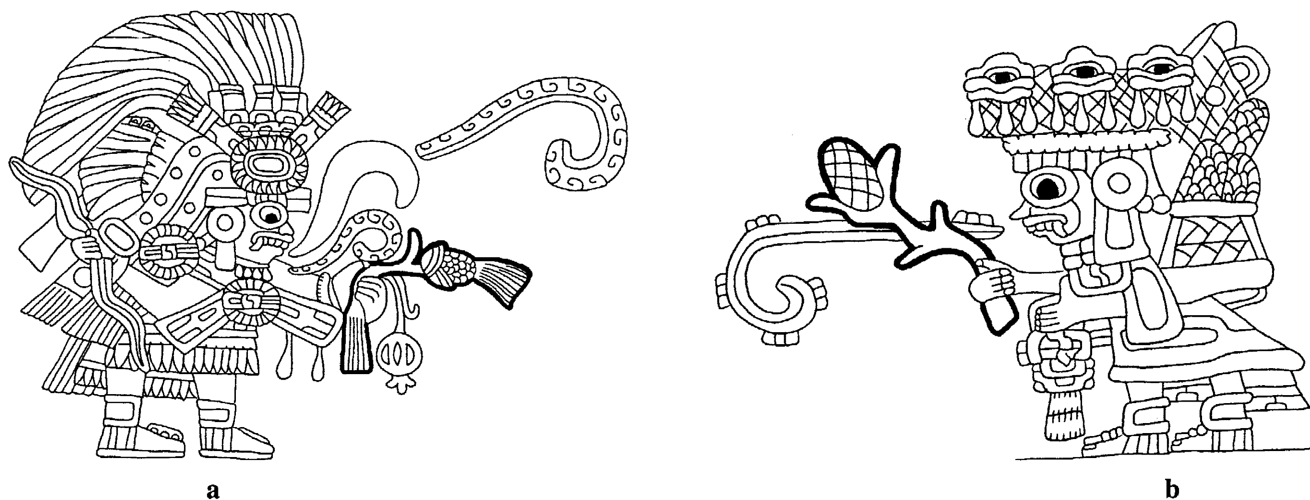

Figure 6. Two representations from Teotihuacan mural painting of storm gods carrying corn plants. (a) Provenience: Techinantitla, North Talud, and Wall (Millon et al. 1988:Figure 4, 21a; drawing after Saburo Sugiyama); (b) provenience: Zacuala, portico 3, 4, 5, or 6 (drawing after Von Winning 1987:154, Figure 1).

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Clearly, the Mexica impersonated their gods. This concept is also well illustrated in their language. For example, the Nahuatl word *ixiptlatl* has been used in contexts with names of gods and can be translated as "image," "delegate," "substitute," or "representative" (López Austin 1989:119).

There are numerous examples of what I consider to be storm-god impersonators in Postclassic relief carving and Colonial manuscripts, and in many cases they are holding corn plants. Some of them can be seen wearing Tlaloc masks. In one case, a man with a corn cob in one hand holds a biconical effigy mask of Tlaloc in the other (Figure 7). From excavations in Cholula, Puebla, archaeologists have reported the discovery of several of these biconical effigies with handles attached, indicating that they may have been held by storm-god impersonators as seen in the codices (Uruñuela et al. 1996).

Given the quantity and variability of masks worn by many of the figures on the Zapotec effigy vessels, it is possible that these people are also impersonating deities. According to Urcid, many of these masks and costume attributes are associated with the calendar glyphs. A number of those glyphs have been identified as deities because of their anthro-zoomorphic character and their correspondence to sixteenth-century sources (Sellen 2002; Urcid 2001:440). Recent research from iconographic analysis has also demonstrated that much of the imagery of the stone monuments, mural painting, and effigy vessels represent human beings (Sellen 2002; Urcid 1999). This evidence supports the view that the Zapotecs were concerned with representing specific moments in human existence, such as births, deaths, marriages, conquests, and so on. In my view, these events have a sacred aspect to them—one where the gods represented by the elite would intervene.

Thus, although I would stress that the Zapotecs did conceive of a pantheon of gods, as has been extensively documented for other Mesoamerican cultures (Nicholson 1971; Thompson 1970), I would also add that animatism was an important pillar of their belief system, thereby agreeing in part with Marcus's assessment. These two concepts do not mutually exclude each other and can be seen as characteristic of Mesoamerican religions as a whole. This angle has been argued by Furst (1975:42) for the present-day Huichols

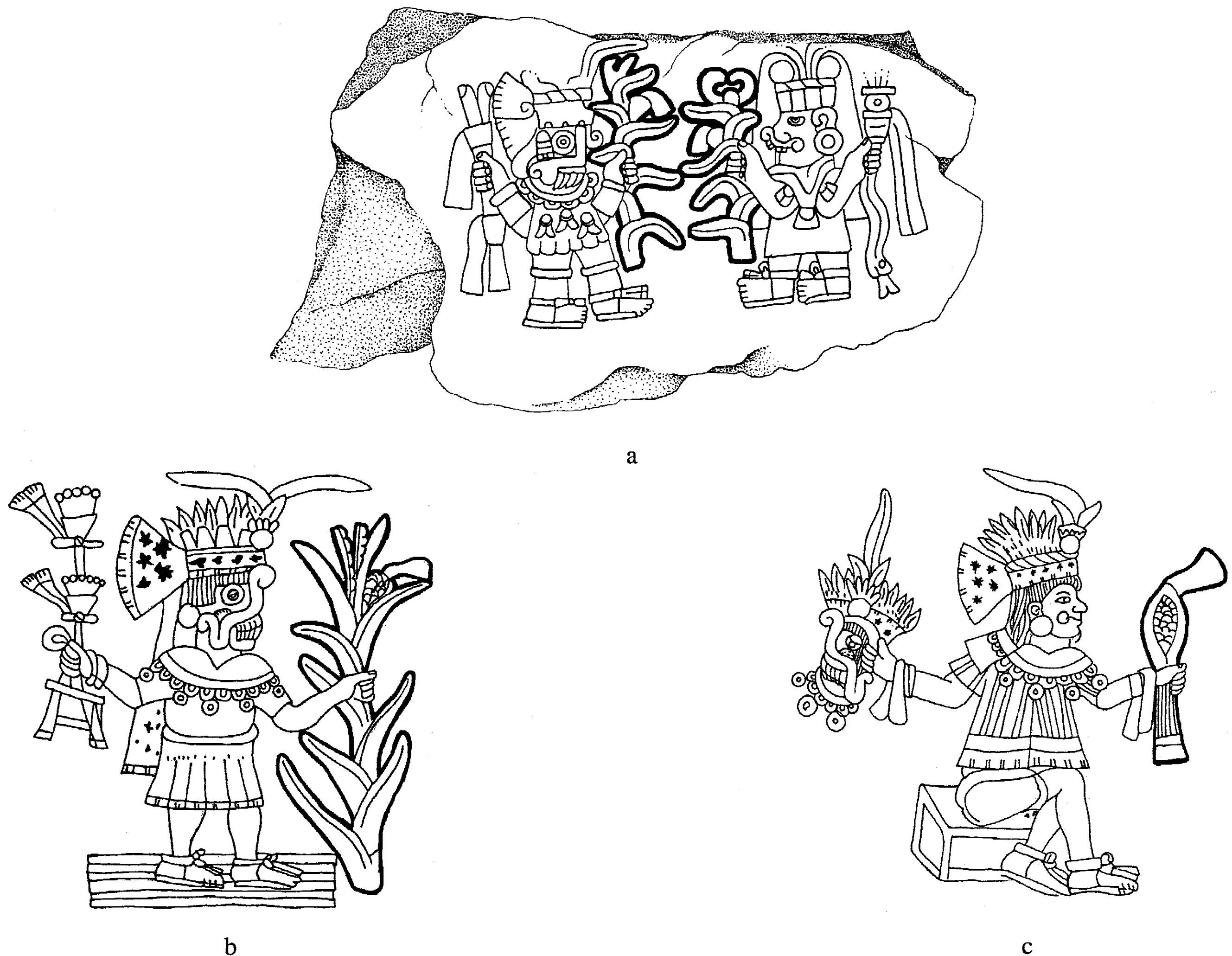

Figure 7. Postclassic Mexica representations of storm-god impersonators holding corn plants (Boone 1983). (a) Monument 41 from Castillo de Teayo, Veracruz; (b) Codex Magliabechiano, page 34 (Feast 6, *Etzalcualiztli*); (c) Codex Magliabechiano, page 29 (Feast 1, *Xilomanaliztli*).

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and was recently proposed by Marilyn Masson (2001:7) for the state religion of the ancient Zapotec. Perhaps, then, it is too extreme a position to maintain that the Zapotecs did not possess a pantheon of gods or represent some of those deities in effigies.

THE PLANTS

The figures on the effigy vessel and the cylinder are both holding plants. The plant forms are of interest because they may help identify the particular ritual being carried out. In the right hand of each figure is the glyph for corn, represented by a stalk topped off by a central element, presumably the cob, itself characterized by a combination of horizontal lines and dots. The identification of this element has been well established (Caso and Bernal 1952:20; Shaplin 1975:113; Urcid 2001:Figure 4.85)

The plant held in the left hand of the figures is not readily identifiable. However, it is possible that it represents a young corn plant. A similar plant can be seen in the headdress of a Zapotec effigy vessel in the Dolores Olmedo Museum in Mexico City (Figure 8). This plant forms part of a sequential representation of the growth and change of corn, illustrated on both sides of the headdress and present in many effigy vessels of this type (Sellen 2002). The initial part of the sequence is represented by a corn kernel that has germinated and is revealing its shoot. The secondary stage shows the corn as it has flowered, commonly known as a "spikelet." Finally, one sees the end product: a fully developed ear of corn (Figure 8a–c). These stages correspond to key moments in the life of a corn plant and are marked linguistically. Ellen Messer (1978:101) recorded the Zapotec terms used by Mitleños as *yähl bäz* (small maize plant), *yu' doh* (spikelet), and *kayak niz* (ear of maize). Thomas Smith Stark's translation (personal communication,) deviates somewhat from Messer's: *yähl bäz* (small cornfield), *yu' doh* (there are spikelets), and *kayak niz* (the ears of maize are growing).

THE RAIN

The spirals and drop-like forms on the cylinder can be identified as clouds and raindrops (Figure 9). Similar imagery appears in the pictographic systems of other cultures in Mesoamerica, such as the Olmec, where they have been given the same identification (Taube 1996:97). The presence of clouds and rain undoubtedly reinforces the role played by the storm-god impersonators.

THE CORN RITUAL

The figures that appear on the cylinder may be involved in a ritual associated with the agricultural cycle of corn. Although the position of the figures is rather stiff, it is possible that they are performing a dance with cornstalks. Dancing with corn as ritual has been well documented for a number of communities in Mesoamerica. In a contemporary Nahua village, Alan Sandstrom recorded a dance to celebrate the green-corn harvest:

> The third ritual is called *sintlacualistli* (Nahuatl for "corn feeding"), and it is held a few days following corn harvest. . . . [Y]oung performers dance with ripe ears of corn to make *chicomexochitl* (7 flower) feel more welcome in the household [Sandstrom 1991:293].

Pre-Hispanic images of corn dancers are also present in other Mesoamerican cultures, such as the effigy piece from Guatemala interpreted as representing the "God of Maize" (Figure 10).

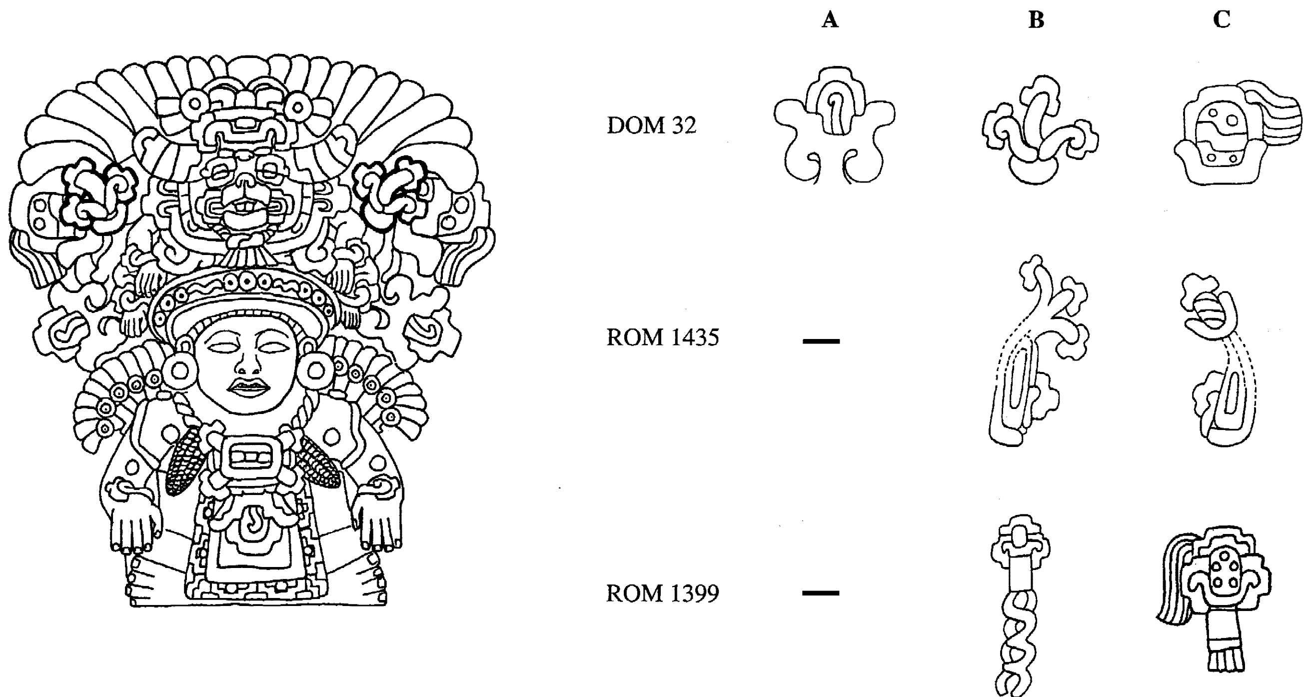

Figure 8. Comparison of the representation of a young corn plant in the headdress of a Zapotec effigy vessel (Dolores Olmedo Museum, Cat. 32).

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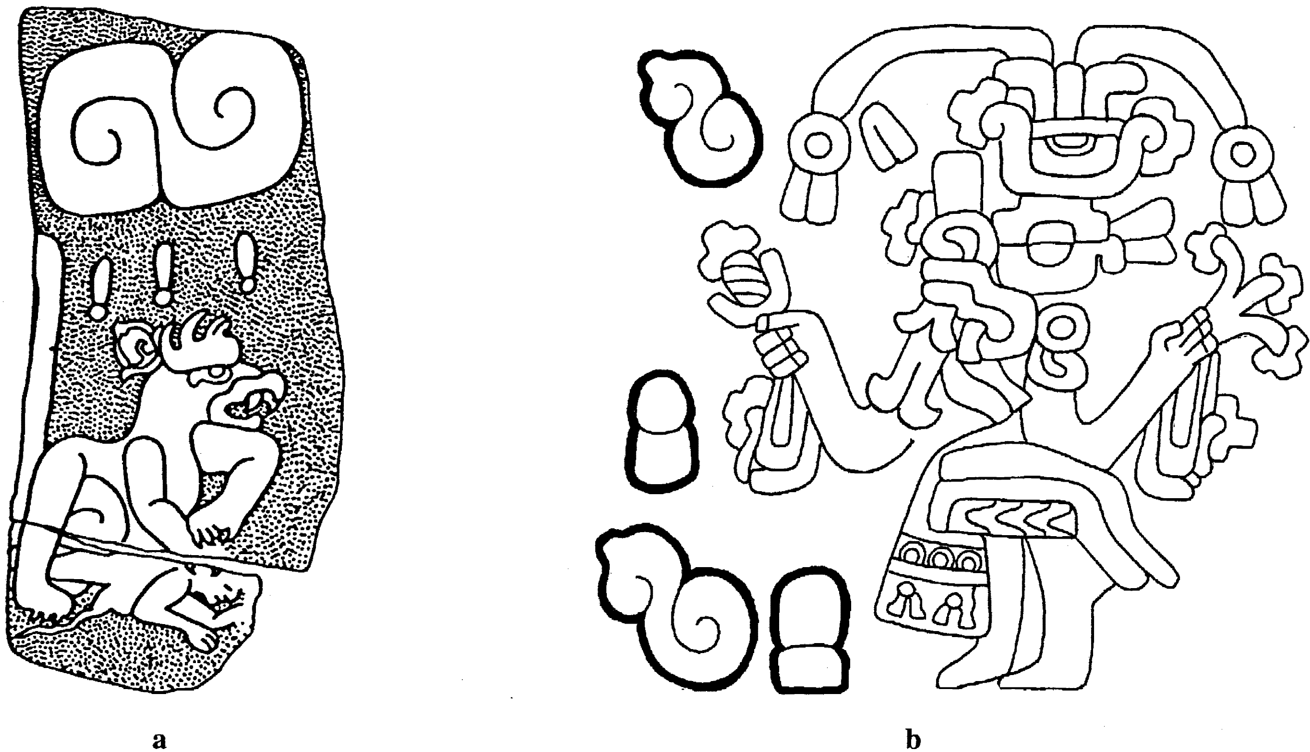

Figure 9. Representations of clouds and raindrops. (a) Relief carving (Monument No. 31, Chalcatzingo, Morelos, drawing by Karl Taube [1996:Figure 24e]); (b) detail of ROM 1435.

The ritual that the Cocijo impersonators on the cylinder are carrying out may refer to the growth cycle of corn. If the plant in the left hand is correctly identified as a spikelet, then it would be flowering and roughly more than a meter high. According to studies carried out with Mitla farmers, this stage in the development of corn is a significant and delicate moment. The flowering corn must be left undisturbed for fifteen days, because adverse activity would affect the development of the green corn (Messer 1978:102).

Similar to the Zapotec representation, the corn plant as spikelet can also be seen in the Mixtec pictographic system, illustrated in the pre-Hispanic Codex Vindobonensis. The context for the image is a scene on page 27 interpreted by Jansen as representing a prayer for a corn festival. He has proposed the following reading for the fifth line, read from right to left (Figure 11):

1. On a carpet of feathers the song of the mortuary bundle
2. The image of the God of Rain
3. Water bursts forth
4. Straw and plants upon which the God of Rain (or his priest) sits
5. The *ñuhu* (or his priest) cries
6. Rain falls
7. Plants spring from the earth (Jansen 1986:182–183).

Jansen (1986:183) considers the central theme in this pictorial prayer to be the making of offerings to the god of rain and the *ñuhu* (a Mixtec spiritual entity) for abundant rainfall. Another study concurs with this view and underlines the idea of the sacrificial act necessary to bring about abundant crops (see Monaghan 1990:566). In my view, the prayer may have a specific message in terms of the development of the *milpa* (cornfield), as many of the corn plants represented are in different stages of growth. The plant that springs forth after the rainfall could represent corn in the spikelet stage.

If this identification of the corn plant as spikelet is correct, then the plant in the right hand of the Cocijo impersonators may represent the next developmental step: green corn. Why would a Cocijo impersonator be dancing with two corn plants at different stages of growth? According to Messer, the developmental stage between the spikelet and green corn is critical in terms of rainfall. She says:

> During the stage of the forming and filling out of the *elote* ("green corn") there are certain dangers to avoid. The fields, if dry, must be irrigated or the harvest will be lost. If there is too much water on the fields, it must be pumped out, or the harvest will be lost. Thus, the rainfall should be adequate but not overly abundant [Messer 1978:102].

For the ancient Zapotec, adequate rainfall depended on Cocijo, the storm god invested with the power to control climatic conditions. Offerings to this deity of food and blood, including human sacrifices (Espíndola 1905 [1580]), may well have been accompanied by dances in which community leaders or priests wore his guise. Similar rituals have been documented for Mixtec leaders (Sepúlveda y Herrera 1999:79). Therefore, the plants the personifier carries may represent this important agricultural stage, highlighted by ritual activity to insure Cocijo's benevolence.

Once the green corn is full, there is another ritual activity of paramount importance. The Zapotec of Mitla conduct a feast in celebration of the harvest of the first green-corn *elotes*. The mo-

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Figure 10. Masculine figure dancing with corn cobs. Provenience: La Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, Classic Period, National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Guatemala City.

ment is described as *a gohl dzub yahl nu*, translated by Messer (1972:103) as the "time to burn the copal." Smith Stark's translation of *a gohl dzub yahl nu* is some what different: "such as it is, we place the incense" (personal communication, 2001). Although he found no word that translates as "burning," it may be implied. The reference to burning copal incense at this stage of the harvest was also recorded by Balsalobre in the seventeenth century:

> [O]n collecting the first ears of green maize from fields, on the day indicated by the teacher of these rites, they sacrifice a black native hen, sprinkling with its blood thirteen pieces of copal in memory of their thirteen gods, and burning this copal, and with the rest of the blood sprinkling the patio of the house [Balsalobre 1892:238].

This quotation confirms that the burning of copal is a traditional part of the ritual of the green-corn harvest. It also provides important clues about how the ancient ritual might have been carried out. First, it appears that blood sacrifices were part of the act, and second, that certain aspects of the process, such as using 13 pieces of copal, were related to divisions stipulated by the calendar. In the twentieth century, Roberto Weitlaner (1961) was able to record similar ceremonies related to corn planting and harvest with the Zapotec's neighbors, principally the Mazatecs, Cuicatecs, Chinantecs, and Mixes. Although these ceremonies varied from group to group and town to town, many aspects remained constant—for example, the offering of an animal's blood to the earth, the use of the four corners and the center of the *milpa* to make the offering, and the spilling of blood over corn cobs, tamales, tortillas, and other foodstuffs that are often presented in groups of thirteen (Weitlaner 1961:Table 16).

The offering of blood during corn festivals was common among Mesoamerican peoples, and the association between corn and blood is still evident in many communities. For example, among Zincanatecos the tortilla is often referred to as "our flesh and blood" (Furst 1978:199). Sandstrom (1991:128) took the Nahua saying *sintli ne toeso*, "corn is our blood," as a metaphor for corn as their most important food. John Monaghan, by contrast, has pointed out two important concepts among the Mixtec regarding corn and blood. First, blood is one of the principal seats of *ánima*, roughly translated as one's "spirit." He notes that the tortilla is called *animao*, and concludes that corn is not only important to subsistence but also essential to being human (Monaghan 1995:217–218). Second, the Mixtec equate blood with human seed (Monaghan 1995:112).

These concepts help explain representations such as that in the Codex Borgia, in which penitents are sacrificing genital blood on to corn plants. It also helps to explain the Zapotec effigy vessel that depicts a man drawing a cord through his phallus, which has the form of a corn cob (Figure 12).

The act of drawing blood from the genitals for offering is also mentioned in the Codex Magliabechiano during the agricultural festival of *Etzalcualiztli,* in honor of the *Tlaloque*; commoners sacrificed blood from their genitals (*motepolezzo*) so that they might have descendants (Boone 1983:194). It is significant that during this festival they also impersonated the rain gods (Broda de Casas 1970:200), marking a relationship among bloodletting, the agricultural cycle, and fertility. Arthur Joyce (2000) has stressed that bloodletting and other forms of blood sacrifice were central concepts to the Zapotec as early as the Formative period, and that this sacrificial act was often a rite to petition fertility from supernaturals.

In summary, it appears from the iconographic evidence that the two plants in the hands of the Cocijo impersonators represent the sequence between the spikelet-corn stage and the green-corn stage. The green-corn harvest is amply documented and marked in many contemporary Mesoamerican communities. For the Zapotec of the sixteenth century, it was an important ritual moment in which blood was drawn and copal was burned. Considering ethnographic evidence, it is also possible that blood was sprinkled over corn as part of the offering. Further back in time, this blood may have been drawn from the genitals, reflecting the belief that this precious liquid sustains human life. In indigenous thought, these concepts have an ordered logic: Blood feeds the corn, and corn, in turn, feeds people. As many scholars have pointed out, corn metaphorically becomes their flesh and blood; thus, when one dies, the material is returned to the earth in an eternal cycle of birth and death (Furst 1974:184; Monaghan 1990:562–563). In this sense, the ritual has as much to do with insuring the continuance of the crops of corn as it does with insuring future generations.

The artifacts discussed in this paper are associated with this ritual activity via the iconographic information they supply. At

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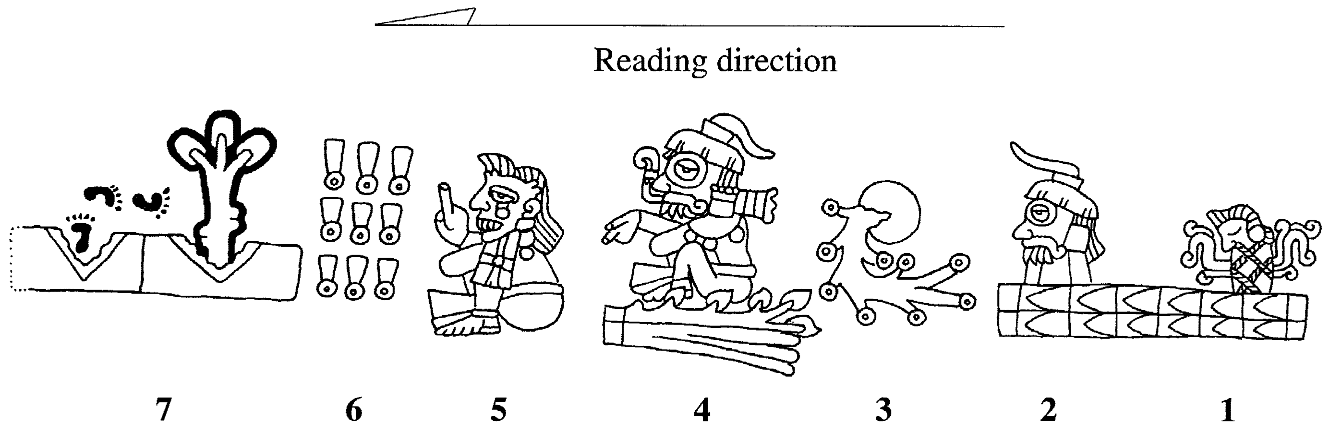

Figure 11. Codex Vindobonensis, page 27, line 5 (Jansen 1986).

this point, it is convenient to explore the question of why the effigy vessel and the cylinder were produced in series. The ancient Zapotec often produced effigy vessels of Cocijo in sets of four and five. The answer to why this was done may have a direct bearing on the way agricultural rituals were carried out; it also links the objects to the Zapotecs' basic understanding of the cosmos.

Taking the original, reconstructed sets of the ROM pieces into account results in four representations of Cocijo for each set (Figure 13). The four Cocijo represented may refer to the four-part division of the world, in which each Cocijo resided in one of the quadrants. This type of arrangement is also reflected in Marshall Saville's Xoxocotlán find (Saville 1899), in which a central figure with a human face is flanked by four Cocijo (Figure 14). However, sets of five Cocijo effigy vessels are also common. Excellent examples can be seen in the Morton D. May Collection in Saint Louis (Figure 15). Although lacking provenience, the pieces in these sets were tested by Shaplin and Zimmerman using thermoluminescence in 1975 and proved to be ancient. These pieces may indicate the four-part division of the world, with an added emphasis on the center quadrant represented by the fifth effigy vessel. The concept is exemplified in the Codex Borgia on pages 27 and 28. On each of these pages, five Tlalocs are depicted with distinct attributes. Their varying qualities, ordered by year, appear to be associated with the negative and positive aspects of the natural

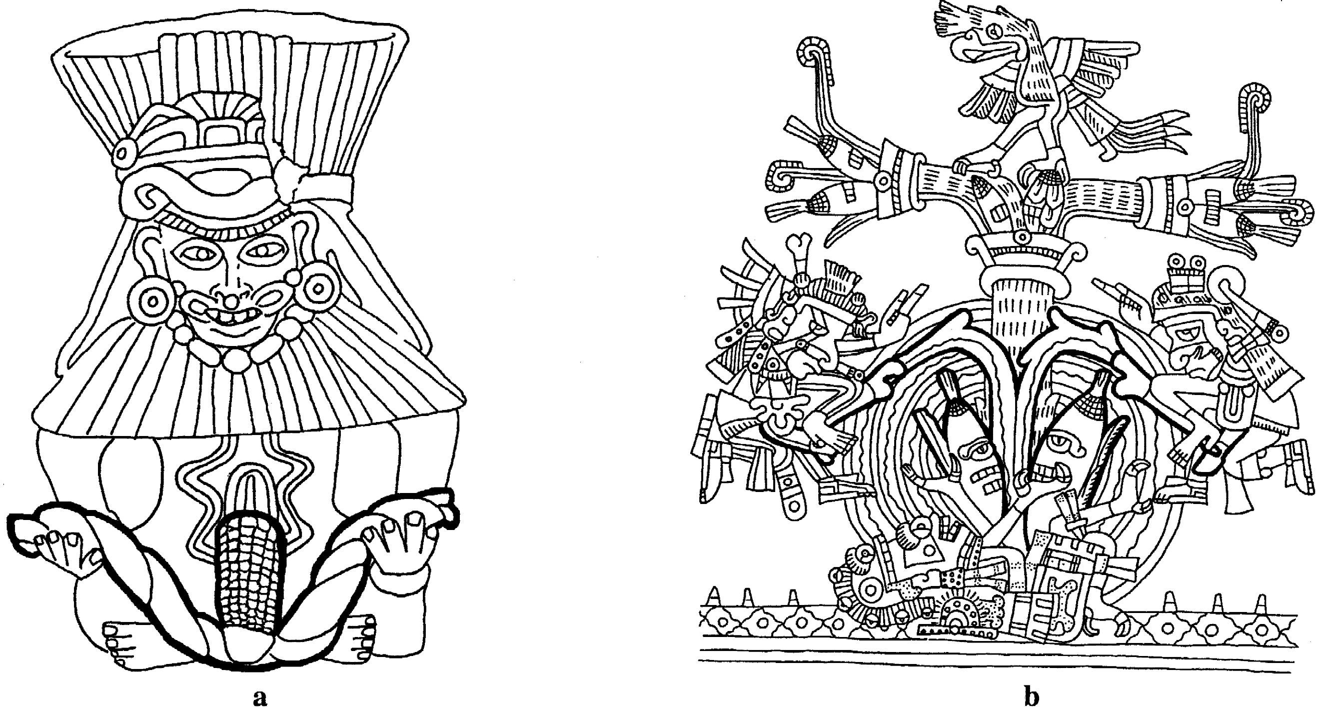

Figure 12. Ritual bloodletting associated with corn in a Zapotec effigy vessel and in a pre-Hispanic codex. (a) Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, Cat. 28354; (b) Codex Borgia, page 53.

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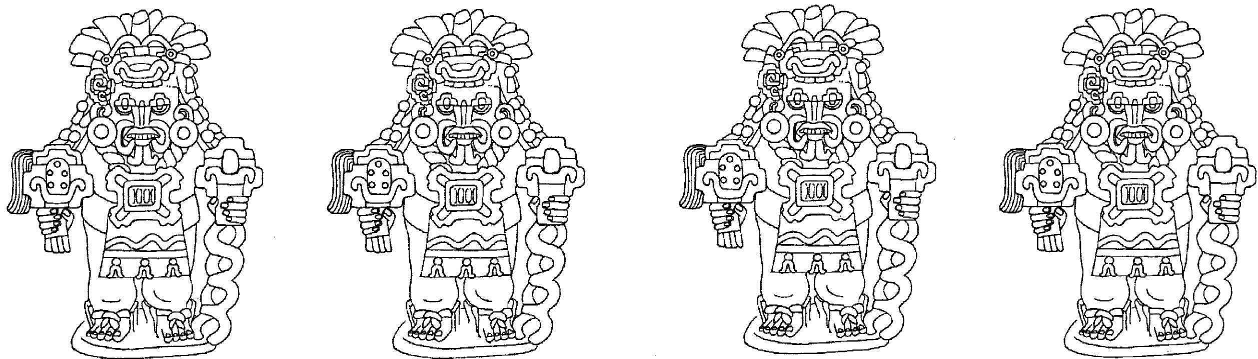

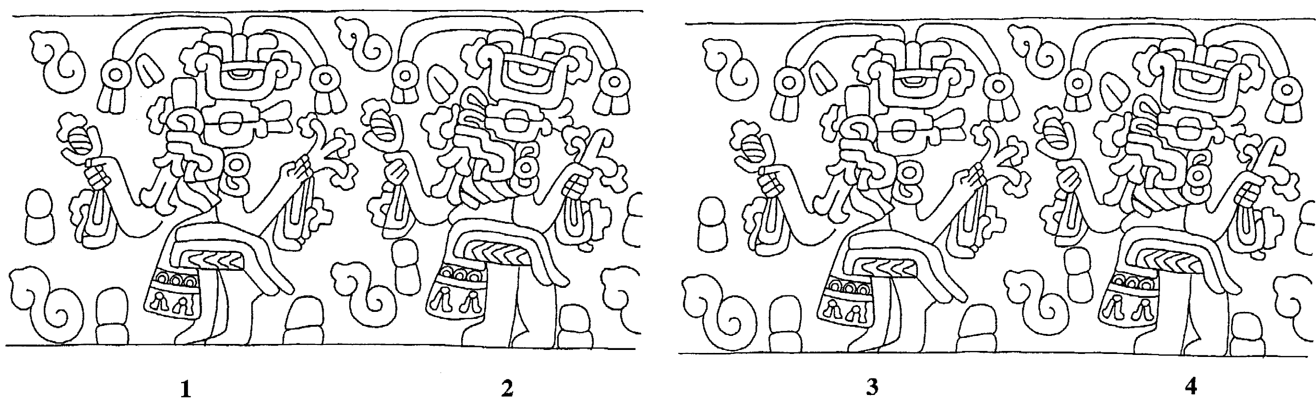

Figure 13. Comparison of four Cocijos from two sets.

elements that affect the outcome of the corn crop. Further, each corner Tlaloc is painted a different color—blue, red, yellow and black, a reference to the four cardinal directions. Four-part divisions of world directions and colors is deeply rooted in Mesoamerican traditions and has been addressed by a number of scholars since the turn of the twentieth century (cf. Anders et al. 1993:167–174; Flannery and Marcus 1976; Seler 1904a:267–271; Thompson 1970:251–253; Weitlaner and De Cicco 1962).

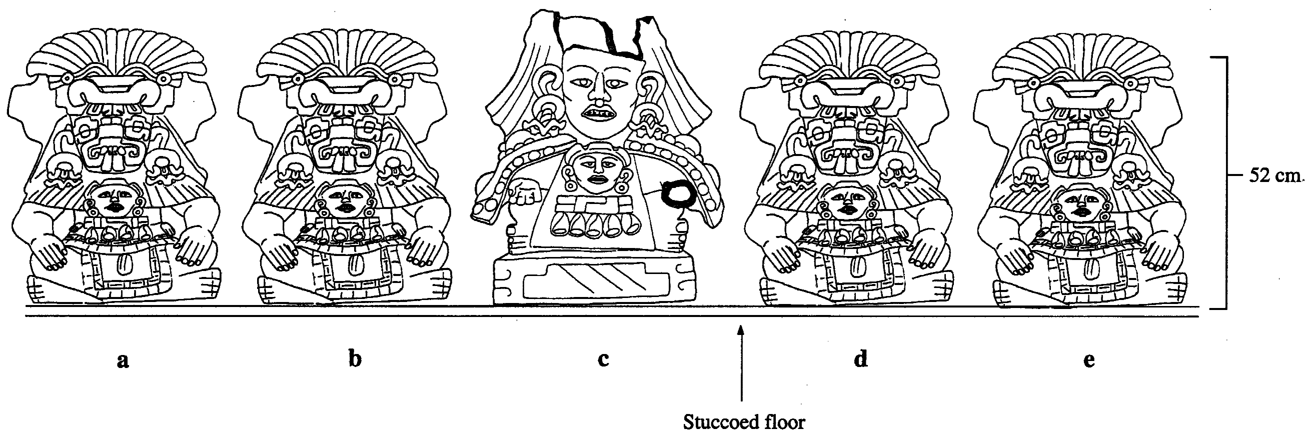

Figure 14. Five effigy vessels discovered by Marshall Saville in 1898, in Xoxocotlán, Oaxaca, Mogote 7, Tomb 1. (a) American Museum of Natural History, Cat. 30/6332; (b) American Museum of Natural History, Cat. 30/6333; (c) Museo Nacional de Antropología, Cat. 6-6221; (d) unknown location; (e) Museo Regional de Oaxaca, Cat. 1347.

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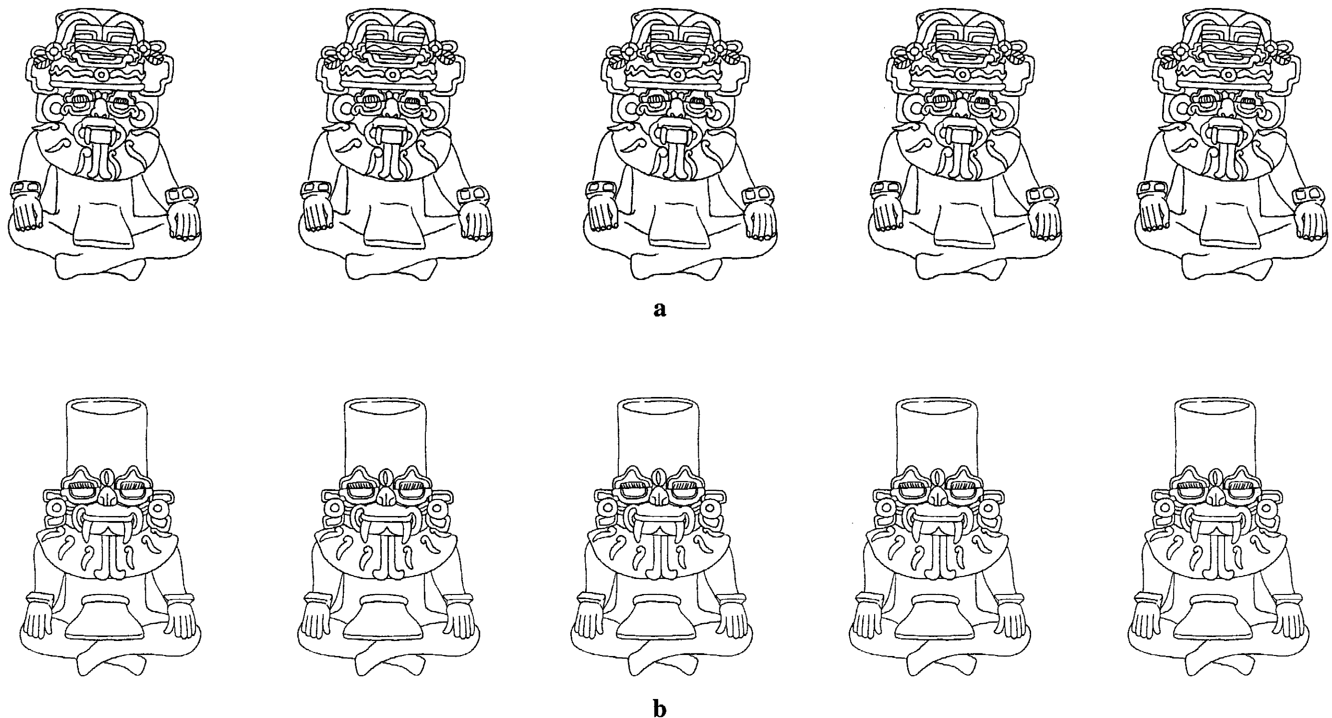

Figure 15. Two sets of five Cocijo effigy vessels. (a) Morton D. May Collection, Cat. 249:1978a–e; (b) Morton D. May Collection, Cat. 250:1978a–e.

As mentioned earlier, in ritual practice among peoples closely related to the Zapotec, offerings of corn and blood were often placed in the four corners of the cornfield and sometimes in the center. For example, Weitlaner (1961:Table 16) mentions that the Mazatecs of Huautla placed five "packets" in the cornfield, one in the center and four in the corners, so that the field would not dry up. It is possible that Zapotec effigy vessels with representations of Cocijo were used as containers for corn and blood or for other types of sacred bundles associated with agricultural ritual. Although this hypothesis responds to the general purpose of the objects, it does not explain why most of these sets were associated with funerary contexts.

THE CONTEXT AND FUNCTION OF THE VESSELS

Through iconographic analysis and ethnographic data, it has been demonstrated that the four Cocijo effigy vessels from the tomb at Santo Domingo Jalieza are connected with the corn ritual. It is possible that these pieces were used in ritual contexts outside the funerary context, then later placed in the tomb as an offering. Many effigy vessels are found in tomb contexts showing signs of wear and breakage (Caso 1934:7), indicating that they had been used before being deposited. I have speculated that the vessels attached to the effigies may have been used as repositories for the blood offered up in a specific moment of the corn ritual. There is other evidence for this use. Although Zapotec effigy vessels are routinely found empty, on occasion obsidian blades or the bones of small birds have been found inside or associated with the offering (Caso and Bernal 1952:10; Caso et al. 1967:127; Rickards 1938:149). Both of these items can be associated with blood sacrifice. Also, given their large size, some of the containers may have been used to hold the corn itself, which may subsequently have been covered with blood. Four or five identical vessels were necessary for the ritual in order to coincide with the subdivisions of the cosmos.

When the elite member dies, ritual effigy vessels are deposited in a tomb with his or her remains. A high-ranking member such as a ruler has acted as provider for the community and should continue to do so even in death; in life, the ruler convoked the festivals and may personally have impersonated the important gods, especially Cocijo, the god responsible for insuring the sustenance of the community. In the sixteenth century, two important Zapotec rulers, Cocijoeza and Cocijopij, had Cocijo as the first part of their names (Oudijk and Jansen 1998:79). This indicates Zapotec rulers' tendency to assume characteristics of gods. Further, there is evidence from the Classic period of this same prefixing of Cocijo to the personal name of a ruler. The name forms part of an inscription on a carved stone from Monte Albán (MA SP-9). Urcid presented a possible reading for the inscription that is a glyphic combination: glyph M equals Cocijo, and glyph E equals *Xoo*, which can be translated as strong or powerful. Thus, the personal name could read as "strong lightning" (Urcid 2001:371). Referencing an elite member's name to a rain deity may not be unusual. Ralph Roys (1967:66–67) notes several occasions in which ancient Mayan rulers assumed the name of Chac, the rain deity, in their titles. Furthermore, they associated their governors with the imagery of Chac, often having his effigy hanging from the ruler's belt (Sharer 1994:531).

The figures on the cylinders can be explained in the same way, although the function of the pieces is different. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether the pieces were found in a funerary context, given the sparse information regarding their discovery. However,

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if one assumes that the objects were used in the corn ritual, and if one takes into account the constant presence of copal and blood documented for this type of ritual, one might be able to explain their function. As I noted earlier, the cylinder had been used at only one end; therefore, it is possible that something, such as a catch basin for blood, was placed on top of it. The vessel may have had a tapered bottom that fit into the top of the cylinder. This type of ceramic assemblage can be seen in the large cylindrical *incensarios* found at Mayan temples. Recently, a number of these from the Grupo de las Cruces at Palenque were analyzed using a variety of physical chemical methods. The results suggested that the *incensarios* were used as repositories for burning a mixture of blood, corn, and copal (Cuevas García 2000:58). The hypothesis that Zapotec effigy vessels contained corn and blood has never been tested. The technology exists, however, and involves using residue analysis of hemoglobin for blood and phytolites for maize. Should an archaeologist attempt these tests, he or she must keep in mind that the piece to be analyzed must be freshly excavated, as traces of blood begin to oxidize immediately on contact with air (cf. Vargas-Sanders et al. 1998).

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this paper not only points to a possible function of these Zapotec pieces; it also underscores the continuity of rituals employing corn. Analyzing the graphic systems of other Mesoamerican cultures, it appears that the Zapotec performed similar types of rain and fertility rituals associated with the corn harvest as the Teotihuacans, the Maya, the Mixtecs, and, later, the Mexica. All of these rituals were performed under the guise of a single entity known by different names to different groups, and with a multiplicity of attributes and masks, but with a common origin. This suggests that Mesoamerican religions did not vary greatly among cultures, and their pantheons were often formed by same deities with the same functions. In my opinion, the Zapotec religion can be seen as pantheistic as well as animistic, given that these two concepts are not mutually exclusive, and this character appears to be applicable to most Mesoamerican cultures.

The view that the images on these pieces represent deity impersonators fits well with what is known about Zapotec society and the pantheistic–animistic view of their religion. I have taken the position that the humans behind the masks are very probably impersonators of deities who were associated with natural forces, especially those divine forces that affected the agricultural prosperity of the community. For this reason, the status of the deity impersonator was probably that of a ruler or high-ranking elite member. These images accompanied the impersonator to his or her grave, where perhaps they continued to play a ritual role in the afterlife.

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza las imágenes plasmadas sobre dos formas cerámicas zapotecas: un cilindro abierto por ambos lados y una vasija efigie. Las dos provienen de una colección poca conocida del Museo Real de Ontario en Toronto. En este estudio propongo que las figuras sobre estos objetos representan personificadores del dios zapoteco de la lluvia y de los rayos, Cocijo. Los personificadores probablemente tienen el estatus de gobernante y desempeñan el papel de este dios. Ambos personajes portan en las manos racimos de maíz en diferentes etapas de desarrollo y por lo tanto están vinculados con rituales que involucran el ciclo agrícola del maíz. Un método comparativo que combina la arqueología histórica, la etnografía y un análisis iconográfico, revela pistas sobre el significado y función de estos objetos. El estudio busca demostrar que estas piezas probablemente fueron empleadas en conexión con la ofrenda de sangre durante los rituales de cosecha de maíz. Posteriormente, los objetos fueron depositados en o cerca de tumbas en veneración al personificador de Cocijo. Estas conclusiones contribuyen a esclarecer temas en torno de la naturaleza de la antigua sociedad, religión y cosmología zapoteca. Además, evidencian que los zapotecos realizaron rituales de la lluvia y de la fertilidad asociados con la cosecha del maíz, semejantes a otros grupos culturales en Mesoamérica.

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