

# THE CONQUERED WOMEN OF CACAXTLA

## *Gender identity or gender ideology?*

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### Abstract

The vividly painted "Battle Mural" of Cacaxtla (Tlaxcala, Mexico) depicts the gory results of a battle between racially distinct factions, characterized by their opposing jaguar and bird insignia. The two central Bird figures that remain standing are shown as captives, and in both cases they are attired in elaborate costumes that include diagnostic items of female clothing, including the *quechquemiltl* cape and long skirt. Other figures are nude or are shown in simple male costumes, including the *maxtlatl* loincloth. This paper considers arguments of whether the two central figures were biological females, or rather, that the presence of female apparel on male actors was used within a context of conquest, symbolically transmitted through a gender ideology of male dominance and female subordination. While the evidence is inconclusive, we employ a contextual analysis of pre-Columbian pictorial manuscripts and Mexican cosmology to argue that these individuals were female. Furthermore, we suggest that the elaborate costume elements associated with these female figures, and their recurrence with the Jaguar Lord 3 Deer Antler "Tlaloc mask," indicates that this was a noblewoman destined for marriage as a means of binding the Jaguar and Bird dynasties. Thus the Battle Mural depicts the capture of the "founding queen," with the subsequent union demonstrated by the complementary depictions of Jaguar and Bird lords on Building A.

In 1975, Mesoamerican archaeologists and art historians were rocked by the discovery of the first in a series of vividly painted murals from the site of Cacaxtla, located in the Puebla/Tlaxcala valley of central Mexico (Abascal et al. 1976; López de Molina and Molina Feal 1976). The construction phase associated with the murals dates to between A.D. 650 and 850 (López de Molina 1981; Santana Sandoval and Delgadillo Torres 1990a), corresponding to a dynamic period in Mesoamerican culture history characterized by intense highland–lowland interaction immediately following the collapse of the Teotihuacan empire (Diehl and Berlo 1989). The murals are painted in what has been described as an "eclectic style," combining elements from Teotihuacan, Xochicalco, the Gulf Coast, Oaxaca, and the southern Maya Lowlands (Kubler 1980:163). Thus, in many respects these murals provide an important clue for understanding the cultural complexity of the Epiclassic period.

Since their discovery, the Cacaxtla murals have been the focus of continuous debate, considering aspects of their iconography, content, and cultural origins (Baird 1989; Baus Czitrom 1990; Berlo 1989; Carlson 1991; Foncerrada de Molina 1976, 1978, 1980; Kubler 1980; López de Molina 1977; McVicker 1985; Nagao 1989; Quirarte 1983; Robertson 1985; Santana Sandoval and Delgadillo Torres 1990a, 1990b). While the growing literature on Cacaxtla represents some of the finest examples of recent Mesoamerican scholarship, we suggest that a detailed analysis of costume elements provides a valuable fram-

ing context<sup>1</sup> for further interpretations of the action and underlying meanings of the representations (Anawalt 1981, 1982).

While costume analysis is useful for understanding all of the figures, we will concentrate on two central figures of the "Battle Mural." These individuals wear the diagnostic emblems of the defeated Bird warriors,<sup>2</sup> and are attired in the most elaborate costumes, including long triangular capes known as *quechquemiltl*. In this paper we consider the significance of these and other gender-specific elements of female costume from the per-

<sup>1</sup> The concept of "framing" involves "the processes by which contextual cues are used to decide which of the various possible interpretations should be given to the object on any specific occasion" (Miller 1985:9). In Miller's (1985:9) ethnoarchaeological study of material culture from India he found pottery to act "both *as* frames and *within* frames" (emphasis in original). In a similar way, we suggest that costume acts to channel understanding of a contextual situation for those fluent in reading the culturally prescribed cues.

<sup>2</sup> The identification of the "Bird warriors" is based on the diagnostic costume element of an open-beaked bird headdress. This bird head resembles that of a quetzal, and in early drafts of this paper we referred to these as "Quetzal warriors." The presence of an identical headdress on the south portico mural of Building A on a figure with non-quetzal-feather wings (possibly eagle or owl feathers), makes the identification more complex. As Donald McVicker (1985:97) described it, "[f]eathered deities and serpents originally associated with quetzal-like birds begin taking on attributes of eagles." For this reason we have opted for the generic, if less expressive, "Bird warrior" designation.

spective of what the representations communicated in terms of the gender identity of these individuals. Specifically, we raise the question of whether these were biological females, or, instead, males dressed in female clothing.

## CONTEXT OF THE CACAXTLA MURALS

Cacaxtla sits atop a fortified hill, visible from many miles around, with mounds and plazas surrounding the principle platform where the murals are located (Lombardo de Ruiz et al. 1986; López de Molina and Molina Feal 1980). The main patio is surrounded by Structure A to the northeast, Structure B to the north (at the base of which are the Battle Murals), Structure E to the northwest, and a complex of plastered adobe walls that may have enclosed an elite living area to the south (Figure 1). A notable feature found on a column associated with Structure E is a stucco-sculpted relief of the lower portion of a human figure wearing an elaborately woven skirt and high-backed sandals (Figure 2). No loincloth is evident, suggesting that this individual was female.

At the northeast corner of the main patio is Structure A. Two large murals are painted on opposite sides of the doorway, with smaller paintings found on the inner surface of the portico jambs and within the room. The two main figures stand in complementary positions but with contrasting insignia and accoutrements. The figure on the north portico is depicted with costume elements of a jaguar, including headdress, skin, and claws (Figure 3), while the figure on the south portico is depicted with bird attributes such as a beaked headdress, feathered wings, and taloned feet (Figure 4). Both of these figures wear short hip cloths typical of Mesoamerican males, and both wear hanging loincloths, also diagnostic of male costume (Anawalt 1981:209).

Across the facade of Structure B rages the Battle Mural. It is divided into two panels by a central stairway that leads from the patio to the first stage of the north platform. Each panel depicts two opposing forces, identified by contrasting bird and jaguar costumes, engaged in the vividly detailed conclusion of combat (Figure 5). Notably, the jaguar and bird insignia are identical to those of the principle figures from Structure A. In addition to distinctive costume elements, physical features also

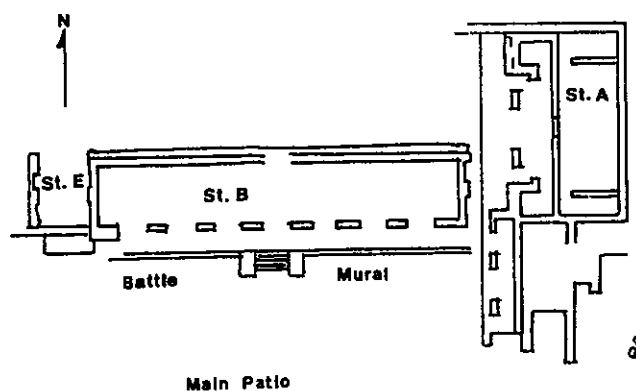


Figure 1. Map of main patio of Cacaxtla (after McVicker 1985:Figure 2).



Figure 2. Carved stucco relief on column from Structure E (drawing by S.D. McCafferty).

distinguish the opposing forces, with the Bird warriors depicted with Maya-style cranial deformation (Abascal et al. 1976; Kubler 1980; Quirarte 1983).<sup>3</sup>

The Jaguar warriors are clearly victorious, with many of the Bird warriors shown on the ground in various states of dismemberment. The Jaguar warriors are typically depicted with weapons and shields, whereas only one upright Bird warrior carries

<sup>3</sup>The distinctive cranial deformation displayed by the Bird warriors conforms to the tabular oblique type defined by Romano (1973). This type is common in skeletal remains found at Jaina in the Maya area (Piña Chan 1968), but is rare in the central highlands. At Cholula, only three examples of tabular oblique deformation were found in a total sample of 121 well-preserved skulls recovered during the Proyecto Cholula (Romano 1973:49). Notably, in a recent excavation at the Great Pyramid of Cholula, Sergio Suárez Cruz (1985) found skeletal remains of an adult male with tabular oblique cranial deformation, jade and pyrite inlaid teeth, and exotic burial goods. On the basis of the physiological and material evidence, Suárez Cruz (1985:35) concluded that this was a Maya noble. Ceramics found associated with the burial date it as contemporary with the Cacaxtla murals.



Figure 3. Jaguar lord from north portico of Structure A (from Baird 1989:Figure 2a).



Figure 4. Bird lord from south portico of Structure A (from Baird 1989: Figure 3a).

a spear, and a fallen comrade still clutches a rectangular shield. Schele and Miller (1986:250, 256-257) point out that the opposition of Jaguar and Bird warriors is structurally embedded in Maya mythology, with the felines always victorious and avians symbolically linked with defeat. In central Mexican mythology this same opposition is common, although the structural associations with victory and defeat are not as clear.

The Jaguar warriors are identified by their jaguar-skin costume elements, often including headbands and short capes with the head, paws, and tail attached. Different degrees of elaboration in the jaguar insignia may relate to military rank. Other characteristics include a tonsure-type hairstyle (i.e., a shaved

crown leaving a fringe around the sides but with a long lock hanging down the back<sup>4</sup>); headbands that may include a frontal disc or a "trapeze and ray" headdress (see Berlo [1989] for a discussion of the significance of this costume element); and tubular earplugs. Only Individuals 36 and 40<sup>5</sup> wear nose ornaments. Most of the Jaguar warriors have arm, wrist, and leg bands, and many of them are barefoot. Virtually all of the Jaguar warriors are depicted with a male loincloth hanging between their legs, with the exception of Individual 35 who is shown on the ground. Some Jaguar warriors are identified by calendrical names, while others may be associated with glyphic elements (Berlo 1989).

The defeated Bird army is identified by their open-beaked, feathered headdresses as well as distinctive Maya facial features. Other characteristics include tubular nose ornaments, simple bar necklaces or anthropomorphic pendants, and bell-shaped earplugs with dangling jewels. Many have arm, wrist, and knee bands. Notably, the fallen Bird warriors are naked other than their jewelry and headdresses. Although these individuals lack even loincloths, genitalia is rarely if ever evident. In central Mexican tradition, nudity was an ultimate form of humiliation, and was often a metaphor for captivity and sacrifice (Klein 1988:242). In Maya representations as well, captives are shown naked or wearing a simple loincloth. In the Bonampak murals, for example, wounded captives are depicted in loincloths, while in an accompanying battle scene many of the defeated warriors are shown naked (Miller 1986).

<sup>4</sup>In reference to Aztec warriors' hairstyles, Sahagún (1950-1982: VIII:76) described one that was "cut like a ring-shaped carrying pad, they shaved only the crown of his head." This style was used on those who had participated in several battles *without* taking any captives, and so was a symbol of dishonor. Since this is the hairstyle found on the victorious Jaguar warriors, cultural differences probably do not permit such an interpretation of status.

<sup>5</sup>The numbering of the individuals conforms to the format in Diehl and Berlo (1989:Volume Figures 1 and 2).

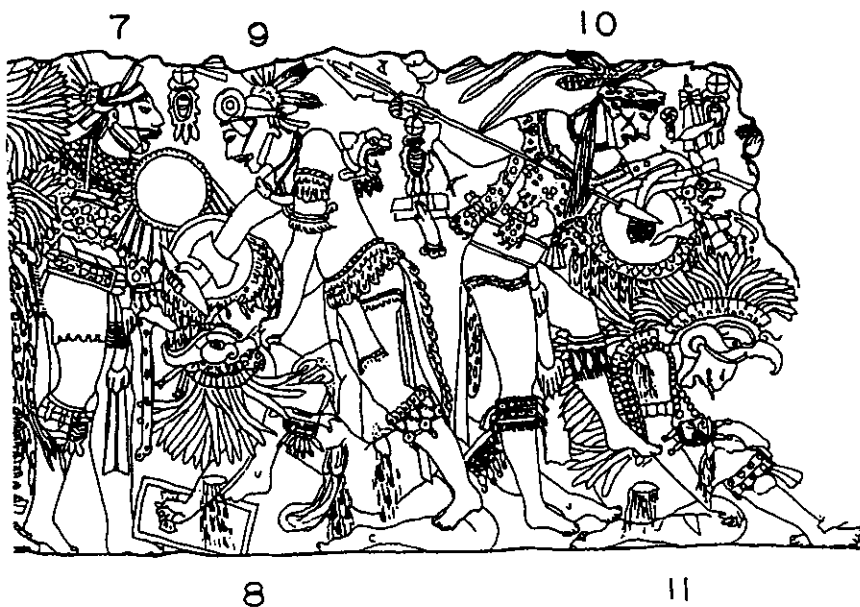


Figure 5. Detail of Battle Mural showing costume elements of Jaguar and Quetzal warriors (from Diehl and Berlo 1989:Volume Figure 1).

Only four of the Bird warriors are shown upright, and their costuming provides additional information. One warrior (Individual 37) is shown wounded and under attack, but wielding an atlatl and long spear (Figure 6). He wears an elaborate necklace with an anthropomorphic pendant and a chest covering of unidentified ovals (possibly skeins of spun fiber?) dangling from a cord tied around his chest. His gender is indicated by a loincloth, although it only appears in the front, as if it were falling off.

A second individual (41) is shown with full headdress and a frontal cloak. Ellen Baird (1989:117-118) has suggested that this individual is female on the basis of its diminutive stature and distinctive cloak. Close inspection, however, indicates that the relative height is due to the fact that this individual is either crouching or is in the process of falling, with the body twisted and both knees bent. The cloak is identifiable as a distinctive shoulder cape described by Anawalt (1981:179-182) as a diagnostically male garment among the Maya, and a similar cape was also worn by Aztec and Mixtec males (Anawalt 1981:209). No loincloth is evident on this individual, but a possible penis is depicted. Curiously, this individual shows no evidence of being wounded, and is not confronted by any Jaguar warriors.

#### COSTUME ELEMENTS OF THE CAPTIVE WOMEN

The two central Bird warriors (Individuals 6 and 32) are the focus of the remainder of this paper. They stand on either side of the central staircase, dominating the scene despite the fact that within the context of the murals they themselves are represented in defeat. Elsewhere, these individuals have been described as male (Baird 1989; Carlson 1991; Kubler 1980; McVicker 1985; Nagao 1989), even though their costumes have occasionally been identified as *quechquemil* (Carlson 1991; Nagao 1989; Quirarte 1983; Stuart 1992). On the basis of the present costume analysis, we suggest that they were represented

as gender female, while explicitly retaining the possibility that these could be biological males in female costume. Furthermore, because both figures are depicted in complementary pairings with the Jaguar warrior 3 Deer Antler "Tlaloc mask," we suggest that this is also the same person depicted twice, first at the end of actual combat and then shortly afterward as a bound captive (see also Carlson 1991).

On the east side of the central stairway, surrounded by Jaguar warriors, stands Individual 6 (Figure 7). She grasps an arrow that has been embedded in her cheek, with blood dripping down from the wound. The mouth is open in anguish, and the teeth are clearly shown. Her empty left hand is folded up near her shoulder in a gesture of submission. She is depicted frontally in what Robertson (1985) has described as a "stela-like" pose, with feet splayed to either side. The torso is somewhat asymmetrical owing to the motion of grasping the arrow. A striking feature is the width of the hips and the tapering of the waist. Standing before this individual is the Jaguar warrior 3 Deer Antler "Tlaloc mask" (Individual 3), who directs an atlatl toward her, possibly indicating that he inflicted the wound, and symbolically identifying him as the conqueror.

Individual 6 wears an elaborate open-beaked bird-headress that includes a bejeweled tubular nose ornament on the beak (Figure 8). A beaded headband extends from under the headress. Jewelry includes a drooping tubular nose bar with a jewel at each end, a circular beaded earplug, elaborate wrist bands, and a turquoise beaded collar with a Maya-style anthropomorphic pectoral (Schele and Miller 1986:50). Attached to the arms is a feathered cloak that hangs like wings below the arms, reminiscent of the wings worn by the Bird lord on Building A, though in this case the feathers are blue. Beneath the collar of Individual 6 is a *quechquemil* decorated with cross and stepped-diamond motifs on the front and shoulder, and with a finely woven border that includes bars, "T"s, cross-hatching, and twisted "X" patterns, ending in a feathered fringe. The border

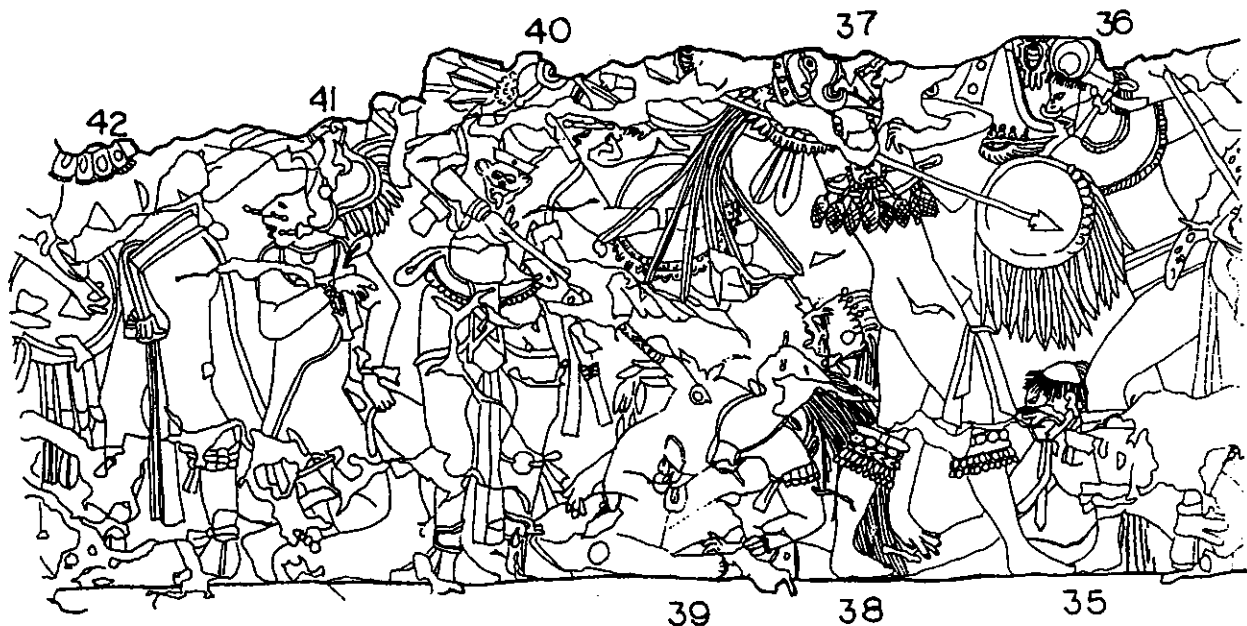


Figure 6. Detail of Individuals 37 and 41 of Battle Mural (from Diehl and Berlo 1989:Volume Figure 2).

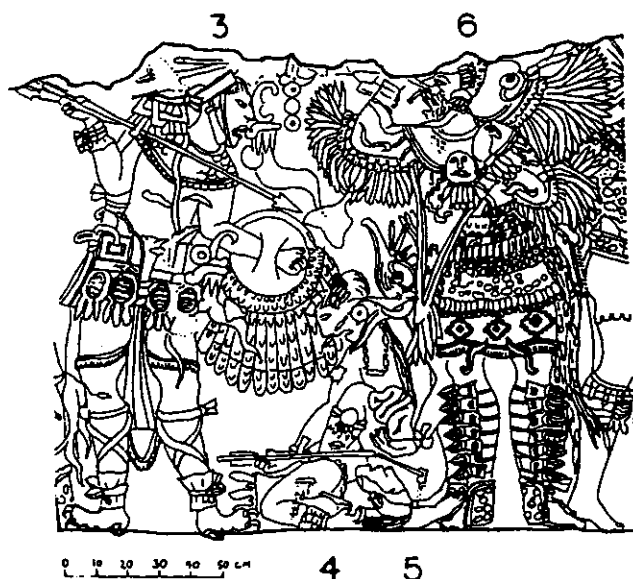


Figure 7. Detail of Individual 6 of Battle Mural (from Diehl and Berto 1989: Volume Figure 1).



Figure 8. Individual 6, highlighting design motifs (drawing by S.D. McCafferty).

motif is comparable to the Maya "Sky Band Motif" (Miller 1986:154; Schele and Miller 1986:47), a motif that is associated with female costume among the Maya (Andrea Stone, personal communication 1991). The *quechquemilt* is long, reaching below the hips and ending in an acute point in both the front and back. The garment is twisted to the side, exposing part of Individual 6's naked torso and, possibly, her left breast. Two crescent motifs occur on either side of her forearms with one in proximity to the possible breast as if it were milk exuding from her nipple.<sup>6</sup>

The elaborately woven skirt is divided into two horizontal panels by bands of jeweled fringe with motifs and colors matching those of the *quechquemilt*. The skirt is secured by a long belt that is wrapped four times around her waist. A turquoise tie is shown on the figure's midriff, and a jeweled tassel (possibly made of hair<sup>7</sup>) extends from under the belt and down to calf level. Woven motifs on the belt include nested triangles, *xicalcolihqui*, and chevrons. The hem of the skirt is mildly scalloped with a fringed border. Two crescent motifs, identical to those described on the arms, are located at the bottom of the skirt on the inside of the legs. The skirt is relatively long, reaching to just above the knees. The individual wears distinctive leggings, tied with white cotton into seven knots secured by white shells. High-backed thong sandals tied at the ankle are also color coordinated with her outfit. Notably, this individual is represented without any indication of a loincloth, even though her frontal position would have shown one if present.

The second individual (32) appears on the west side of the staircase (Figure 9), and is again confronted by 3 Deer Antler "Tlaloc mask." She is also shown in a frontal pose with legs splayed to the sides, but here the pose is more subdued. The figure has her hands crossed before her, possibly bound with a large knot secured with a shell. Notably, bound wrists are depicted on some women in the Mixtec codices in marriage scenes, particularly when the marriage "binds" a dynasty.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>In a provocative study of the relationship between women and warfare in Aztec society, Cecelia Klein (1990) describes women of Tlatelolco defending their city against Aztec warriors by, among other things, expressing milk from their breasts. Klein suggests that this act should be interpreted as in such complete opposition to proper behavior that it was perceived as a violation of the natural order, and therefore a desperate last resort intended to dishearten the Aztec soldiers. In the Cacaxtla mural, the symbols shown with Individual 6 (on either side of her chest and also on her legs at the hem of her skirt) are shallow crescents, similar to the water glyph used in Mixtec and Borgia-group codices. Although this identification is speculative, it could be a glyphic notation indicating that Individual 6 was releasing bodily fluids in desperation. A similar theme may be displayed in the *Maya Codex Madrid* 1967:30 (see Figure 12), where a bare-breasted goddess figure is depicted with wavy lines coming from each breast, and also from beneath her short skirt. Alternatively, Carolyn Baus Czitrom (1990:356) suggests that the Maya figure may be a representation of the "Old Red Goddess" associated with rain, and relates this scene to the "Venus woman" of Cacaxtla.

<sup>7</sup>Baird (1989:113) has identified this as the "long, jewelled hair" of Individual 6. We agree that the material could well be hair, but on close inspection it does not appear at the neck or above the waist. Rather, the jeweled strand first appears as it emerges from under the belt.

<sup>8</sup>The motif of bound wrists occurs seven times in the *Codex Nuttall* (1975:30-1, 31-2, for example), on six different women. Each time the marriage ensured dynastic succession through an incestuous union (cf. Caso 1977). Susan Gillespie (1989:55-56) has commented on the role of royal incest in the maintenance of the Aztec royal lineage, and also as a symbolic link to the supernatural authority of kingship.

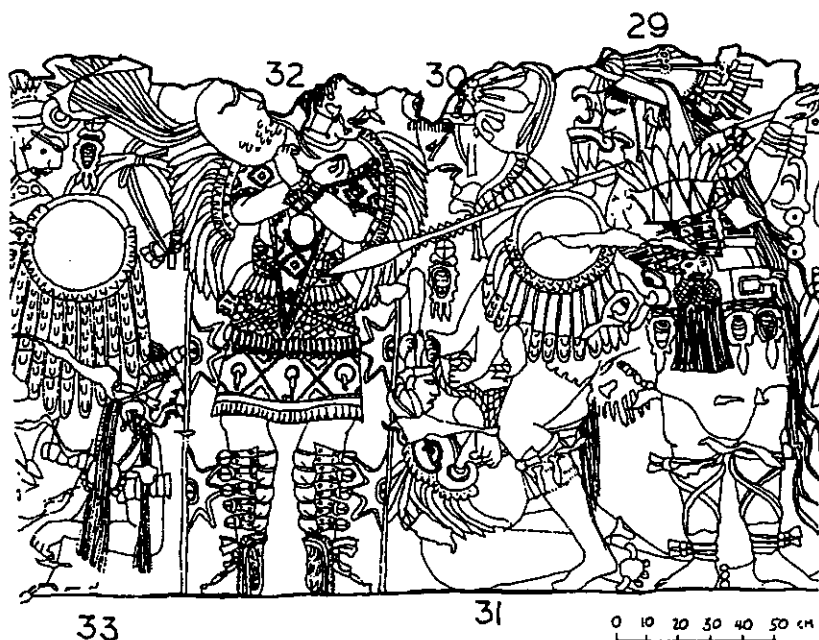


Figure 9. Detail of Individual 32 of Battle Mural (from Diehl and Berlo 1989:Volume Figure 2).

Individual 32 stands in front of a white panel decorated with red, five-pointed half-star/eyes, spaced along the outer edge. The decorated panel has been alternatively interpreted as a "star cloak" (McVicker 1985:86-87), a stela<sup>9</sup> (Baird 1989:114), and a "star enclosure" relating to Venus rituals (Carlson 1991). The recent discovery at Cacaxtla of a "scorpion man" and woman standing in front of very similar panels has led John Carlson (1991) to infer a highly developed Venus cult of ritual warfare and sacrifice (but see Baus Czitrom 1990). Baird (1989) has described the symbolic meanings of the star/eye motif, documenting its transformation at Teotihuacan from a primarily aquatic significance into militaristic/sacrificial contexts, and also describing the adoption of the motif by the Maya. The star/eye pattern is also worn by members of the central Mexican Mother Goddess complex, particularly Toci and Ilamatecuhtli, who each wore a "star skirt" (Milbrath 1988; Sahagún 1950-1982:I:16, II:155). Aquatic/fertility as well as militaristic/sacrificial concepts were closely associated with aspects of the Mother Goddess cult (Nicholson 1971). If this is in fact a cloak, then it would be an appropriate costume element for a noble woman associated with the Mother Goddess.

The headdress of Individual 32 is largely missing due to destruction of the upper portions of the mural, but a small portion of the lower beak is still apparent. Behind the head is a large spherical object from which extend long blue feathers. This is possibly a representation of a "balloon headdress" (Schele and

Miller 1986:213; Stone 1989), a military headdress worn in Maya and Teotihuacan representations.

Individual 32 wears the standard tubular nose bar with jewels (Figure 10). The earplugs are in two parts. The forward section is a bell-shaped piece with jewels, while behind and below the ear is a large-diamond shaped section, perhaps serving as a counterweight to keep the front section from drooping. Individual 32 wears a large round collar with a band of jewels around the edge. An oval pendant like that of Individual 6 hangs from a string, but the pattern cannot be distinguished. John Carlson (1991) points out that the Jaguar warrior 3 Deer Antler wears an anthropomorphic pendant in this scene, and suggests that he has taken the "maskette" from the Bird warrior's pendant.

Beneath the collar is a *quechquemilt* that drapes over the upper arms and extends to an acute point just below the waist. It is decorated with stepped diamonds and crosses, and the border again features a possible "sky-band motif." The arms have blue feathers hanging from the shoulders to the elbows and are crossed in front of her chest with the wrists overlapping each other and her wristbands shown. Individual 32 appears to be bare chested beneath her *quechquemilt*, which covers her breasts but exposes the sides of her abdomen. She wears a skirt that is divided into two horizontal panels by a beaded fringe. The upper panel is tan (matching the *quechquemilt*), with "X"s dividing the field into diamond and triangle areas that are further decorated with small circles. The "X" pattern of the skirt may be related to the beaded or net skirts commonly depicted on Maya noblewomen (Bruhns 1988; Joyce 1992). The lower panel is reddish brown, with a similar series of diamond and triangular motifs, but further decorated with dangling jewels extending out from round turquoise disks. This pattern is reminiscent of the skirt worn by the central Mexican deity Chalchiuhtlicue ("Jade Skirt"), particularly since the dangling jewel was the glyphic symbol for jade (*chalchihuitl*). The skirt ends in a blue fringe hanging down to just above her knees. It is secured by a belt wrapped four times around the waist, with the

<sup>9</sup>If, as Baird (1989) suggests, this is a stela, then it is a very short one, since it does not extend above the individual's shoulders. Baird compared this scene with the upright stela of Altar 1 in the Patio of the Altars at Cholula, where a large flat stone is carved with a border of El Tajin-style volutes framing a blank interior (Acosta 1970). A second example, Altar 3, has a similar border, although its form is pointed at the top (Contreras 1970). It should be noted that the Cholula altar that Baird cites as a comparison measures 3.85 m in height, and Altar 3 is of a comparable size. This is approximately four times the estimated height of the Cacaxtla "stela," and would have been clearly visible behind a standing individual.



Figure 10. Individual 32, highlighting design motifs (drawing by S.D. McCafferty).

ends hanging down on either side. The belt is woven with complex patterns, including *xicalcolihqui*, diamonds with inset circles, and vertical bars. The tassels at the end of the belt are red, with turquoise fringe. Conspicuously absent is any evidence of a loincloth hanging beneath the skirt, though again the pose should have shown one if it were there.

This individual also wears white knotted leggings on her calves, with five shell-covered knots on each leg.<sup>10</sup> The ends of the white cloth are decorated with dark splotches of paint or blood. Finally, she wears high-backed, thong-type sandals made of blue feathers trimmed in red beaded ties.

#### GENDER IDENTITY OR GENDER IDEOLOGY?

These two captive figures are distinctive for the presence of the triangular *quechquemiltl* and long skirt, the elaboration of the woven decoration including the sky-band motif, the lack of male loincloths, and the elaborate knotted leggings and sandals. Based on the results of this costume analysis, we suggest that

<sup>10</sup>Chalchiuhtlicue wears similar shells knotted in her headdress in the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (1964:11v).

these two individuals were represented as gender female. In this identification, we use gender as a culturally defined category that does not necessarily equate with biological sex. Thus, the representation of these individuals in culturally prescribed female costume relates to gender identity and only implies sexual identity. Within the context of the murals as “public proclamation” (Nagao 1989), this identification may have been manipulated by the artist to serve one or more specific agendas. Several possible interpretations can be suggested to account for this gender identification:

1. These were biological females, possibly war chiefs or noblewomen, who were captured either for sacrifice or to forge marriage alliances with the conquering group.
2. These were male war chiefs portrayed in female costume for the purpose of public humiliation, as a symbolic evocation of an ideology of male dominance and female subordination.
3. These were male lords who wore female costume as an emblem of office corresponding to the *cihuacoatl* of the Late Postclassic Aztec.
4. The scene refers to a mythical portrayal of the Mother Goddess, and therefore relates to a mythico-religious scene rather than a specific historical event.

In the remainder of this paper these possible interpretations will be discussed, with the understanding that more than one perspective may have existed at the same time. The first interpretation, that these were actually women, is the simplest to support. The two central Bird figures are represented in costumes with diagnostically female elements, including *quechquemiltl* with sky-band motifs, skirts, and long belts. They each lack the diagnostic male loincloth. While this representation does not necessarily prove the biological sex of the individuals, it certainly suggests the possibility that they were female. If, as we suggest, the left breast of Individual 6 is exposed where the *quechquemiltl* has been pulled aside, then of course the biological sex can be inferred. It should be noted that in other representations of women wearing the *quechquemiltl*, the breasts are occasionally depicted protruding at precisely this location (Figure 11). Additionally, the relatively broad hips portrayed on the two figures are also consistent with depictions of women in Mesoamerican art.



Figure 11. Woman with breasts exposed beneath quechquemiltl (after Codex Laud 1966:39).

The most significant costume element depicted is the long triangular *quechquemiltl* hanging over the shoulders to cover the chest. Patricia Anawalt (1981, 1982) has demonstrated the association of the *quechquemiltl* with pre-Columbian women, particularly with those affiliated with the Mother Goddess complex (see also Furst 1981:156–157). Ethnographically and historically, this garment is characteristic of the Gulf Coast, but was only used in ritual contexts in central Mexico. It appears often in pre-Columbian codices and on ceramic figurines from the central highlands, suggesting a ritual use associated with the Mother Goddess complex (Anawalt 1982). The *quechquemiltl* is rare in Classic Maya contexts (Bruhns 1988:109–110).

A second female costume element is the long skirt, often fastened using a belt that was wrapped around the waist several times. Anawalt (1981:211) lists skirts as traditional attire for both central Mexican and Maya women. Karen Bruhns (1988:110) notes that skirt length varied on Classic Maya representations, but always covered the knee. In this respect, the Cacaxtla murals are significantly different. One possibility could be that skirt length was shortened by the artist to emphasize the white cotton leggings and sandals; Bruhns (1988:110) points out that many of the Maya women with shorter skirts were also the ones wearing high back sandals. Rosemary Joyce (personal communication 1991) suggests that where Maya women are depicted in shorter skirts they are usually associated with the Old Mother deity (Figure 12).

Alternatively, short skirts may have been more stylish in the central highlands. Pre-Columbian manuscripts of the Mixtec and Borgia groups depict women with short skirts that occasionally end above the knee. The skirt of the Cacaxtla “Venus woman” is identical in length and form to those of the central Bird warriors (Figure 13).

A final consideration regarding skirt length could be the context of use. Most Maya women are depicted in very formal ceremonial contexts, wearing clothes that would hardly be practical on a daily basis (Bruhns 1988:107). Women in the central Mexican codices are often portrayed in more active roles, and the



Figure 12. Maya Old Goddess with short skirt; note the wavy lines emanating from her breasts and between her legs as possible representation of body fluids (after Codex Madrid 1967:30b).



Figure 13. “Venus woman” from Cacaxtla Star Chamber; note skirt length (after Carlson 1991:Figure 8f).

costumes may have varied accordingly. In summary, then, the use of the skirt conforms to a pan-Mesoamerican tradition of female costume (Anawalt 1981:211), while the relatively short length is more common among highland cultures, and perhaps also relates to the context of social practice.

A final attribute that can be presented as evidence of female costume is the degree of elaboration in the woven textiles. The clothing on the two central figures is intricately detailed with a variety of different motifs, including the sky-band motif, and with coordinated costume items including *quechquemiltl*, skirt, and even sandals. In contrast, the other figures in the battle scene wear relatively simple outfits of cloth, with elaboration more often expressed through the addition of jaguar-skin insignia. Costume representations from Mixtec and Borgia-group codices consistently depict women in more elaborately detailed textiles, while males add complexity in the form of zoomorphic insignia. A similar pattern is apparent in depictions of Maya costume. At the Gulf Coast site of Matapan, Veronica Kann (1989, personal communication 1993) identified a transition in the degree of female costume elaboration on figurines from the early to late Middle Classic period. She related this change to an increase in cloth production during the period, with a resultant increase in the economic and ideological value of the process and product of women's labor.

Spinning and weaving were closely related to female gender identity in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica (Sullivan 1982; S. McCafferty and G. McCafferty 1991), and particularly to resources of power controlled by the Mother Goddess complex. The display of elaborate textiles could therefore be considered a form of conspicuous consumption, and communicate affiliation with the Mother Goddess cult.

In summary, the costume elements of the *quechquemiltl*, skirt, and elaborately woven decoration are all indicative of female gender identity. If these are, in fact, women, then the question arises as to how this should be reinterpreted within the context of the Cacaxtla Battle Mural. Were these female war chiefs, leaders of the defeated Bird warriors? Or were they



Figure 14. Lady 6 Monkey with captive (after Codex Selden 1964:7-1).

instead members of a royal family, captured as a result of the defeat? Certainly female warriors were not unknown among the ancient Mesoamericans, where the Mixtec Lady 6 Monkey was one of the great conquerors of the Early Postclassic period (Figure 14). Neither of the Cacaxtla women are armed, but Individual 6 has been wounded in the battle. Furthermore, the "balloon headdress" worn by Individual 32, and the cotton and shell leggings, could be considered military insignia.

The second possibility, that these were captured noblewomen, does not necessarily preclude their military role. In any case, it is notable that whereas most of the other Bird warriors have been killed or at least severely wounded, the two women are still on their feet and appear as captives. Significantly, they have not been stripped, but instead are shown in their finery (see Bruhns [1988:112] for a similar case). We suggest that rather than captives destined for sacrifice, these two may have been preserved for royal marriage, perhaps as a means of legitimizing the conquest and extending marriage alliances (Spores 1974). As a possible parallel, the important role of the Culhua "founding queen" who legitimized the Aztec dynasty has recently been described by Susan Gillespie (1989).

Despite the presence of diagnostic female costume elements, these two figures have been consistently identified as male (Baird 1989; Carlson 1991; Kubler 1980; McVicker 1985; Nagao 1989). Although the gender identification has never been explicitly discussed, we suggest that the interpretation stems from an assumption that these captives were displayed in women's clothing as a form of humiliation.<sup>11</sup> This identification introduces a gender ideology of male dominance that was then employed as a metaphor for other power relations. June Nash (1978:356) has described this for the Postclassic Aztec: "So rigid was the division of labor by sex that the tools and raw materials used by women became a metaphor for subordination and humility."

The theme has also been discussed by Cecelia Klein (1990), who suggests that the Aztec equated femininity with military cowardice. Klein cites the early Colonial chronicler Diego Durán (1967:92) in an example of dressing Aztec emissaries in "shameful" women's clothing in an attempt to provoke war. Elsewhere, we have challenged the concept of powerless women in pre-Columbian society (G. McCafferty and S. McCafferty 1989; S. McCafferty and G. McCafferty 1988). Nevertheless, the evi-

dence is strong for an Aztec state ideology of male dominance that served as a metaphor for power relations (Rodríguez V. 1989; but see Brumfiel 1990; G. McCafferty and S. McCafferty 1990). It is less obvious that the same ideology should be projected into the more distant past, and in fact Nash (1978) argues for greater gender equality prior to the social reorganization by the Aztec state (also Brumfiel 1991).

Ritual cross-dressing among the Maya has been suggested during bloodletting ceremonies, as at Bonampak Room 3 (Miller 1986:146-147). Possible support for this interpretation could be found at Cacaxtla in Baird's (1989:113) assertion that Individual 6 "may be pressing [the dart] into his [sic] flesh in an act of self-sacrifice." We are unconvinced, however, by the interpretation that this is a self-inflicted wound.

Other pre-Columbian examples of males dressed in women's clothing also exist in ritual practice. During the Aztec Ochpaniztli ceremony, dedicated to the Mother Goddess Toci, a female deity impersonator was sacrificed, flayed, and then a male priest continued the ceremony wearing the skin and costume of the impersonator (Durán 1971:233-234; Sahagún 1950-1982:II:120-122). A possible explanation for this might be the ambiguous sexual status of the fertility cult, where male and female characteristics were often combined (Anawalt 1982; Milbrath 1990). Janet Berlo (1983:98) illustrates a possible example in butterfly imagery on Classic-period urns from Oaxaca, where figures simultaneously wear both the female *quechquemil* and the male loincloth.

Another possible example of cross-dressing involves the Aztec political office of *cihuacoatl*, literally the "serpent woman." This position was second only to the *tlatoani* in the political hierarchy, and the *cihuacoatl* may in fact have participated in a form of dual kingship (van Zantwijk 1983). Cecelia Klein (1988:246) suggests that the *cihuacoatl* may have dressed in female costume on ceremonial occasions (Sahagún 1950-1982:I:69), acquiring the costume as well as the title of *cihuacoatl* as the result of military conquest, when the Aztec lord Tlacaélel defeated cities in the southern Valley of Mexico where the cult of the goddess Cihuacoatl was dominant.

While Klein suggests a relatively late historical beginning for the office of *cihuacoatl*, there is some evidence for an earlier presence of the concept of a cross-dressing co-ruler. In the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976:29v), the two leaders of the Tolteca-Chichimeca at Cholula are depicted with their entourage (Figure 15). Unlike other representations of the two in typical male costume (long capes and loincloths), in this scene Quetzalteueyuc wears a long *huipil*, typical of Aztec-style female costume used throughout the manuscript. While the manuscript probably dates to the mid-sixteenth century, the mythico-historical scene took place in the late twelfth-early thirteenth century.

Despite the precedents described for ritual cross-dressing, there is little evidence that this was the case in the scenes depicted in the Cacaxtla Battle Mural. Whereas female costume may have been a metaphor for subordination and cowardice among the Aztec, a more common form of representation both in the central highlands and in the Maya region was nudity. From the *danzante* stones of Monte Albán, through Classic Maya art, and up to the Aztec period, nudity was the ultimate form of humiliation for captives. Klein (1988:241-242) notes that this applied equally for women, citing the excavated Coyolxauqui stone at the base of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan as an example of the goddess stripped and then further

<sup>11</sup> John Carlson (1991:Note 8) cites a previous draft of this paper, but favors the interpretation that this is a captured male (depicted twice) dressed in female costume as a form of public humiliation. Carlson does not discuss his rationale for identifying the figures as male, nor does he provide any related examples of similar scenes to support his inference.

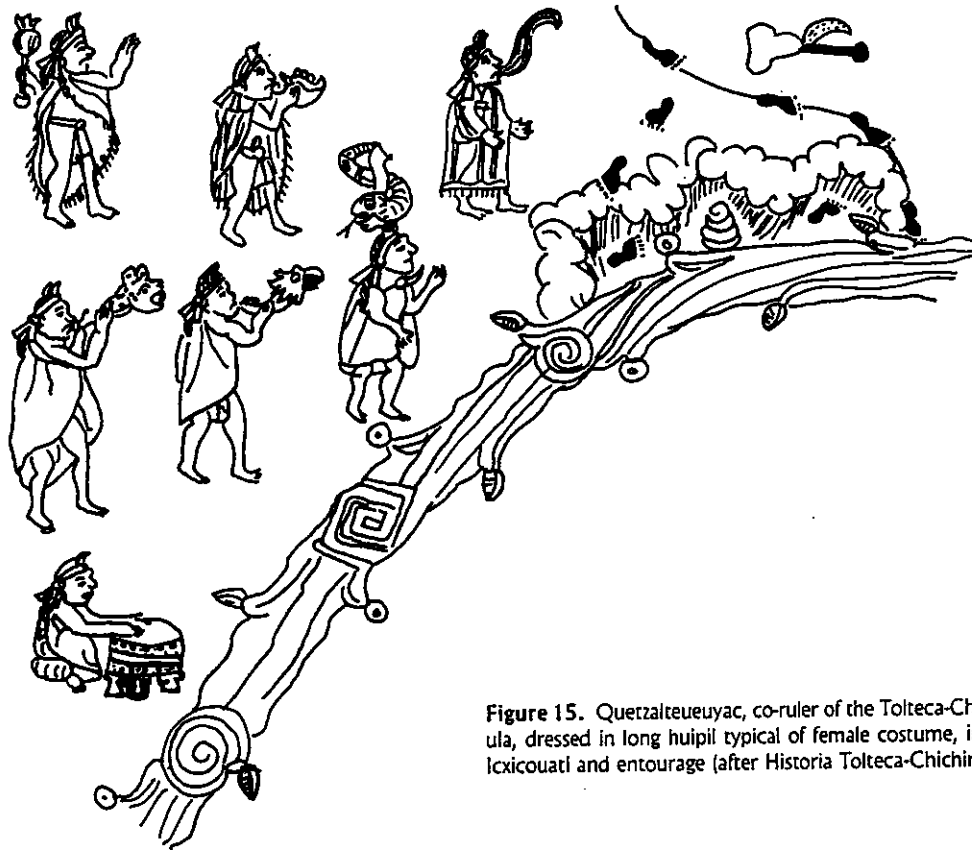


Figure 15. Quetzalteuuyac, co-ruler of the Tolteca-Chichimeca at Cholula, dressed in long huipil typical of female costume, in procession with Ixcicouatl and entourage (after *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* 1976:29v).

humiliated by being depicted in a male loincloth, a visual metaphor for defeat and/or sacrifice. At Cacaxtla, this convention certainly applies to other members of the defeated Bird army, who are generally portrayed in the nude. If, as could be suggested, the two central individuals were males forced to wear female costume, we would expect to see some male attribute, specifically the end of a loincloth, to indicate the "shameful humiliation" of the event. Without this clue, any ascription of male gender is highly speculative and based more in modern gender bias than on hard evidence.

A final possibility must also be considered. It is conceivable that the scenes depicted in the Battle Mural do not refer to historical events at all, but rather are mythico-religious performances. As discussed above, a pan-Mesoamerican tradition existed in which felines and avians were structurally linked, sometimes as metaphors for victory and defeat. Furthermore, central Mexican mythology linked the Mother Goddess complex with militarism, with the goddess Itzpapalotl ("Obsidian Butterfly") as the primordial victim (Berlo 1983). Conceivably, the Cacaxtla scene could be a reenactment of this myth, with the central Bird figures playing the role of the captured deities. In this context, the *quechquemil*, "jade skirt," and the "star cape" would serve as attributes that could be associated with the Mother Goddess.

A second possible mythic interpretation is based on recent analyses of the transition from a central female deity complex at Teotihuacan to a Postclassic pantheon dominated by male deities (Berlo 1993; Klein 1988; Nash 1978). In this scenario the capture of costumed goddesses may be a symbolic representation of this development, with the defeat of the other Bird war-

rriors as indication that this was not a peaceful process of conversion.

While these mythico-religious interpretations are plausible, we do not find them as compelling as the more historical interpretation presented above. However, we do favor the possibility of religious subtexts within the scene, particularly through the association of goddess imagery related to Chalchiutlicue paired with the Tlaloc iconography of Lord 3 Deer Antler. The representation of this dual aspect of the agricultural/fertility complex may have been a favorable portent for the newly forged dynasty. And, as discussed by Pasztory (1988) and McVicker (1985), Tlaloc imagery in Postclassic art was used to "symbolize the legitimacy and continuity of rule from ancient Teotihuacan through the Toltecs to the Aztecs" (McVicker 1985:92).

## CONCLUSION

In summary, a costume analysis of the Cacaxtla Battle Mural has identified two individuals who wear diagnostically female clothing. They stand out within the context of the murals as the two central members of the defeated Bird army, and both of these individuals appear as captives. The interpretation of these individuals as gender female is in direct contrast to published accounts of the battle scene and demands further revisions to the interpretation of the mural's content. The question is raised as to whether these individuals are biological females, or alternatively, captive males represented in female clothing in reference to a gender ideology that metaphorically associated women with subordination and humility. At this point, the data remain inconclusive. In our opinion, the case for these being biological females is less problematic, and therefore more plausible.

If these scenes do represent captive women, the elaboration of the costumes may suggest a distinctive fate other than sacrifice. Baird (1989:119) has interpreted these murals as "public proclamations of ancestry and legitimacy," with the murals of Structure A indicating "dual ancestry" relating to both Bird and Jaguar groups (see also Robertson 1985). Although we differ in several specific details of interpretation, we agree that this may well be the predominant theme of the murals. If the Battle Mural depicts the conquest of the Bird group and the capture of at least one noblewoman, then this mural may represent the introduction of the female line of a hypothetical "Cacaxtla dynasty." The woman is depicted in her finery, appropriate for the "founding queen." As in the case of the *Codex Nuttall*, the bound hands may signify the "binding" of the new dynasty. The marriage of Lady "Bird" with Lord "Jaguar" (probably Lord 3 Deer Antler "Tlaloc mask") could therefore represent the founding of the dynasty, with the murals publicly proclaiming, and thereby reifying, its legitimacy. Metaphorically, the symbolic costume elements relating to the Mother Goddess Chalchiutlicue may add a mythico-religious dimension to this union, since Chalchiutlicue was the principal consort of Tlaloc, the rain god closely associated with Teotihuacan.

In a recent series of articles (Baird 1989; Carlson 1991; Stuart 1992), the Battle Mural has been interpreted as a ritual enactment of Venus-regulated warfare, sometimes referred to as "Star Wars." Under this scenario, combat is organized around the cyclical movement of the planet Venus, with captives destined for sacrifice in a manner analogous to the "Flowery Wars" of the Postclassic Aztec. While our interpretation does not necessarily conflict with the possibility of an astronomical periodization for the battle, we do not accept the fate of the captive women as sacrificial victims. A possible alternative that could better account for the mural depictions is provided by Schele and Freidel (1990) for Maya warfare, where they suggest that Tlaloc-Venus warfare was concerned with imperial conquest. As such, the marriage of elite women of the conquered territory would be a valuable step in the consolidation of authority. The presence of the "balloon headdress" on Individual 32 is diagnostic of Tlaloc-Venus warfare (Schele and Freidel 1990:146-147), although it is usually depicted with the victorious warrior. Other characteristic elements that suggest ritualized warfare include the "trapeze and ray" adornment in the headdress of Lord 3 Deer Antler, the Tlaloc mask itself, and numerous trilobe "blood" glyphs.

At a higher level of abstraction, the male/female opposition suggested by the Battle Mural may provide a clue for interpreting the architectural organization of the main patio complex. The portico murals of Structure A represent complementary male figures wearing the diagnostic costume elements of both the Bird and Jaguar ancestral groups. Opposite this building, on the west side of the Battle Mural, Structure E features the stucco sculpture of a woman in elaborate woven costume, similar to the costume worn by the central Bird warriors. Tentatively identifying Structure E as a female compound would create a structural balance with the male compound of Structure A. The west and east positioning, respectively, corresponds well with the Mesoamerican cosmological pattern of west as the domain of women and east as the domain of men.

In the long run, questions of the gender identities of the central Bird warriors may be relatively trivial to all but the few specialists who work with this specific data set. What we feel is far more significant, and equally disturbing, is the fact that until now gender has not been a factor considered in the analysis. Previous interpretations of the murals have seemingly been based on the androcentric assumption that militarism was an exclusively male domain, and therefore any and all participants must be male. This form of "gender blindness" is rife in traditional archaeological and art-historical interpretation (Conkey and Spector 1984; S. McCafferty and G. McCafferty 1988, 1994; Wylie 1991). To name just two relevant examples, women were not recognized on Maya stelae until Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1961), an innovative and *female* scholar, first recognized them on the basis of costume elements and the initial decipherment of the glyphic inscriptions (Miller 1988:xv). Even more recently the principle deity of Teotihuacan has been reinterpreted as a "Great Goddess" rather than a male Storm God (Berlo 1983, 1993; Furst 1974; Pasztory 1972; Taube 1983). These examples clearly demonstrate the value of critically evaluating fossilized notions of gender identity found in the archaeological literature (see also S. McCafferty and G. McCafferty 1994).

Feminist scholars have long struggled to expose gender bias in academic research. As anthropologists interested in cultural diversity in the present as well as the past, however, the identification of female participation should not be simply a political agenda, but rather a fundamental step in any research project. We offer this reanalysis of the Cacaxtla murals as an example of the potential rewards of a broader perspective on gender relations in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.

## RESUMEN

El "Mural de la Batalla" en Cacaxtla (Tlaxcala, México) representa vividamente el sangriento resultado de una batalla entre facciones de distinta raza, caracterizadas por las insignias opuestas de jaguar y pájaro. Las dos figuras de pájaro centrales que aún están en su lugar están representando a cautivos quienes, en ambos casos, están cubiertos con elaboradas vestiduras que incluyen elementos diagnósticos de ropa femenina, tales como la capa *quechquemil* y la falda larga. Otras figuras están desnudas o cubiertas con atuendos masculinos simples, incluyendo el taparrabo *maxtlatl*. Este artículo considera los argumentos de si las dos figuras centrales fueron mujeres o si más bien la presencia de vestido femenino en actores masculinos se usó en el contexto de la conquista, transmitido simbólicamente a través de una ideología de género

de dominación masculina y subordinación femenina. Mientras que la evidencia no es conclusiva, nosotros empleamos un análisis contextual de los manuscritos pictóricos precolombinos y de la cosmología mexicana para argüir que estos individuos fueron mujeres. Además, sugerimos que los elementos de la vestidura compleja asociados a estas figuras femeninas y su recurrencia con el Señor Jaguar 3 Cornamenta de Venado "máscara de Tlaloc," indica que ésta fue una mujer de la nobleza destinada a contraer matrimonio como medio de unión entre las dinastías del Jaguar y el Pájaro. Entonces el Mural de la Batalla representa la captura de la "reina fundadora," con la subsiguiente unión demostrada por las representaciones complementarias de los Señores Jaguar y Pájaro en el Edificio A.

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