Chapter Twelve

Ethnic Conflict in Postclassic Cholula, Mexico

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Making Military Histories

Ethnohistoric sources describe a sequence of ethnic changes in the Puebla/Tlaxcala Valley of Central Mexico beginning at the end of the Classic period and continuing up to the Spanish conquest (figure 12.1). In this chapter, I contrast the documentary accounts with archaeological evidence derived primarily from Cholula, the major urban center of the Puebla/Tlaxcala region with continuous occupation since at least the Middle Formative (McCafferty 1996a). Cholula is notable for not experiencing a collapse at the end of the Classic period as did other prominent urban centers, such as Teotihuacan and Monte Albán. It was the focus of panregional religious ceremonies for much of its history, with ethnohistoric accounts identifying it as an important pilgrimage site, especially during the Postclassic, when visitors came from diverse parts of Mesoamerica to worship at the temple of Quetzalcoatl (McCafferty 2001; Olivera 1970; Ringle et al. 1998). Thus, the socioreligious influence of Cholula spread far and wide, as can be measured by the dispersal of its characteristic artifact style known alternatively as the Mixteca-Puebla style (McCafferty 1994; Nicholson 1960, 1982) or as the Postclassic International style (Robertson 1970; see also Smith and Heath-Smith 1980).

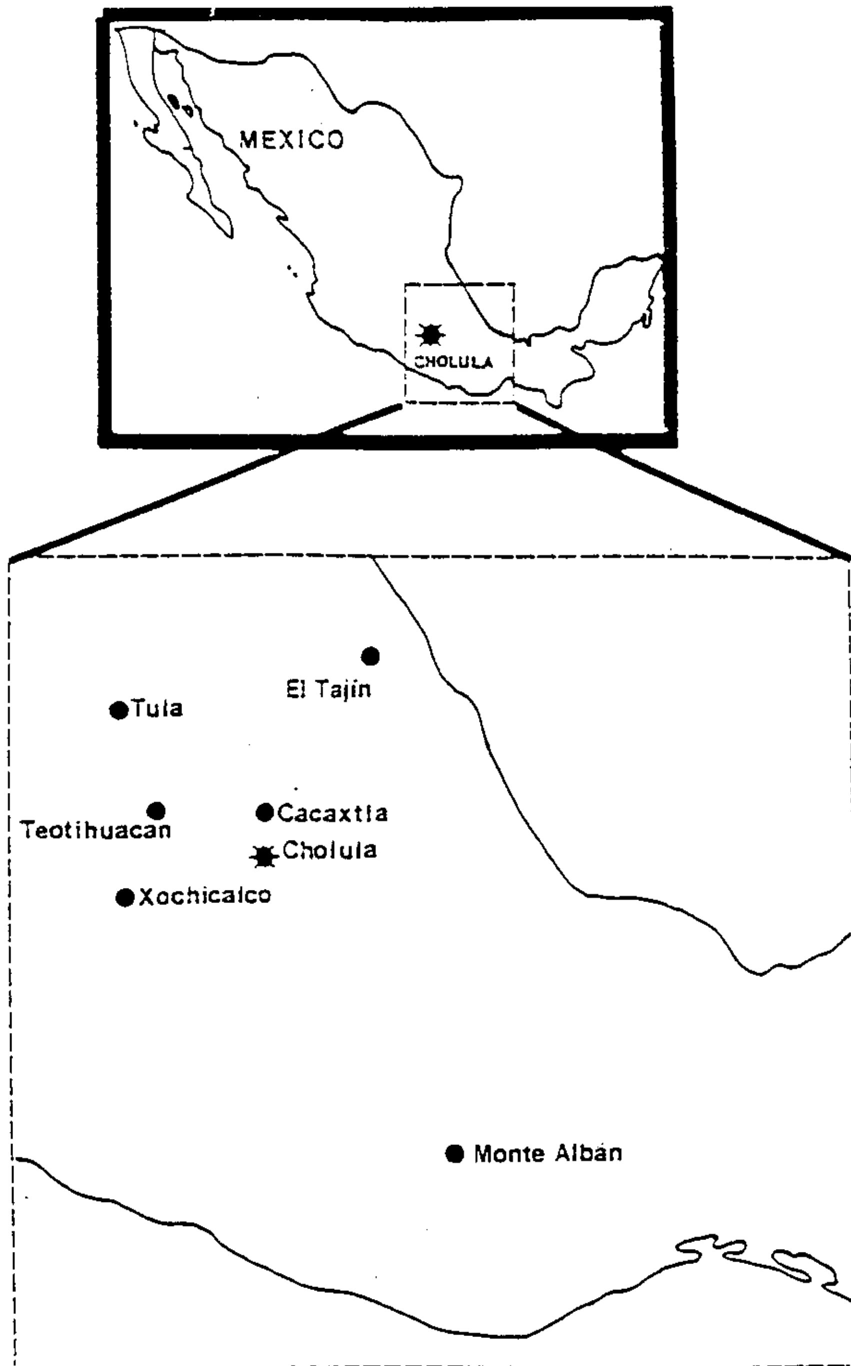

Figure 12.1 Map of the central highlands showing the locations of Cholula and Cacaxtla

If Cholula enjoyed a wide sphere of influence over Postclassic Mesoamerica, however, it was through this combined practice of religion and trade; militarism does not seem to have been a significant characteristic of its hegemonic strategy. No evidence of "conquest" monuments are found in Cholula's artistic program, and while colonial period accounts mention Cholula as part of a rival "Triple Alliance" with Tlaxcala and Huejotzingo in the "Flowery Wars" against the Aztecs and their allies (Durán 1994), it is not renowned for having done particularly well. In fact, in the case studies to be examined in this chapter, Cholula is consistently known for its military defeats, as foreign groups conquered and occupied the city in successive waves. What is notable about this sequence of military failure is the resilience with which the city continued to flourish and remain a constant force in the religion, economy, and culture of Central Mexico throughout the turbulent Postclassic period. Thus, Cholula provides an alternative to the militaristic model of political organization, and this alternative may have value for explaining the longevity of the Cholula polity.

The first episode occurs around A.D. 700, at the end of the Classic period. It is described by colonial chroniclers such as Ixtlilxochitl (1975–1977) and Torquemada (1975–1983) and may be represented in the Cacaxtla Battle Murals (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994; McVicker 1985; Quirarte 1983). In contrast to the accounts of violent interaction between the Olmeca-Xicallanca and existing populations identified as Quinametinime, excavations on the northeast platform of Cholula's Great Pyramid suggest a gradual integration of the two groups (McCafferty 1996a).

The second example is documented in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976), with the arrival to Cholula of immigrant Toltecs and Chichimecs around A.D. 1200 (various interpretations of the historical accounts have produced several specific dates, but all cluster around this more generic date). Architectural features at the Great Pyramid indicate a violent end to the ceremonial center, followed by a major reorganization of the site's ceremonial landscape as a new Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl was built in what is still the town's civic-ceremonial center (McCafferty 1996b). Additional evidence for this change is found at the residential site of UA-1, about 2 kilometers east of the Great Pyramid, where evidence of burning and a high incidence of projectile points are among the evidence of warfare-related destruction (McCafferty 1992).

Finally, the Spanish conquest of Mexico is among the most violent episodes of world history and resulted in radical changes in cultural

organization. At Cholula, Cortés and his soldiers perpetrated the famous "Cholula Massacre," in which nobles from the city were gathered in the plaza associated with the Temple of Quetzalcoatl and attacked at the same time that indigenous allies swarmed into the city to attack and sack the residential areas (McCafferty 2000a). The massacre is one of the best-documented events of the conquest, with more than a dozen colonial period accounts from conquistadores, Spanish priests, and indigenous chroniclers (including codex-style pictorial versions). This provides the opportunity for critical evaluation of the different sources. Archaeological evidence for the massacre was recovered in the form of 671 burials found in the central square, many showing diagnostic sword cut marks (Castro Morales and García Moll 1972). The archaeological evidence therefore provides an independent perspective for further evaluation of the chronicles regarding this crucial event of the conquest.

The documentary and archaeological evidence for pre-Columbian warfare at Cholula provides an opportunity not only to infer how and why militarism occurred but also to evaluate how the colonial historians chose to accentuate or minimize the role of violence in the past. The theoretical framework that I employ here is based on practices derived from historical archaeology where documentary and archaeological data are not simply combined to construct a more complete story of the past but rather are treated as somewhat independent representations of the past that can reveal aspects of the "formation processes" of the distinct lines of evidence (Leone et al. 1987). For example, by contrasting the various ethnohistorical accounts of the Cholula Massacre against the archaeological evidence, a variety of perspectives is revealed relating to specific agendas of the chroniclers. Furthermore, the archaeological evidence derives from limited excavated contexts. Thus, the documentary accounts can be used to suggest additional arenas of action that have not been adequately sampled and thus identify topics for future investigation while pointing out gaps in the archaeological record that may lead to skewed interpretations.

The methodology, therefore, is explicitly dialectical, as it seeks not for an ultimate truth in the past but rather for the overlaps and ambiguities of the various lines of evidence. Both provide useful information. In the present study, ethnohistoric and archaeological evidence shed light on pre-Columbian warfare. But on a higher level, the contrast between the two data sets reveal distinctions in the Mesoamerican "history-making" process; what was worthy of being recorded and especially how propagandistic histories, often written by the victors, portrayed a biased vision of the past.

The "Invasion" of the Olmeca-Xicallanca

Mythicohistorical accounts describe the arrival of the Olmeca-Xicallanca during the Epiclassic period (ca. A.D. 700; McCafferty 1997). According to Ixtlilxochitl (1975–1977:I:529), the Cholula region was inhabited by "giants" (Nahuatl = *quinametitzúcuil*) following the Second Age, or Tlalchitonátiuc. These were the beings who built the pyramids of Teotihuacan and Cholula (Sahagún 1950–1982:X:192; see also Davies 1977:46). In archaeological terminology, they correspond to the Classic period. When the Olmeca-Xicallanca arrived in the Cholula area, the giants who had survived the cataclysmic end of the Second Age enslaved them. Yet the Quinametinime giants were eventually defeated and "consumed," at which point the Olmeca-Xicallanca became the rulers of Cholula. The same historical tradition was also shared by the Tlaxcaltecas (Armillas 1946; Torquemada 1975–1983:I:51–55), who kept a "femur the height of an ordinary man" (probably from a prehistoric mammoth) as evidence of giants, at least according to the testimony of Díaz del Castillo (1963:181).

Shrouded in the mists of time and fantasy as these accounts are, archaeological evidence provides some evidence to substantiate at least the outline of an ethnic invasion of the Puebla-Tlaxcala area following the Classic period. The Olmeca-Xicallanca originated in the Gulf coast region of Veracruz, as implied by their names as well as by later ethnohistoric sources (McCafferty 1997; Sahagún 1950–1982:X:187–88). Olman ("place of rubber") is located in the southern Gulf coast, where Formative period remains were designated as relating to the "Olmec" culture (since no original name was recorded for this culture, the term "Olmec" was adopted from the colonial period Nahua name for the region). The historic Olmeca-Xicallanca also came from the same area, perhaps more specifically from the area surrounding the Laguna de Terminos, where the Postclassic city of Xicalango was an important port and trading city (Berdan 1978; Chapman 1957).

Sahagún (1950–1982:X:187–88) wrote that the Olmeca came from the east, where their homeland was a land of abundance where flowers, cacao, and liquid rubber grew and where exotic birds with beautiful feathers lived. The wealthy were known as "sons of Quetzalcoatl," a name that was also used to describe successful merchants.

One of the greatest problems faced when trying to identify the Olmeca-Xicallanca is the chronology of when they were active in Central Mexico. While this has been discussed in several historical interpretations (Davies 1977; Jiménez M. 1966; McCafferty 1997), the actual evidence is extremely tenuous, based on Torquemada's (1975–1983:I:452–54; see also Fowler 1989) account of a migration out of Central Mexico (initiated by Olmec "tyranny") by Nahua groups who would eventually settle in Central America. Since this allegedly took place "7 or 8 lifetimes of an ancient person" prior to Torquemada's time (ca. A.D. 1600), and a "lifetime of an ancient" is generally interpreted as twice the fifty-two-year calendar round (Davies 1977:117–20), this would push the migration back to around A.D. 750–850. Thus, the ethnohistorical record indicates the arrival of ethnic Olmeca-Xicallanca sometime after the fall of the Classic empires but before the expulsion of the Nahua Nicarao (ca. A.D. 800). Furthermore, Ixtlilxochitl's (1975–1977) account implies an initial period in which the Olmeca-Xicallanca were dominated by the resident population, followed by their overthrow and violent destruction.

Archaeological evidence to evaluate this scenario is available from two sources: the Cacaxtla Battle Murals and an excavated elite residential area on the northeast platform of the Great Pyramid of Cholula. Although each provides relevant information relating to the ethnohistorical account, they are not consistent in supporting that account.

Cacaxtla, including the adjoining hilltop site of Xochitecatl, was occupied during the Epiclassic period, A.D. 650–850 (López de Molina 1981). Colonial period chroniclers still recalled its affiliation with the Olmeca-Xicallanca (Torquemada 1975–1983:I:353–54). It features extensive monumental architecture in the construction of the acropolis area. The acropolis probably combined elite residential as well as administrative functions, while religious/ceremonial functions were centered at the pyramids of adjacent Xochitecatl (Serra Puche and Lazcano Arce 1997). In addition to the Battle Mural, other polychrome murals have also been discovered that reveal historical as well as religious concepts (Stuart 1992). Of particular significance to the question of Cacaxtla's ethnic identity is a mural located in an early construction level that depicts a merchant, identified by a carrying pack (Nahuatl = *cacaxtli*) containing quetzal feathers and rubber, both deriving from the Olmeca-Xicallanca heartland. The merchant is further identified by the calendar name "4 Dog" and by costume elements, including a distinctive hat, all of which serve to identify him as the Maya God L, patron deity of merchants (Carlson 1991).

The Cacaxtla Battle Mural consists of a long panel painted on a building facade facing out onto the main patio of the acropolis (Foncerrada de Molina 1976). It represents two warring armies dressed in jaguar and bird insignia (figure 12.2a), respectively, with the jaguar army consistently depicted as victorious (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994; McVicker 1985; Quirarte 1983). The right side of the panel shows the battle still in progress, while the left side (divided by a central staircase) depicts the immediate aftermath of the battle. In addition to the contrasting costume elements, the two armies are distinguishable on the basis of facial features, the defeated bird warriors represented with Maya-like cranial deformation and the jaguar warriors lacking this characteristic (Quirarte 1983). This facial feature, combined with the artistic style and identifiable costume, jewelry, and other objects, has been interpreted as evidence that the mural was painted by artists with Maya background, with the closest stylistic parallel being the murals of Bonampak.

The Battle Mural does relate to the ethnohistoric account of ethnic conflict, but whereas Ixtlilxochitl describes the defeat of the Central Mexican "giants" by the Olmeca-Xicallanca, the mural depicts the defeat of a Maya-like group by non-Maya warriors, presumably residents of the central highlands. Yet this defeat is depicted in a style characteristic of the Maya, and earlier-phase murals clearly depict the Maya merchant god at Cacaxtla. This apparent contradiction has bewildered archaeologists and art historians alike.

An interpretation that provides a possible way out of this conundrum relates to an engendered reading of the Battle Murals (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994). Two standing members of the bird warriors are represented in female costume, including triangular *quechquemitl* capes, knee-length skirts, elaborately decorated textile patterns, and the absence of a loincloth (figures 12.2b and 12.2c). Both are shown confronted by a leader of the jaguar army, identified by the calendar name 3 Deer Antler "Tlaloc-mask." Since the Mesoamerican convention for representing captives is to show them nude, as are most other members of the Cacaxtla bird army, it can be suggested that the fate of the female-costumed individuals (or more likely a single individual depicted twice) was not to be sacrificed. Instead, McCafferty and McCafferty (1994) suggest that this noblewoman of the bird clan was captured for the purpose of marriage, thus forging an alliance with the jaguar clan that resulted in a combined bird/jaguar dynasty. This is precisely what is then represented on the portico murals of Building B at Cacaxtla, where two complementary individuals, in bird

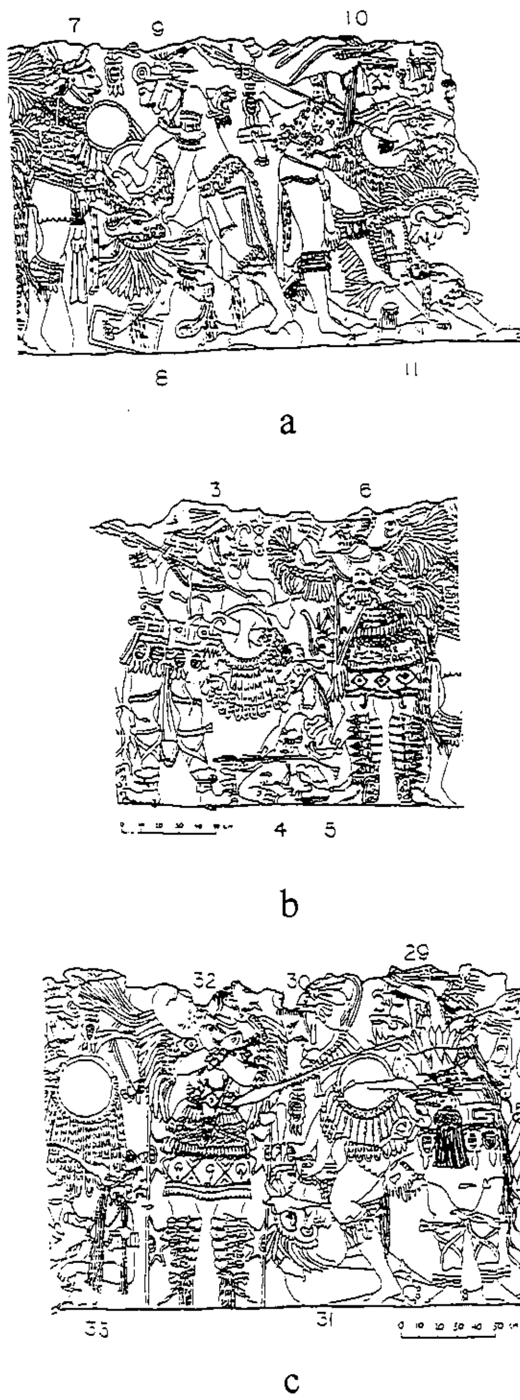

Figure 12.2 Cacaxtla Battle Murals: (a) warring armies; (b–c) bird warriors in female costume

and jaguar insignia, respectively, are shown on either side of the doorway as descendants of the union implied in the Battle Mural. Thus, while the overall theme of the Cacaxtla Battle Mural was one of ethnic conflict and explicit violence, the conclusion was one of marriage alliance to unite the two groups into a multiethnic lineage. This same process may also be present in the archaeological record of Epiclassic Cholula.

Cholula was a major ceremonial center during the Classic period, peripheral to the political sphere of the great Basin of Mexico center of Teotihuacan, even though it probably shared ethnic traits with the Teotihuacan population (McCafferty 2000b). Recent investigations at Cholula have fundamentally challenged traditional interpretations of the Classic to Postclassic transition at the site (McCafferty 1996b, 1998, 2000b), as it is now believed that Cholula did not suffer a collapse as did its mighty neighbor to the northwest but instead went through a prolonged period of monumental construction. The Great Pyramid of Cholula was expanded from 180 meters on a side to 400 meters (Marquina 1970; McCafferty 1996a, 2001), more than three times the volume of Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Sun. It is precisely at this time that the ethnohistoric chronicles indicate "invasion" by the Olmeca-Xicallanca.

Architectural evidence from the Great Pyramid and its surrounding ceremonial precinct supports the idea of ethnic change, with iconographic elements that create an eclectic mix of Maya, Gulf coast, and Central Mexican traits. The pyramid itself was built as a four-sided, radial pyramid, with access to the top from any direction (for Maya parallels, see Schele and Mathews 1998). The facades represent a change from the previous construction phase (Stage 2), in that Stage 3 used the *talud-tablero* format usually associated with Teotihuacan; *talud-tablero* facades were introduced only after the fall of Teotihuacan's ceremonial center and may have been a symbolic expression by Cholula's elite that they were appropriating Teotihuacan's role as Central Mexico's premier religious center (McCafferty 2000b, 2001). Sculpted and painted across the *tableros* of the Great Pyramid were Gulf coast– and Maya-inspired symbolic elements, including mat motifs, greca friezes, and scrollwork volutes. Two massive stela/altar groups were located in the Patio of the Altars on the south side of the Great Pyramid (figure 12.3); these are also Maya characteristics without precedent in the central highlands (McCafferty 1996a, 2001). The eclectic blending of highland and lowland traits is a characteristic of the Olmeca-Xicallanca, as they introduced an international theme that

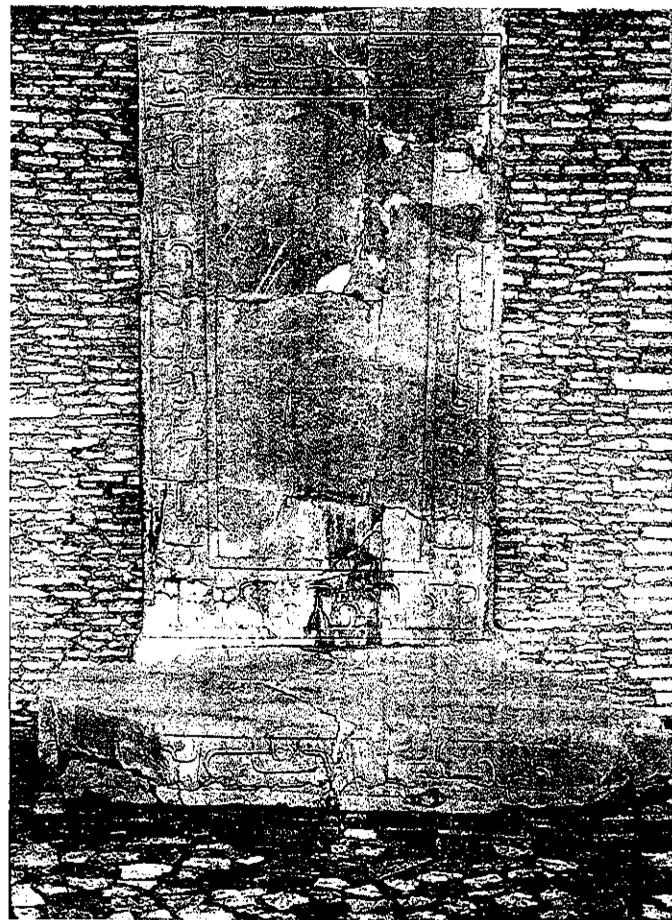

Figure 12.3 Stela/Altar Group 1, Patio of the Altars, Cholula

developed into the Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition (McCafferty 1994; Nagao 1989; Robertson 1985). A skeleton of an adult male was found associated with Epiclassic architecture adjacent to the Patio of the Altars with distinctive cranial deformation that Suárez Cruz argues may even represent a Maya merchant or priest (Suárez C. 1985).

Archaeological evidence for the process of ethnic change comes from a small-scale excavation at the Patio of the Carved Skulls, located on the northeast platform of the Great Pyramid (McCafferty 1996a; McCafferty and Suárez C. 1995). This area was originally explored in

the 1930s by Noguera (1937), who identified a small patio relating to an elite residence with a miniature pyramid-altar in the patio. This location corresponds to the palace of the Olmeca-Xicallanca high priest (figure 12.4), the Aquiach Amapane, as recorded in the colonial period *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976; see also McCafferty 1996a).

As part of a project to consolidate the architectural remains uncovered by Noguera and to map the exposed features, several units were excavated that recovered artifactual material relating to the construction sequence of the patio and its associated architecture. Six phases of construction were encountered, including an earlier pyramid-altar that had been partially dismantled and covered over when a new staircase was built (figure 12.5). Since the original altar discovered by Noguera (1937) contained the skeletal remains of an adult male and female, associated with grave offerings and dental mutilation to indicate elite status, it is inferred that the altars may have served as shrines

Figure 12.4 Great Pyramid of Cholula with the palace of Aquiach Amapane (adapted from *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* 1976)

Figure 12.5 Remains of partially dismantled pyramid-altar

for revered lineage founders (McCafferty 1996a, 2000b). Thus, the intentional destruction of the earlier pyramid-altar may indicate a break in the dynastic history.

The material culture recovered from the patio features a blend of Classic period diagnostics together with ceramic types that later became prominent in the Early Postclassic period. Although no archaeometric dates could be established, the pottery suggests a relative date between A.D. 700 and 900 (McCafferty 1996a). That the ceramics represent a cultural blending of Classic and Postclassic types suggests that the transition was not abrupt but rather gradual, as would be the case with ethnic in-migration and intermarriage. Notably, both serving and utilitarian wares were introduced, including *comales*, which make their first appearance in Cholula in this assemblage. As cooking and particularly tortilla production were characteristic female tasks (Brumfiel 1991), the implication is that females were important agents of the ethnic change, perhaps as the result of marriage alliances with lineages from the Gulf coast.

In summary, ethnohistoric accounts indicated a fairly dramatic and violent ethnic change as the existing population of Classic "giants" was exterminated. In contrast, however, both the Cacaxtla

Battle Murals and the archaeological evidence from the Patio of the Carved Skulls suggest that intermarriage and especially lineage alliances through marriage may have been the process through which the Classic was transformed into the Postclassic. At Cacaxtla, the union of the bird and jaguar clans may have initially been brought about through military conquest in which the highland army was victorious, resulting in the capture of a dynastic founding queen. At Cholula, too, Gulf coast and Maya design elements on the ceremonial architecture support the arrival of ethnic immigrants, while the introduction of "foreign"-style cooking wares and forms such as the *comal* imply the presence of foreign women. The destruction of the earlier pyramid-altar also suggests a break in the lineage sequence, and the later shrine featured innovative pottery with Gulf coast origins (including imitation Fine Orange), while the two skeletons featured Maya-style dental mutilation. In this case, the archaeological evidence does not support the ethnohistoric record, but through a dialectical analysis, a broader and anthropologically richer interpretation is presented.

The Arrival of the Tolteca-Chichimeca

The Olmeca-Xicallanca domination of Cholula lasted for approximately 500 years, at least according to the mythicohistoric accounts of Ixtlilxochitl (1975–1977) and Torquemada (1975–1983). During this time, the Great Pyramid was built to truly monumental proportions; it was compared to the Tower of Babel, as it provided a means of ascending to the heavens (Durán 1971). Cholula was ruled by the priesthood of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, to whom the pyramid was dedicated (Rojas 1927; Torquemada 1975–1983).

Around A.D. 1200, however, a new group, the Tolteca-Chichimeca, arrived on the scene and conquered the city. Again based on ethnohistoric accounts, especially from the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (a "history" clearly written by the victors), the Tolteca-Chichimeca left Tula after its fall and migrated east, following their priest-king Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. Arriving in Cholula, the first group of immigrants was given land to the northwest of the ceremonial center and was subservient to the dominant ethnic group. But when the Toltecas called on ethnic allies for support, they were able to overthrow the Olmeca-Xicallanca and establish a new civic administration. The Great Pyramid was abandoned, and a new ceremonial center was established in the Tolteca-Chichimeca community around a "new" Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl. According to the colonial period *Descripción de Cholula*, the

Olmeca-Xicallanca were "vanquished" (Carrasco 1971; Rojas 1927; but see Olivera and Reyes 1969).

Archaeological evidence for the arrival of the Tolteca-Chichimeca and their subsequent conquest of the Olmeca-Xicallanca is available from the ceremonial precinct of the Great Pyramid and also from a residential site on the campus of the University of the Americas. Unfortunately, because the modern urban center of San Pedro Cholula is built on top of the Late Postclassic center, relatively little information is available to interpret the Tolteca-Chichimeca ceremonial complex.

Stage 3 of the Great Pyramid covered an area of 350 meters on a side and reached 65 meters in height (Marquina 1970; McCafferty 1996b). Several modifications were made to the west side of the pyramid, including Stage 3B, which featured a *tablero* decoration of a mat motif, followed by a steep-sided, rounded structure (Stage 3C) that caused the destruction of the front stairs of Stage 3B (figure 12.6). These represent the outermost facades of the Great Pyramid. But over the top of these construction levels was another layer of adobe brick that extended the Great Pyramid to its greatest dimension of 400 meters to a side. No finished stonework is preserved from this final construction level, raising the question of whether Stage 4 was ever

Figure 12.6 Stages 3B, 3C, and 4 of the Great Pyramid, Cholula

completed or whether instead the building stone had been stripped away for other construction projects (McCafferty 2001).

An incomplete pyramid would imply a radical shift in political organization as resources were channeled in a different direction. Alternatively, building materials were a rare commodity in Cholula since it is situated in the center of an alluvial plain with the closest source of building stone over 50 kilometers to the southeast (Sergio Suárez Cruz, personal communication). Quarrying stone from an existing building would be a cost-efficient means of procuring construction materials. Furthermore, stripping away the outer face of the Great Pyramid could be perceived as a form of humiliation. Pyramids were known as *cue* in the central highlands (Díaz del Castillo 1963), derived from the Nahuatl word *cueitl* for "skirt"; in support of this concept, Mixtec codices depict temples decorated with the same textile patterns as female costume (McCafferty and McCafferty 2003). Stripping away the outer layer of the skirt may have been perceived in the same way as stripping the clothing from a captive, as a sign of humiliation and defeat.

Further evidence of conquest is found in the Patio of the Altars on the south side of the Great Pyramid, where the large stone stelae of the stela/altar groups were thrown down and intentionally smashed. Stela/Altar 1 measured 3.85 meters in height and 35 centimeters in thickness (figure 12.7a) yet was shattered into at least seventeen fragments (Acosta 1970). Stela 2 (also known as Altar 3; Contreras 1970) was of comparable size and was broken near the base with the upper section dragged 40 meters to the base of the pyramid's south staircase (figure 12.7b), where it has been reconstructed (probably incorrectly since it was likely the complementary stela to Altar 2; McCafferty 1996a, 2001). The thickness of the slabs, as well as the small size of some of the fragments of Stela 1, suggests the intentionality of the breakage, as it would have required considerable force and labor to break this stone into so many small fragments. Furthermore, the act of dragging the multiton top portion of Stela 2 to the base of the pyramid suggests some ritual act. This may have been part of a termination ritual for the monument (cf. Mock 1998b), perhaps related to the destruction and desecration of the Patio of the Altars as a ceremonial space.

After the architectural facades had been stripped of their stone facing and the south ceremonial plaza had been destroyed, the major ceremonial functions were moved to the "new" Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl in what is now San Pedro Cholula. The Great Pyramid maintained some of its importance as a shrine dedicated to a rain deity,

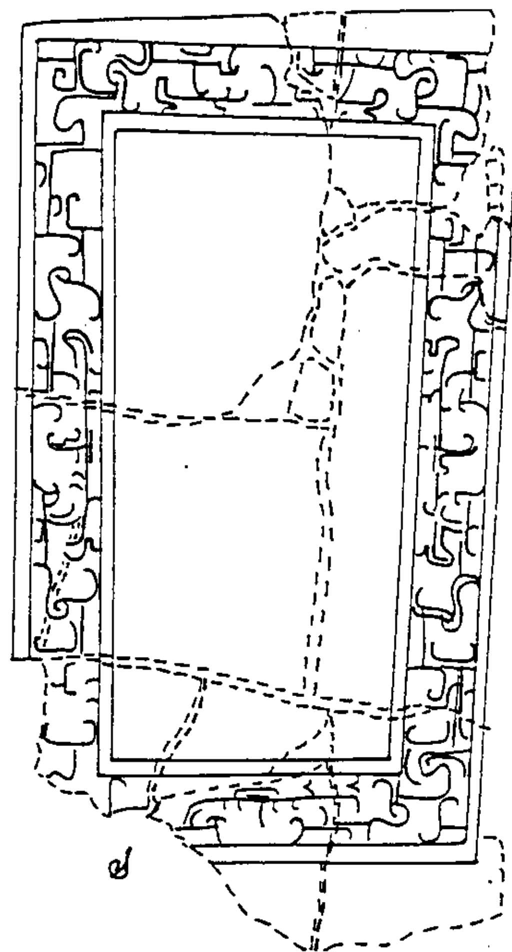

Figure 12.7a Cholula Stela/Altar 1

Chiconauquiahuitl (Rojas 1927), and as a mortuary site for ceremonial interments (López et al. 1976). The Great Pyramid was allowed to become overgrown with trees and grasses, perhaps as another form of humiliation to the religious practices of the Olmeca-Xicallanca (for a similar case relating to the Tenochca treatment of its rival Tlatelolco's own pyramid, see López Luján 1998).

Evidence of violent destruction is also available from the outskirts of the urban center at the UA-1 locus of the University of the Americas. UA-1 was excavated in 1968 as a field school under the direction of

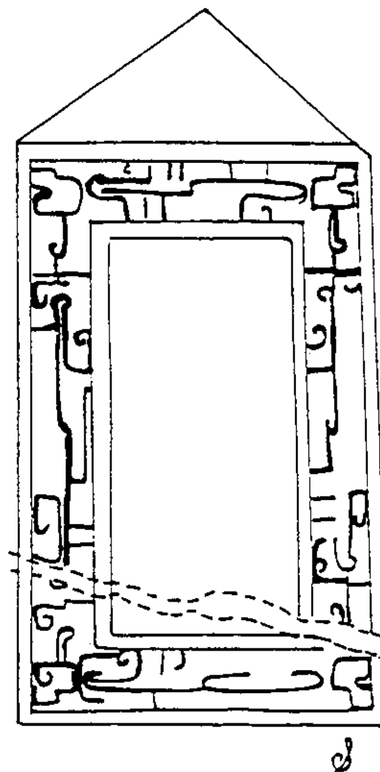

Figure 12.7b Cholula Stela 2

Daniel Wolfman (1968; McCafferty 1992). Three structures were encountered (figure 12.8); the most extensively tested was Structure 1, a residential area that dated to the Middle and Late Tlachihualtepetl phases (A.D. 900–1200). Structure 1 consisted of four rooms plus associated porch areas and a deep trash midden. A thick layer of ash and charcoal on the surface of a charred plaster floor led excavators to suggest that the house had been destroyed by fire. Objects including vessels, spindle whorls, grinding stones, and projectile points were found as de facto refuse on the floor, suggesting rapid abandonment with objects left in their systemic context (Schiffer 1972). A cache box, lined with adobe bricks, was set into the plaster floor of Room 3 but was empty except for a fragment of a charred, carved bone; since the box was covered by collapsed adobe walls, it is possible that it was looted at the time that the house was burned. Room 4 featured a multiple burial of an adult female, three children, and two infants. These

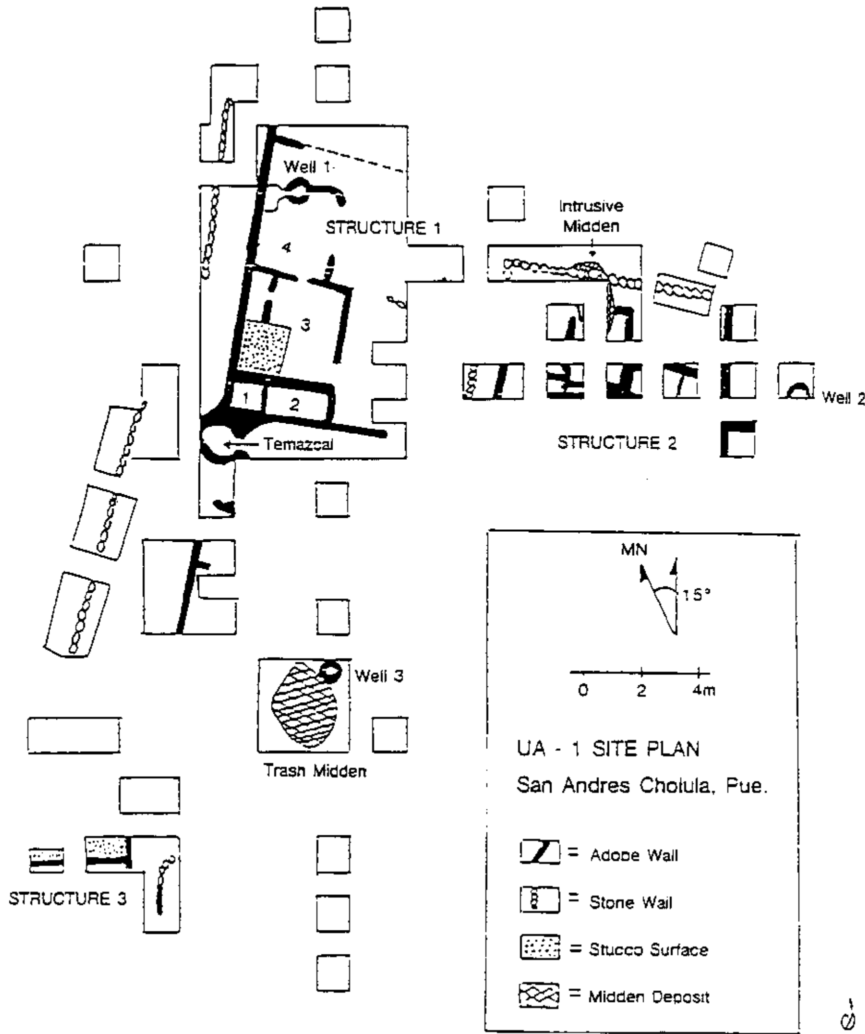

Figure 12.8 UA-1 site plan

skeletons were buried in flexed, seated positions in a shallow pit dug through the plaster floor, with their heads above the floor level. The base of the burial pit featured a 3-centimeter layer of carbon and ash. The collapsed adobe walls covered the burial pit, again implying that the interment probably took place shortly after the house was destroyed.

Although the evidence is not conclusive, Structure 1 apparently

was destroyed in a cataclysmic fire during the Late Tlachihualtepetl phase (A.D. 1050–1200), about the time of the invasion of Cholula by the Tolteca-Chichimeca. Was the destruction of Structure 1 related to the invasion? Mixed in with the artifacts of UA-1 were remains of 102 projectile points, a remarkable number considering that the excavation only covered 200 square meters (McCafferty 1992:570–74). Many of these points (37 percent) were found in association with the occupation level of Structure 1, including direct floor contact (figure 12.9). The majority of the measurable projectile points were long (6–8 centimeters) side-notched points of the type usually associated with atlatl darts. Many other points were found in the extramural portions of the excavated site, suggesting that darts were not simply curated but were discharged and subsequently abandoned.

In summary, the arrival of the Tolteca-Chichimeca (ca. A.D. 1200) was noted in the ethnohistoric accounts as a period of violent upheaval, with the resident population of Olmeca-Xicallanca uprooted and "vanquished." This is substantiated by archaeological evidence from the Great Pyramid and from the UA-1 residential area.

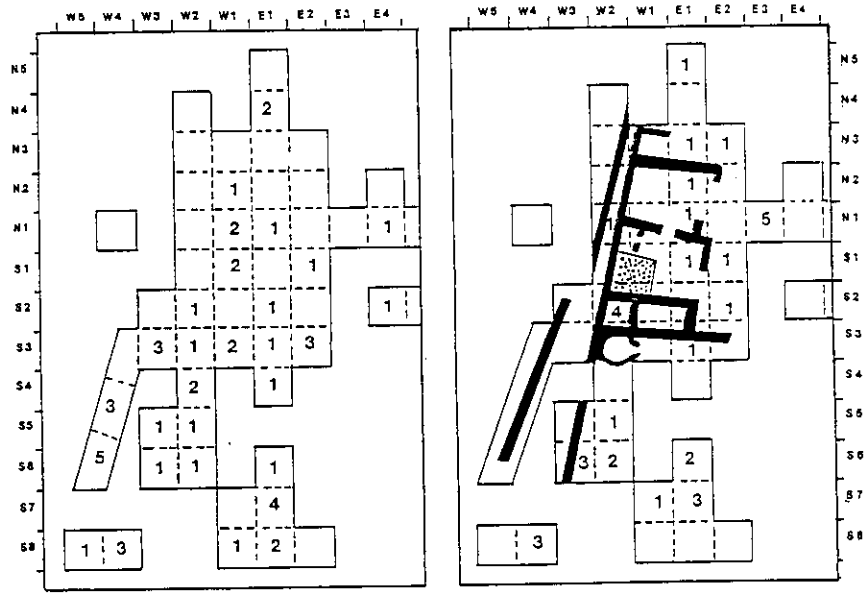

Figure 12.9 Distribution of Projectile Points at UA-1, Structure 1; (a) levels 1 and 2; (b) level 3 and below

The Great Pyramid was not only abandoned as the principal ceremonial center of the city but also intentionally desecrated through the destruction of stone stelae in the Patio of the Altars and the (possible) stripping of finished masonry from the exterior of the Stage 4 pyramid facade. Structure 1 of the UA-1 locus exhibits evidence of violent abandonment associated with the burning of the structure, looting of its cache box, and possibly the death of a mother and her children. A high concentration of projectile points within the occupation context and in the surrounding area indicates that this destruction was related to military attack.

While the archaeological evidence agrees with the outline of the ethnohistoric account, it remains unclear the extent to which the resident Olmeca-Xicallanca were, in fact, "vanquished." Colonial period accounts indicate a political division between the original Olmeca-Xicallanca part of town and the area occupied by the Tolteca-Chichimeca (McCafferty 1997; Olivera and Reyes 1969). This boundary exists up to the present in the distinct municipalities of San Andrés Cholula and San Pedro Cholula, which make up part of the same metropolitan area but maintain very different political, religious, economic, and cultural practices (Bonfil Batalla 1973). As will be seen in the next section, the multiethnic division of Late Postclassic Cholula had an important impact on the strategies behind the Cholula Massacre during the Spanish conquest.

The Spanish Conquest of Cholula

One of the most violent yet best-recorded events of the Spanish conquest of Mexico occurred in Cholula in October of A.D. 1519, when Cholulteca nobles were gathered in the plaza of the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl and attacked at the same time that indigenous allies of the Spanish swarmed in to sack outlying parts of the city. This event, known as the Cholula Massacre, was recorded by virtually all chroniclers of the colonial period, including Spanish conquistadores (Cortés 1986; Díaz del Castillo 1963), Spanish priests and historians (Las Casas 1992; López de Gómara 1964; Sahagún 1950–1982; Torquemada 1975–1983), and indigenous scholars (Ixtlilxochitl 1975–1977; Muñoz Camargo 1966) as well as several pictorial representations in indigenous style (Bittman Simons 1968a, 1968b; Lienzo de Tlaxcala 1979; Muñoz Camargo 1966).

Each of these accounts represents what would be considered a primary source, and in isolation each would be relied on for historically

accurate evidence. By critically analyzing all of these sources, however, clear differences become apparent that imply the agendas of the particular "historians." Such critical analysis of the Cholula Massacre has been presented by Dudek (1993) and Peterson and Green (1987), and recently I compiled the documentary and pictographic evidence into a study of factional competition relating to the massacre (McCafferty 2000a). Clear distinctions appear among the different accounts, with the most significant being events and/or strategies that may have provoked the massacre. Was it a justified defensive maneuver to forestall an imminent ambush, or was it a strategic offensive move predicated on Cortés's desire to instill fear among the Aztecs of Tenochtitlán, or was there some other political reason?

Cortés (1986) and other members of his army (Díaz del Castillo 1963; López de Gómara 1964) relate evidence that there was an impending ambush, perpetrated by deceitful Cholultecas and supported by their Aztec allies. Claims were made that battlements could be observed in the city and that the women and children had been sent away so that the city was filled only with warriors. There was even the rumor of 50,000 Aztec warriors hiding outside the city, waiting to ambush the Spaniards.

In contrast, however, one of Cortés's officers, Vazquez de Tapia, stated before the Inquisition that he had no warning when Cortés gave the order to attack the assembled Cholultecas (Wagner 1944:173, cited in Peterson and Green 1987:209–10). A similar account was recorded by Sahagún (1950–1982:XII:29–30), based on Aztec informants, that the Cholultecas were gathered unsuspectingly and slaughtered "treacherously." And it is curious that the alleged Aztec army did not join in the battle, especially once the Tlaxcalteca and Cempoalan allies entered the city in support of the Spanish.

Even if an actual ambush was not planned, the fear of one may have loomed large in the minds of the Spanish. Numerous accounts refer to warnings given by the Spaniards' Tlaxcalteca allies, who cautioned that the Cholultecas were allied to the Aztecs. A key element in the "conspiracy theory" was a warning that was allegedly given to Cortés's indigenous translator and adviser, Malintzin, who learned from a Cholulteca noblewoman that an ambush had been plotted (Díaz del Castillo 1963; Torquemada 1975–1983). When Malintzin informed Cortés of the plot, he set the wheels in motion to punish the city.

Was there ever such a plot? Virtually all information passed through Malintzin, including the warnings from the Tlaxcalteca. Was

she a passive conduit, as has so often been inferred (Messinger Cypress 1991), or did she have political motivations of her own? Malintzin joined the Spanish in the southern Gulf coast, the Olmeca-Xicallanca heartland, and although she was presented to the Spaniards as a servant, she had been raised as a noble trained to inherit rulership (Kartunnen 1994; McCafferty 2000a). Malintzin's participation throughout the conquest demonstrates her skill as a political adviser and strategist. Arriving in Cholula to find a complex system of political factionalism based on ethnic differences between Nahua Tolteca-Chichimeca and Olmeca-Xicallanca, perhaps including lineages familiar to her, did Malintzin take a role in maneuvering the Spanish into siding with her own clan?

Several lines of evidence suggest that Malintzin did influence events of the Cholula Massacre. First, the indigenous depiction of the massacre presented in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (1979) clearly shows her in the center of the action, pointing her hand to direct the assault on the Tolteca-Chichimeca Temple of Quetzalcoatl (figure 12.10). Second, in the account of Muñoz Camargo (1966; see also León Portilla 1992:48), the Tlaxcaltecan allies of Cortés wore plaited grass in their hair in place of their traditional war headdresses. While this may have been a practical means of distinguishing themselves from the similarly dressed (at least to European eyes) Cholultecas, it could also have been a sign of affiliation with Malintzin since *malintzin* means "precious grass" in the Nahuatl language. Finally, both Díaz del Castillo (1963) and Torquemada (1975–1983) recorded the aftermath of the massacre when a separate group of nobles from Cholula appeared, claiming to be leaders of different factions who were sympathetic to the indigenous allies of Cortés. Peace was immediately restored, and Cholulteca warriors joined in the final assault on Tenochtitlán.

The Cholula Massacre presents a complex scenario of ethnic conflict that was not simply a case of the Spanish versus the Native Americans but also included diverse groups, including the dominant Tolteca-Chichimeca and the subordinate but rival Olmeca-Xicallanca, both of Cholula, as well as Tlaxcalteca and Cempoalan allies of the Spanish. Although still preliminary in scope, archaeological evidence for the massacre illuminates some of the ethnohistorical confusion over this event.

Castro Morales and García Moll (1972) published a brief summary of their excavations in the courtyard of the Cathedral of San Gabriel in downtown San Pedro Cholula, where they had excavated 671 skele-

Figure 12.10 Malintzin directing the attack during the Cholula Massacre (adapted from Lienzo de Tlaxcala 1979)

tons that they interpreted as victims of the Cholula Massacre (see also McCafferty 2000a; Peterson and Green 1987). The Cathedral of San Gabriel represents the most likely location for the Late Postclassic Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl (Marquina 1970), though attempts to locate the foundations of the pyramid have failed. The skeletons combined pre- and postcontact characteristics, leading to the interpretation that they dated from the moment of European contact. Many featured cranial deformation, a practice that was discouraged under the Spanish, yet they were buried in the traditional Christian position, extended with the head to the east, as opposed to the more typical pre-Columbian

burial position of a flexed, seated position facing north. Few grave goods were found, again a divergence from the pre-Columbian tradition, and those that were found were principally items of personal adornment, such as a lip plug, jadeite beads, and copper "buttons." Two Spanish coins were also found, including one dated to A.D. 1512 (Peterson and Green 1987:211).

Evidence to indicate that these were victims of the Cholula Massacre derives from the pathology of numerous individuals, forty-three of whom had been decapitated or dismembered (Castro Morales and García Moll 1972:383). Others showed deep cut marks in the bones consistent with trauma from a sharp blade.

The demographic profile of the skeletal population provides some hints that can be used to evaluate the ethnohistoric accounts of the massacre. Approximately 51 percent ($n = 342$) of the skeletons were adults, while juveniles ($n = 47$) and infants ($n = 256$) were also present. The analysis of the population by sex has not yet been reported, but some were pregnant women (Peterson and Green 1987:211). This information conflicts with the statements by Cortés and others that the women and children had all left the city prior to the planned ambush. Further osteological analysis of the skeletons would provide additional information relating to the ethnic factionalism of the battle, particularly if facial anatomy and DNA testing could isolate specific biological populations among the victims.

The variety of perspectives in the ethnohistorical accounts of the Cholula Massacre incorporate enough contradictions to call into question the events and particularly the motivation behind the attack. Specifically, most interpretations have been strongly Eurocentric, focusing on the Spanish as actors, with little attention paid to the multiethnic factionalism of the indigenous actors. Could Malintzin have manipulated Cortés and his companions into attacking the pro-Aztec faction at Cholula, thus promoting the subordinate pro-Tlaxcala, Olmeca-Xicallanca group, who were themselves her own kin? The accounts present only faint clues, but the archaeological record does contain information on the demographics of the massacre that challenge the accounts of Cortés and his supporters. Future problem-oriented archaeology to address the early colonial period of Cholula may produce additional information for evaluation of ethnic change, including intrasite organization of the Tolteca-Chichimeca versus Olmeca-Xicallanca rivalry.

Conclusion: A Dialectical Approach to Postclassic Warfare

Cholula experienced several violent conflicts during the Postclassic period, some of which can be further evaluated using archaeological evidence. In none of the cases examined was there a perfect fit between the ethnohistoric accounts and the archaeological record. There can be several explanations for this, the most direct being simply the fragmentary state of the archaeological material. Further problem-oriented archaeology to investigate specific periods of ethnic conflict would undoubtedly recover additional information that could be used to modify the interpretations presented here. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence, fragmentary as it is, consistently contradicts facets of the ethnohistoric accounts, challenging the veracity of the written records. This is particularly true for the case of the Cholula Massacre, where the accounts themselves are internally inconsistent. This lack of fit should be viewed not as a problem, however, but rather as varying perspectives on a complex mosaic of human experience. Certain lines of evidence, especially the ethnohistoric accounts, were constructed purposely to project specific ideas about the past, and it should never be forgotten that these projections were created strategically to accomplish certain agendas. The archaeological record, on the other hand, may be less "constructed" but is nevertheless a creation of the various interpreters of the patterned material culture who choose to emphasize or ignore attributes as they "reconstruct the past." An example of this practice is found in the many interpretations of the Cacaxtla Battle Murals that fail to consider the significance of the two bird figures wearing female costume. By engendering this scene, a radically different interpretation of the action can be realized, though again it is an act of manipulating the evidence into a particular pattern. The task at hand is to most completely and consistently incorporate all the information without leaving out any nonconformist pieces.

But what to do with the pieces of information that still do not fit? That is the interesting part of the analysis, for it provides the means to widen the net beyond events of the distant past to question the history-making process itself. Using a dialectical approach, we can critically evaluate the agency of the colonial historians as they embellished to suit their own purposes. Furthermore, we can examine our own prejudices as contemporary archaeologists manipulate their sherds

and skeletons in support of the theoretical agenda du jour. By considering the multiple "voices" of the ethnohistoric and archaeological records, the past becomes more complex and much more interesting.

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Chapter Thirteen

A Macabre Sense of Humor: Dramas of Conflict and War in Mesoamerica

Shirley Boteler Mock

As archaeologists, our mission is to interpret spatial patterning in the material remains we recover, seeking to discover certain features of form and redundancy as a mode of understanding, in order to sort out the "structures of signification" (Geertz 1973:9). In the realm of middle-range theory, through the embracing of epigraphy, ethnography, ethnohistory, linguistics, and other academic fields, archaeologists have made important intellectual advancements in understanding the social reality of the past. For instance, the iconography provides daunting evidence that war was a persistent social drama in Mesoamerica, of varying degrees and intensities, carried out within a distinctive pattern of structuring principles merged with ideology and power (see Brown and Garber, chapter 6 in this volume). In this chapter, I seek to enliven the archaeological record by contextualizing these skeletonized life and death events into social dramas of conflict. From this middle-range perspective and guided by the nexus of belief and action, I merge humor with the macabre and sacrifice with war in an examination of the trickster complex. Thus, the archaeological record becomes not the static remains of postdepositional processes or someone's leftover sacrifice but rather a tantalizing piece in the patterns of