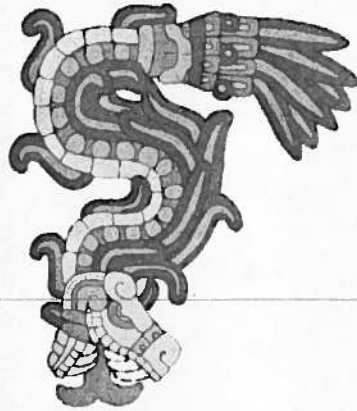


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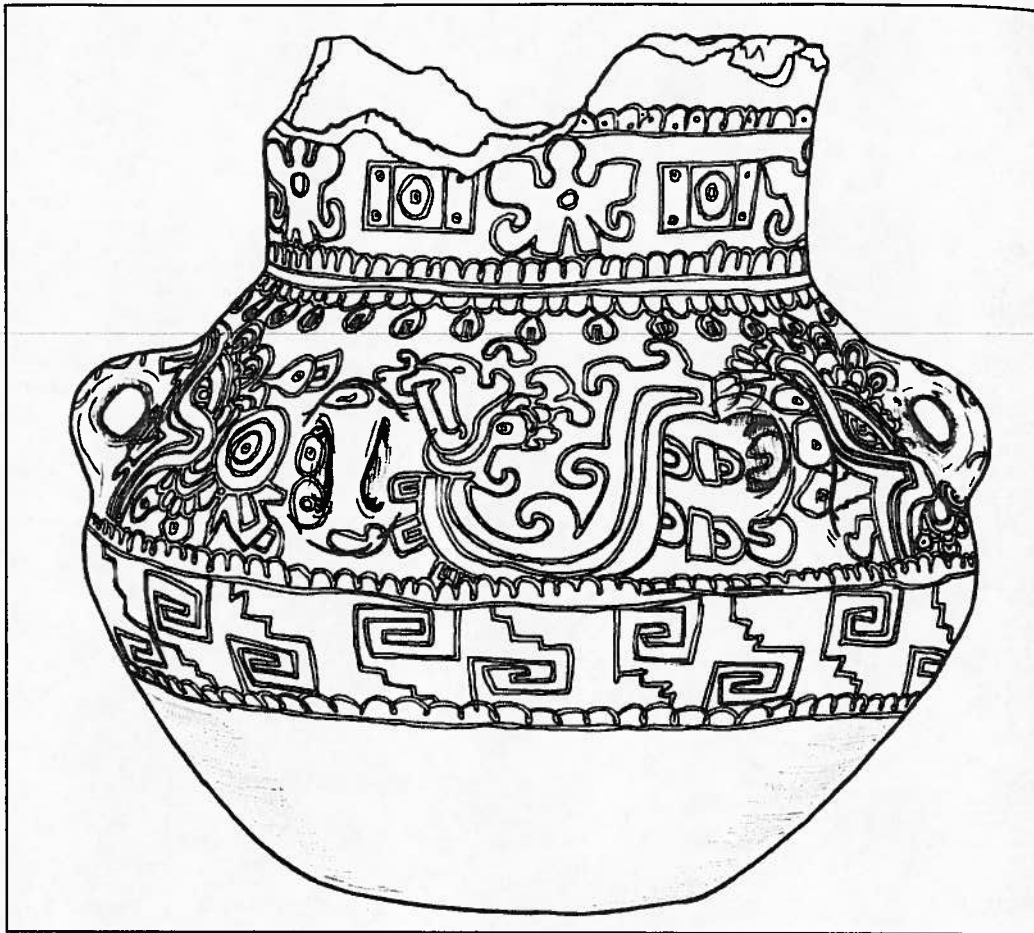


FEATHERED SERPENTS, PULQUERÍAS, AND INDIAN SEDITION IN COLONIAL CHOLULA

Geoffrey G. McCafferty

More than 100 years ago, Carl Lumholtz (1909) published a short study on an incised black on red vessel in *American Anthropologist* (figure 17.1). The globular jar (olla) featured six handles around its shoulder and was decorated with Mixteca-Puebla Style iconography typical of the Postclassic Period (AD 900–1520). Feathered serpents are the dominant theme in the main design panel, alternating between full-bodied examples and just the heads. A narrow neck panel features stylized butterflies (symbolic of death and resurrection) interspersed between a rectangular motif with a circle in the center. Another panel around the lower portion of the shoulder features the step-fret *xicalcolihqui* motif often associated with the god Quetzalcoatl. Lumholtz noted that the vessel was purchased in Cholula (Puebla, Mexico) and was later donated to the American Museum of Natural History.

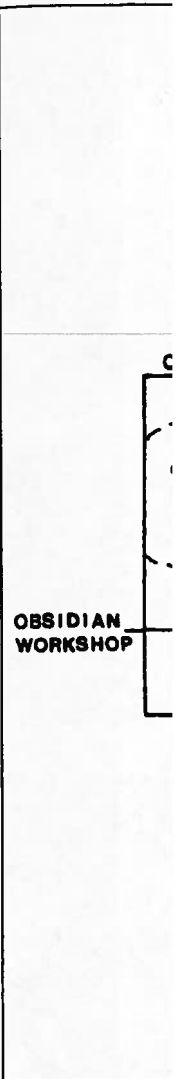
The Lumholtz vessel obtains renewed significance through comparison with a nearly identical example recovered through recent salvage excavation in the urban center of Cholula. Cholula was an important religious and economic center in the Mexican Highlands, and in the Postclassic it was the center of the religious cult of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god associated with the wind, the planet Venus, and religious knowledge (Carrasco 1982; Nicholson 2001). Cholula was one of the largest cities in Mesoamerica at the time of the Spanish Conquest (McCafferty 2001b), and it continued as a center of indigenous



17.1. The Lumholtz Cholula vessel, a San Pedro Black on Red Incised olla (height 25.6 cm, maximum circumference 80 cm). From Lumholtz 1909: 199. Redrawn by Robyn Lacy.

culture through the Colonial Period, in contrast to the more European character of nearby Puebla (Bonfil Batalla 1973; Castillo Palma 2001). The modern city of Cholula covers the Precolumbian site, and while a major archaeological project was carried out during the mid-twentieth century (Marquina 1970), most archaeological investigation in the past forty years has taken the form of salvage archaeology in response to development projects. Consequently and unfortunately, one of the most important archaeological resources in Mexico is being whittled away by rampant development, with minimal effort devoted to recovering cultural information.

The R-106 rescue project at Cholula was directed by Sergio Suárez Cruz of the Puebla Regional Center of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in collaboration with archaeologists from Brown University. This project was a valuable exception to the general lack of information resulting from archaeological salvage (McCafferty 1996; Reynoso Ramos 2004). A Classic Period house and associated deposits were explored; this remains the best-known



17.2. Salvage excavation view by Sharis.

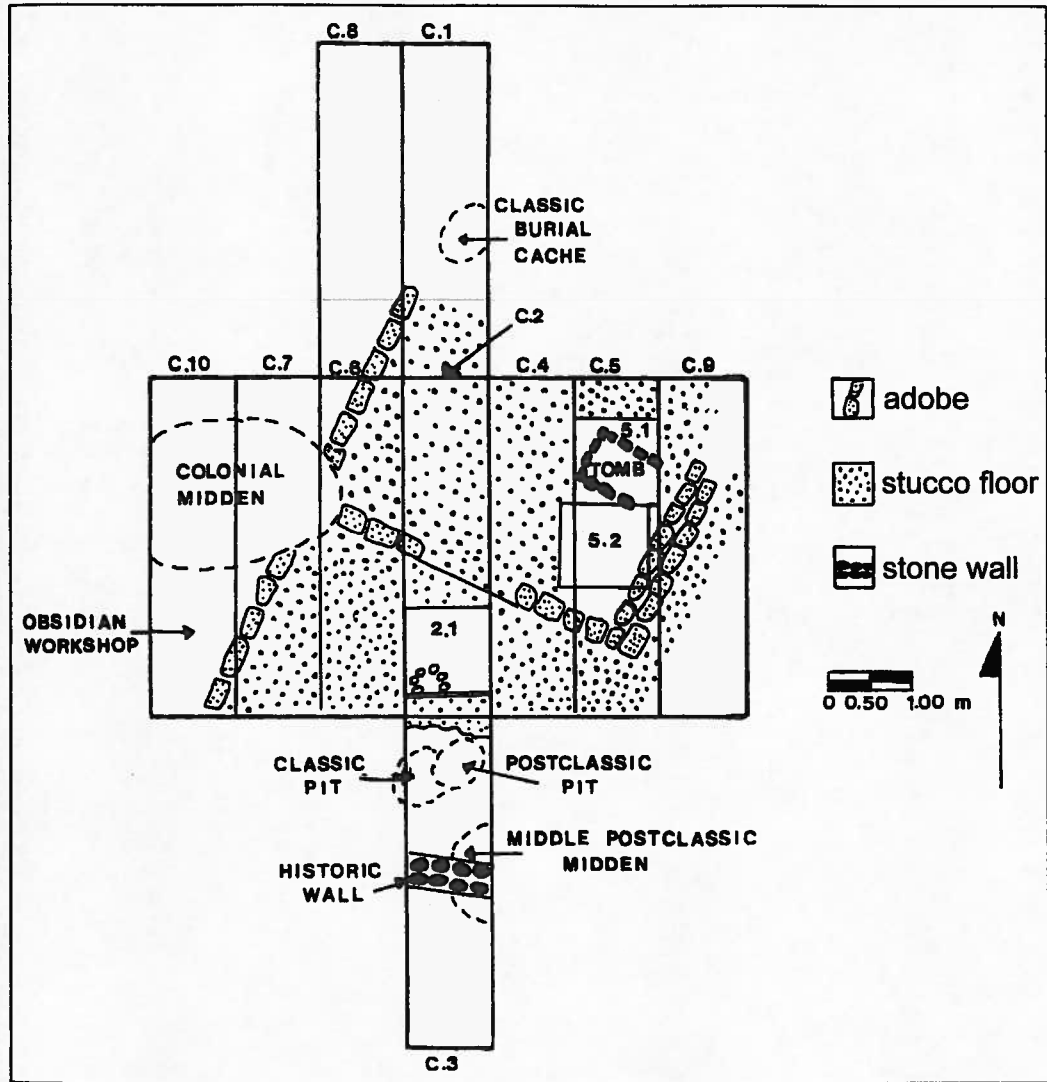
domestic site trash pit per 17.2). This pit contains piths and some indigenous earthenware, including a majolica ceramic intrusive mic decorated olla, which are nearly identical to painted and incised handles on the



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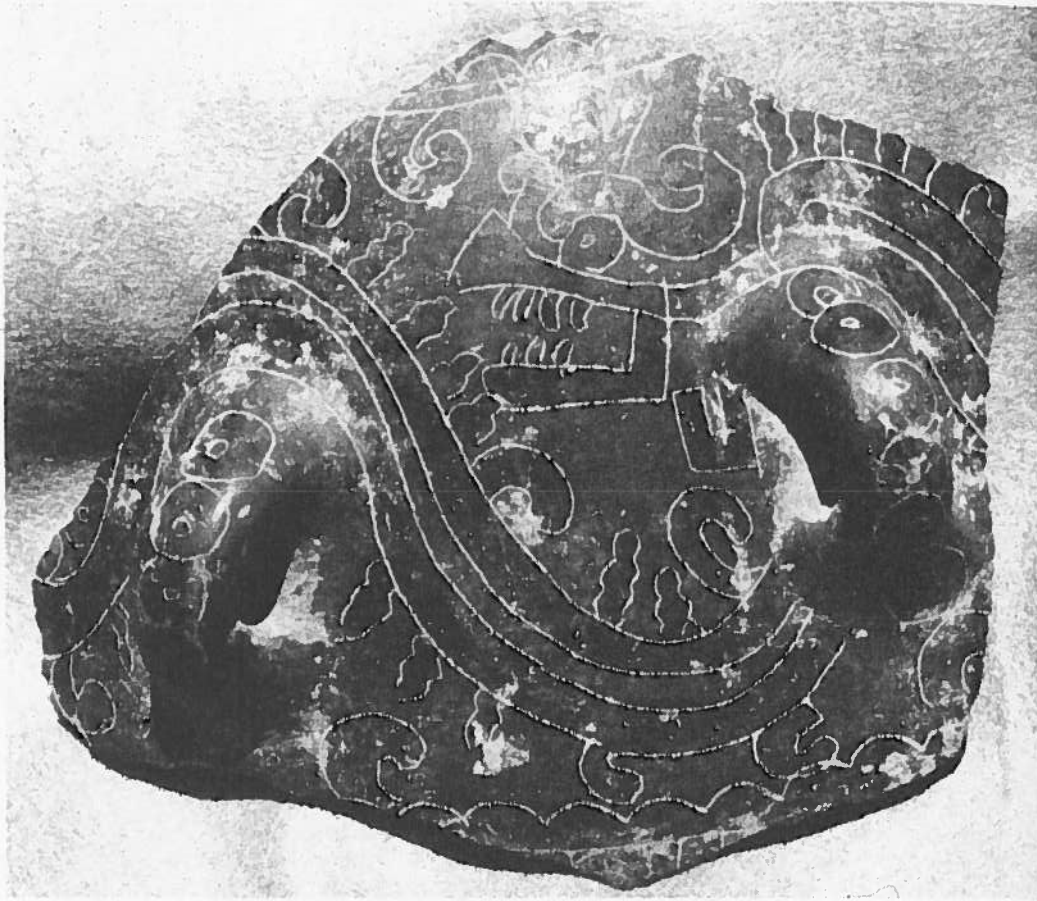
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17.2. Salvage excavations at El Tránsito (R-106), Cholula. Colonial Period trash pit (left). Plan view by Sharisse D. McCafferty.

domestic site dating to the Late Classic Period (ca. AD 400–650). An intrusive trash pit penetrated through the west side of the Classic Period floor (figure 17.2). This pit contained midden with the bones of domesticated European animals and some Colonial glazed pottery; most of the ceramic assemblage was of indigenous earthenwares (McCafferty 1996; Reynoso Ramos 2004). Based on its majolica ceramics, Citlalli Reynoso Ramos (2004: 103) estimated the date of this intrusive midden to the end of the sixteenth century. San Pedro Polished Red decorated olla fragments (subtype Black on Red Incised) found in this midden are nearly identical to the Lumholtz vessel (McCafferty 2001a: 71–74): both have painted and incised images of a full-bodied feathered serpent and multiple loop handles on the shoulder (figure 17.3).



17.3. Feathered serpent design on San Pedro Polished Red Incised pottery vessel from the El Transito (R-106) site, Cholula. Photo by Geoffrey G. McCafferty.

CHOLULA CERAMICS

Postclassic Cholula was famous for its decorated polychrome pottery (Noguera 1954; McCafferty 2001a; Hernández Sánchez 2005), to the extent that the Aztec ruler Moctezoma II allegedly preferred to eat from Cholula wares over any others (Díaz del Castillo 1963 [1580]: 226). San Pedro Polished Red was a minor type in typical Postclassic assemblages (< 2 percent), and while it was locally produced, it probably relates to the more widespread *Guinda* tradition described by Michael Smith (1990: 154) for Postclassic Central Mexico. San Pedro Polished Red seems to have increased in popularity during the Colonial Period, as observed in deposits in a trash-filled well from the UA-1 site on the eastern edge of Prehispanic Cholula that also included European domesticated fauna and diagnostic glazed pottery (McCafferty 1992: 139, 2001a: 92–95). In Colonial Mexico City, comparable “Red Ware” utilitarian and serving wares were important components of household assemblages (Rodríguez-Alegría 2005: 561).

Black on red pottery has a long tradition in Puebla and continues to be produced in the city (Kaplan and Levine 1981; Kaplan 1994). When Colonial Puebla

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was founded in the early sixteenth century, potters from Cholula were relocated into the indigenous barrios of the budding capital city as one of several ploys to usurp economic power from the Precolumbian city. Flora Kaplan (1994: 3) has recognized black on red pottery as early as the mid-nineteenth century based on still-life art from that time period; at the time of her research, no historical archaeological studies were available for comparison. In her ethnoarchaeological study of the Puebla pottery tradition, Kaplan evaluates the potential meanings of a range of morphological and stylistic elements. She believes the combination of black and red surfaces, for example, is related to Quetzalcoatl symbolism (*ibid.*: 55).

One prominent element among contemporary potters is the distinction between “non-multiple vs. multiple ears” (handles). Non-multiple ear vessels are typically smaller and were used as individual serving vessels; they “relate to culturally defined Indian food categories” (Kaplan and Levine 1981: 879). Multiple ears are more typically associated with display and, at least in later time periods, were associated with *mestizo* and Mexican cultural identities. Kaplan and David Levine note that, when decorated, multiple ear pottery can include ideologically charged symbols such as the “eagle with serpent on cactus motif” representing the founding of Mexico.

The olla described by Lumholtz (1909) featured six handles (ears). The large fragment found at R-106 probably had an equal number based on the placement of those preserved on the potsherd. This was not a characteristic of Postclassic ollas, which typically had only two handles, if any. The multiple ears/handles support a Postcontact date for this vessel, consistent with the other Colonial Period contents of the R-106 midden deposit. The small olla vessel form is closely associated with the production and consumption of alcoholic *pulque* (Kaplan 1994: 57), the fermented sap of the agave plant that was a vitamin-rich staple of the indigenous diet.

If these are Colonial Period ollas, then it is telling that the prominent iconography of both vessels is that of the feathered serpent. Feathered serpents were important religious icons in Precolumbian mythology since at least the Middle Formative Period, ca. 1000 BC. They are represented in monumental sculpture and murals at such diverse sites as Teotihuacan, Uxmal, Chichén Itzá, Tula, Cacaxtla, Xochicalco (figure 17.4), and Tenochtitlan—but not at Cholula. This is surprising because Cholula was widely regarded as the center for the worship of Quetzalcoatl, literally “precious feather” plus “serpent” in the Nahuatl language of Central Mexico, at least as attested in Colonial Period ethnohistorical accounts (Durán 1971 [1576–1579]; Rojas 1927 [1581]; see also Carrasco 1982). These accounts also describe Precolumbian Cholula as a pilgrimage destination for religious festivals and for the investiture of visiting royalty by priests of the Quetzalcoatl temple.

In her detailed study of Late Postclassic iconography on Cholula “Codex style” pottery, Gilda Hernández Sánchez (2005) found little evidence of feathered



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17.4. Plumed serpent framing a seated human figure at Xochicalco. Photograph of the Pyramid of the Plumed Serpent by H. B. Nicholson; courtesy, H. B. Nicholson Photo Archive, California State University, Los Angeles.

serpent imagery (3 examples out of a sample of 110), and none were on small ollas. Instead, metonymic elements associated with Quetzalcoatl are common; examples include the “cut shell” motif worn as a pendant or combinations of xicalcolihqui stepped frets appearing on his shield (figure 17.5). These symbols can be interpreted as a “shorthand” for representing Quetzalcoatl as an anthropomorphic deity but without reference to his persona as a feathered serpent. So why are feathered serpents, a prominent symbol of Prehispanic religion (but not at Cholula), represented on these later Colonial Period Cholulan vessels? The answer may be found in the archaeological evidence provided by the R-106 midden.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FROM CHOLULA

The R-106 archaeological site is located along the Camino Real, the royal highway linking Puebla and Mexico City, just as it enters Cholula. This would have been one of the most heavily traveled roads in New Spain during the Early Colonial Period. The midden artifact assemblage is distinctive. A large number of faunal remains were encountered, primarily from European domesticates. Of 296 bones, 61 were identifiable (Reynoso Ramos 2004: 114–115). Cow comprised the greatest proportion of the assemblage (57 percent), followed by sheep/goat (34 percent) and pig (7 percent). A single turkey bone represents the only native



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17.5. Quetzalcoatl, with stepped-fret motif on his shield. From Sahagún 1956: 4 (*Atavios de los Dioses, Ms. de Tepepulco [I]*).

species identified. While such faunal evidence suggests access to comparatively expensive meat resources, the skeletal elements (primarily tarsals, vertebrae, and cranial bones) actually indicate low-quality cuts, of types most amenable to stew rather than steak.

In addition to the large Black on Red Incised olla body sherd, there were also a few fragments of Colonial glazed pottery and other serving wares of indigenous styles that continued from the Late Postclassic Period. The glazed wares were of poor quality, with an incomplete glazed surface, while some of the indigenous-style polychromes were over-fired, giving the impression that they might be production "seconds."

Most ceramics recovered from the intrusive pit were indigenous-style earthenware utilitarian vessels. Of these, the most common were *comales*, the very shallow griddles used for heating tortillas, and small ollas (ibid.: 106–108). The relative proportions of these vessel forms vary radically from the domestic assemblages found in other Postclassic and Colonial contexts (McCafferty 1992). For example, comal rims made up 63 percent of the R-106 midden, roughly three times the frequency of a typical domestic assemblage. Small olla rims made up 13 percent of the assemblage, again about three times the expected frequency. Serving vessels such as bowls made up only 9 percent of the Colonial midden, about five times less than the expected frequency from a typical domestic assemblage. Because of these percentages, we believe the R-106 Colonial midden was probably not the result of domestic activities (see also Reynoso Ramos 2004: 149).

The large percentage of tortilla preparation vessels (*comales*) but low frequency of bowls in the Colonial Period midden is confusing, at least until the possibility of perishable drinking vessels is considered. In traditional Indian taverns, gourd bowls (*jicaras*) are often used for consuming liquids, especially pulque (Kaplan 1994: 56). These would be archaeologically invisible, thus skewing ceramic frequencies. *Jicaras* would have been lightweight and durable, perfect for travelers. The higher-than-expected frequency of small ollas would be consistent

with the jugs from which pulque could have been served. Tortillas were a highly portable food easily combined with meats and sauces that would have been a perfect "fast food" along the highway.

In Prehispanic Mesoamerica, alcohol consumption was associated with ceremonial practice, especially religious feasts surrounding the ritual calendar. With the introduction of Spanish Colonial authority, restrictions against public drunkenness were relaxed, and secular taverns emerged. Serge Gruzinski (1993: 278) notes that in 1784 there were 600 taverns in Mexico City, which then had a population of about 200,000. He describes them as dirty and dangerous: "The *pulqueria* was . . . on the fringes of the norms invoked by the Church and the Inquisition: a culture distinct from the façade of laws and constraints surrounding colonial power."

In a 1593 letter to the king of Spain, Juan de Pineda complained of forty taverns in Cholula and another fifty on its outskirts (Carrasco 1970: 180–181). They were frequented by indigenous merchants, for whom Cholula was famous. Pineda concluded that "they spent much on wine and other things, [the merchants] as well as their women and children, who would ordinarily be in the taverns day and night" (*ibid.*; translated by the author). The R-106 midden evidence may consequently represent an Early Colonial Period commercial establishment supplying food (tortillas) and drink (pulque?) to Indian travelers. By offering traditional indigenous foods so close to the Camino Real on the outskirts of the traditional pilgrimage center of Cholula, such a *pulquería* at the end of the first century of Conquest might have provided an atmosphere ripe for sedition. In this interpretive context, a brightly painted and iconographically charged olla decorated with a feathered serpent, multiple handles facilitating its suspension perhaps for public display, might have been a clandestine symbol of native resistance to acculturation.

CONCLUSION

In his study of Colonial Mexican foodways, Rodríguez-Alegría (2005: 551) argues that "both colonizers and Indians were aware of the social and political implications of their material lives and their eating practices." Then, as now, the *pulquería* was territory where priests feared to tread: "The *pulquería* was also a constant hotbed of anticlericalism and . . . it challenged the spiritual conquest of the Indian people by undertaking a process of acculturation and deculturation over which the Church had no hold" (Gruzinski 1993: 258).

Feathered serpent vessels in such establishments may have been nonverbal, covert statements of opposition to Colonial domination and unwillingness to embrace the new religious changes demanded by the conquerors. Within the relative safety of an indigenous tavern and surrounded by fellow travelers, gossip, boasts, jokes, and revolutionary mutterings were probably part of the daily



17.6. Quetzalcoatl
Magliabecchi.

fare. Freed from the form of passive resistance, easy escape from domination.

The cult of the feathered serpent in the Colonial Period Mexico promised his people a way out. Cortés may have seen this. In the writings of Sahagún see also Lafay (1986) Christian attributes to human form; Instead, the Colonial Period (11: 85) lists "quetzalcoatl" as a venomous serpent completely in human form in form to the Sahagún's *Florentine* local images as (1986) at Nacaco bird motifs re

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17.6. Quetzalcoatl as depicted in the Codex Magliabecchi. From Nuttall 1903: 61.

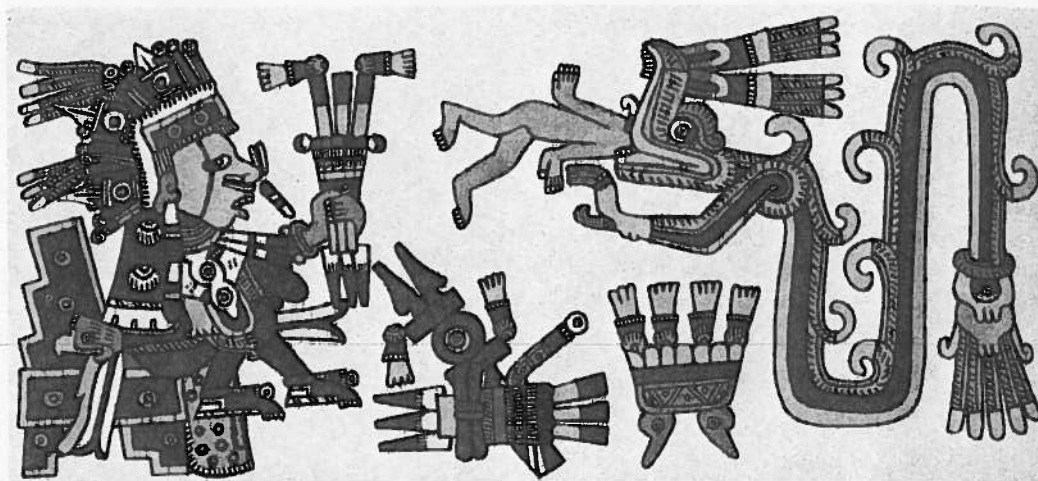


17.7. Quetzalcoatl imagery and accoutrements. Folio 18r Codex Telleriano-Remensis. From Quiñones Keber 1995: 39.

fare. Freed from Precolumbian ritual restrictions, overt alcoholism became a form of passive resistance (Burkhart and Gasco 2007: 216). Drunkenness was an easy escape from the physical and emotional conflicts brought about by Spanish domination.

The cult of Quetzalcoatl (cf. figures 17.6–17.8) was transformed in Colonial Period Mexico. Mythical accounts of the culture hero Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl promised his return, and it was suggested that the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés may have become confused in this revitalization fable (Nicholson 2001). In the writings of Spanish chroniclers such as Diego Durán (1971 [1576–1579]; see also Lafaye 1976), Quetzalcoatl was compared to Jesus Christ and assumed Christian attributes of penitence and purity represented in Colonial codices in human form; little of the “feathered serpent” was left in the Colonial persona. Instead, the Colonial chronicler Bernardino de Sahagún (1950–1982 [1547–1585]: 11: 85) lists “quetzalcoatl,” among other “earthly things,” as a particular kind of venomous serpent with brightly colored feathers that flies on the wind. It is the completely indigenous icon that is represented on our two study vessels, similar in form to the illustration of the feathered quetzalcoatl (figure 17.9) depicted in Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex* (ibid.: 276–277). A similar use of archaic mythological images as a form of symbolic resistance is described by Anthony Wonderley (1986) at Naco, Honduras, where, in response to foreign domination, mythical bird motifs reappear on indigenous pottery after a hiatus of several centuries.

Our two study examples of incised black on red pottery can be interpreted as possibly symbolic of resistance to Spanish practices of forced acculturation in Central Mexico during the first generations after the Conquest. Perhaps, if we are correct, such opposition may have been part of a native revitalization



17.8. Quetzalcoatl imagery on page 7 of the Codex Borgia tonalpohualli. From Díaz and Rodgers 1993: 11.



17.9A AND 17.9B. Feathered serpent, or Quetzalcoatl, depictions in Sahagún's Florentine Codex. From Sahagún 1963: 11: figures 276–277.

movement invoking the return of a lost culture hero. Archaistic images of feathered serpents in Colonial Period Cholula recall much earlier icons and are not simply the unbroken continuation of a long-lived tradition, since feathered serpents were not found on Late Postclassic Cholula polychromes. The additional iconography on the Lumholtz vessel of xicalcolihqui frets was also a metonym for Quetzalcoatl. The butterfly imagery carried significance for resurrection (Berlo 1983), while the rectangle with circle may correspond to the stylization of "serpent skin" (Hernández Sánchez 2005: 70)—both fitting symbols for religious revival.

Dirt archaeology, especially Colonial Period historical dirt archaeology, reminds us that not everything going on at a given time and place always ends up documented in the historical records. A contextual "reading" of indigenous

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pottery from the Early Colonial Period, at least at our Cholula pulquería, offers tantalizing possibilities for the reconstruction of an Indian version of conquest and conversion, one in essential disagreement with that provided by literate Europeans.

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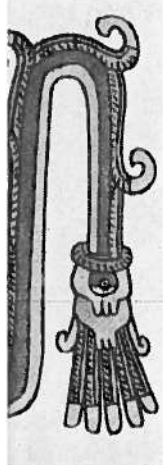
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