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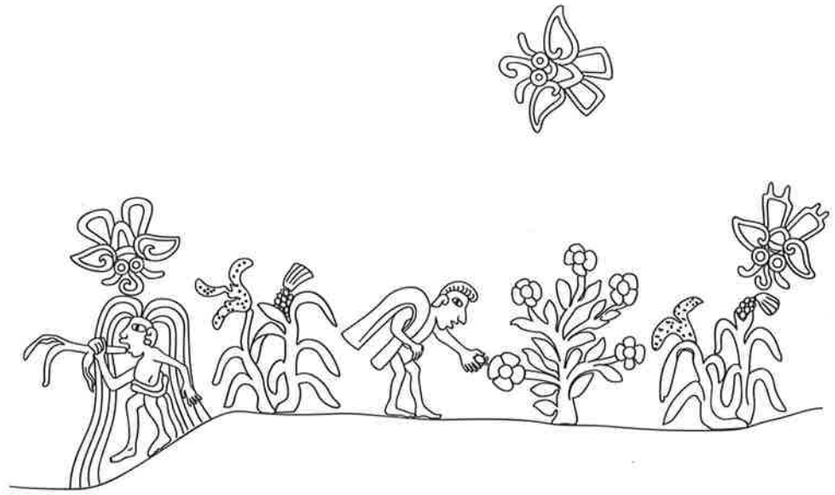

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Atlatls and the Metaphysics of Violence in Central Mexico

Andrew Finegold

In my first semester as a graduate student, I took Esther Pasztory's seminar "Aztec Art and Sacrifice." Though I can't claim that the precise ideas presented here had their origin at that early date, the format of that course encouraged a sustained consideration of the relationship between Aztec—and more broadly, Mesoamerican—metaphysics and material culture that has continued to inform my thinking. Beginning in the context of that seminar and continuing through the completion of my dissertation, Esther's guidance subtly yet indelibly shaped my approach to scholarship, for which I am most grateful. Esther presented the ideas that she was working through that semester the following fall in a paper titled "Sacrifice as Reciprocity," which was delivered at the Pre-Columbian Society of Washington, D.C., symposium (and included in the resulting publication, Pasztory 2010d) honoring Elizabeth Benson. So I find it fitting that I have the opportunity to contribute some of my own ideas on a related topic to this volume of essays collected in her honor.

Even when they are utilitarian, the objects people make use of can be indicative of a wide variety of cultural concerns. Apart from—or, indeed, because of—their practical uses, categories of objects such as weapons can additionally function as markers of identity, as extensions or augmentations of personhood, and as mediators between individuals and the physical world. The case of the atlatl in Postclassic central Mexico is an excellent illustration of this. Rather than merely reflecting the level of technological sophistication achieved by this civilization, the atlatl was retained as an elite weapon even when other tools of warfare were available. In allowing water-borne hunters and warriors to launch projectiles with one hand as the other maintained control of their canoes, the continued use of this weapon had a practical motivation; however, it was also ideological, with the atlatl possessing important symbolic and metaphorical associations related to group identity and divine processes. After outlining these, I argue that an analysis of imagery both of and on atlatls can also provide significant insight into the ways bloodshed in central Mexico was understood to be fundamentally and transcendentally meaningful owing to a well-developed metaphysics of violence.

Atlatls, also commonly referred to as dart-throwers or spear-throwers, are long, narrow weapons usually made from carved wood. One face is typically flat, with a groove running longitudinally along its center to accommodate the projectile. The latter possesses a concavity at its back end that is slotted into a projecting knob or hook on the distal end of the atlatl. Thus loaded, the weapon is held in the throwing

hand of the wielder, who either grasps the shaft or places his index and middle fingers through loops carved into or lashed onto the handle for this purpose; the dart is grasped between the fingers, which release the projectile at the height of the arc described by the overhead throwing movement, thereby allowing for precise control over its trajectory. Atlatls vary in size, but they generally average around 60 cm in length. Their proportions reflect their function as a second elbow and forearm. The mechanics of the dart-thrower allow for a prolonged application of the user's force directly onto the projectile, thus substantially increasing the distance that it travels and the power of its impact (Howard 1974, 102–4). Having had no prior experience using an atlatl, I was able within a short period of time to begin to cluster darts tightly at a distance of around 50 m, results that closely correlate with the experiences of other researchers (Howard 1974).[1]

The use of dart-throwers was widely distributed among ancient cultures around the world and dates back at least 16,000 years, and possibly as much as 80,000 years (Dickson 1985, 6). In Mesoamerica, atlatls, with their substantial penetrating power, were almost certainly employed by early nomadic hunters to take down large game. Since only the stone points of projectiles typically survive in the archaeological record, their attribution to specific weapons systems is based on comparisons of weight and various dimensions of size (Thomas 1978). And though such analysis provides a statistical probability for the presence of atlatl-launched darts at a specific time and place, this is ideally confirmed through other lines of evidence. Unambiguous proof of atlatl use by Archaic period hunters c. 5,400–7,000 years ago comes in the form of a rare, preserved wooden atlatl recovered during excavations of the Coxcatlan Rock Shelter in the Tehuacan Valley (MacNeish, Nelken-Terner, and Johnson 1967, 150–51). Beyond such occasional examples from the archaeological record, the best evidence for the use of this weapon in the region comes from its depiction in artworks—mostly dating to the relatively recent Classic and Postclassic periods—and the written accounts of early Spanish chroniclers.

The handful of extant examples attest to the early importance of the atlatl as a symbol of power among Mesoamerican elites by the Middle/Late Formative period. Two greenstone effigy atlatls in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks, although lacking secure archaeological context, have been attributed to the Olmec horizon based on the quality of both the stone used and the lapidary work. The precious material, small size, and relative fragility—the example with finger loops was made from multiple pieces of stone joined by pins—strongly suggest that these objects were not intended as functional weapons but rather as ceremonial markers of status (Taube 2004b, 136–39). A further Olmec example of dart-thrower use is found on Stela D from Tres Zapotes, where the right-hand figure can be seen carrying an atlatl in his left hand (Taube 2004b, fig. 64). A large greenstone figure from Oaxaca now at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard is incised with various designs, including a figure holding an atlatl and darts. It is possible that the incised imagery was added later, but Donald Slater (2011, 374) has pointed to similarities between the glyphs drawn on this figure and those found on artworks securely datable to the Middle/Late Formative period. Although they are not abundant, representations of atlatls in costly materials and in monumental scenes in the Formative period demonstrate the symbolic value accorded to this weapon at a relatively early date in the consolidation and legitimization of power by Mesoamerican

rulers, symbolism that would only become more prevalent in subsequent periods.

Beginning in the Early Classic period, the dart-thrower, though remaining generally emblematic of martial authority, seems to have become strongly associated with central Mexican influence across Mesoamerica. At Teotihuacan itself—the great metropolis that was both home to the majority of the region's inhabitants and the locus of central Mexican sociopolitical, economic, and cultural life throughout the Classic period—the evidence for this is patchy: some depictions of warriors, often with zoomorphic features, carrying atlatls in mural paintings and on fragments of ceramic vessels (von Winning 1958, 94–95; Slater 2011, 375–76). These few examples nevertheless demonstrate the importance of dart-throwers to central Mexican conceptions of militarism (Headrick 2007, 72–73). Furthermore, taking into account the tendency of Teotihuacan artworks to eschew mimetic figural representation in favor of abstraction, reduction, and substitution, scholars have proposed that the atlatl was conflated with either owls (Nielsen and Helmke 2008, 463–64) or butterflies (Headrick 2007, 129–30) in Teotihuacan thought, in both cases invoking a broader ideology of warfare.

It is, however, in the Maya region—hundreds of kilometers from Teotihuacan—that we see the most compelling evidence for the close association between the dart-thrower and a strain of militarism closely identified with central Mexico. Here, atlatls were depicted as part of a cluster of costume elements strongly correlated with the Basin of Mexico, at first historically and later rhetorically. Individuals associated with the so-called *entrada* of the late fourth century C.E.—an event David Stuart (2000) has persuasively shown almost certainly involved the violent incursion and political intervention by Teotihuacanos into the southern Maya Lowlands—are depicted wielding dart-throwers on Uaxactun Stela 5 and Tikal Stela 31. On the latter sculpture, a stark contrast exists between the Maya-style costume and presentation of the ruler Siyaj Chan K'awiil on the front and the pair of profile images on the sides depicting his father, Yax Nuun Ayiin, clad as a central Mexican warrior (Stuart 2000, fig. 15.2). He is identifiable as such by his dart-thrower, as well as his back mirror with pendant coyote tails, furry knee bands, mosaic zoomorphic headdress, and the Storm God imagery on his rectangular shield.

The effect of this monument is to legitimize Siyaj Chan K'awiil, now two generations removed from the *entrada*, by invoking his connections to both the long dynastic history of Tikal and foreign, central Mexican sources of authority. This is made explicit on the front of Stela 31, where Siyaj Chan K'awiil wears a headdress—a traditional Maya token of the transference of legitimate rulership from ancestor to descendent—containing the name Yax Ehb' Xook, the founder of the Tikal dynasty several centuries earlier. Additionally, in his right hand he raises a second headdress containing the explicitly central Mexican name "Spearthrower Owl," known from other inscriptions—including on the so-called Marcador, which features this name glyph as its central element—to be associated with his paternal grandfather (Stuart 2000, 481–90). Jesper Nielsen and Christophe Helmke (2008) identified a repeated toponymic construction naming "Spearthrower Owl Hill" in a wall painting from Portico 1 of the north patio of the Atetelco apartment compound at Teotihuacan. Because other toponyms identified with specific individuals are not known, they tentatively identify Spearthrower Owl as a mythical ancestor or patron deity similar to Huitzilopochtli among the later Mexica and suggest that the individual mentioned at Tikal could have been named after this deity, a common Mesoamerican practice. Regardless, it seems clear that the

grandfather of Tikal ruler Siyaj Chan K'awiil, who is described as the individual under whose auspices the militaristic incursion and installation of new rulers in a significant portion of the Maya region during the late fourth century C.E. occurred, had ties to the central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacan.

Various interpretations have been put forward to explain the continued depiction of Maya rulers in what has become known as the Teotihuacan Warrior Costume into the Late Classic period, after the central Mexican metropolis was no longer a major seat of power and source of influence. Andrea Stone (1989) has proposed that Maya elites used dress to emphasize their difference from the population at large and to proclaim (real or imagined) external sources of legitimacy for their power. Additionally, associations between this costume and the practice of ritualized warfare related to the Storm God and timed to coincide with important points in the Venus cycle have been proposed by numerous scholars beginning in the 1980s (e.g., Schele and Miller 1986, 209–22). Although this latter point has been largely discredited (Aldana 2005), the correlation of Storm God imagery with warrior costumes suggests the persistence of ideological associations ultimately traceable to Teotihuacan.

When depicted on Maya monuments, atlatls are often shown being held vertically like a staff, grasped at the base beneath the finger holes. This is the case on Uaxactun Stela 5 and Tikal Stela 31 but also on later monuments such as Bonampak Stela 3. This formal, ceremonial quality of depictions of atlatls, coupled with speculation that the densely forested terrain would not have been amenable to projectile weaponry, led Ross Hassig (1992, 73) to conclude that the dart-thrower was primarily a symbolic object denoting status and power among the Classic Maya. Nevertheless, material evidence exists to suggest that atlatls were regularly employed in warfare and the pursuit of game. This can be deduced by their consistent presence in the pictorial record and through functional analysis of projectile points (Brokmann 2000; Ciofalo 2012). A rare surviving wooden atlatl dating to the final days of Tikal was excavated from Structure 5D-51 at that site (Harrison 2003). Additionally, a handful of polychrome vessels feature scenes of hunting and combat that include the use of dart-throwers (e.g., vessels K2036 and K5857 in Justin Kerr's Maya Vase Database). Thus, among the Classic Maya, atlatls appear to have been wielded both as weapons and as symbolic tokens of status, affiliation, or martial accomplishment, complementary roles that reinforced a militaristic ideology perhaps originating in central Mexico.

The continuous practical and symbolic importance of the dart-thrower in the southern Maya region throughout the Classic period complicates our understanding of its presence in the northern lowlands of Yucatán during the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods. Here, particularly in the huge quantities of bellicose-themed artwork from the site of Chichen Itza, atlatls are consistently shown in the possession of warriors identifiable by their repeated costume traits, who are often referred to in the literature as Toltecs or Toltec-Mayas and were long thought to represent an incursion by militaristic central Mexicans (or "Mexicanized" Maya from the Gulf Coast) into the region not unlike that more recently posited for fourth-century Petén. The name "Toltec" underscores the undeniable similarities between the warrior figures depicted at Chichen and those seen at Tula, over 1,000 km distant.

Further close correspondences between the architecture and iconography of these two sites—and the virtual lack of directly related imagery and structures in the intervening landscape—led early scholars to interpret Chichen as a Maya site conquered by

Fig. 15.1. Detail from the Battle Mural, east *talud*, Structure B, Cacaxtla, showing 3 Deer with a raised atlatl at the left. Drawing by Andrew Finegold.

an influx of central Mexicans led by the exiled ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, an interpretation that relied heavily on accounts written in the decades following the Spanish conquest (Tozzer 1957, 20–65). This reconstruction of the ancient past no longer seems tenable given the radiocarbon dates that identify the so-called Toltec structures at Chichen as contemporary with, rather than subsequent to, buildings exhibiting a pure Maya style and that date Chichen Itza as a whole to a century or more prior to the fluorescence of Tula (Cobos Palma 2004; Coggins 2002, 46). The direction of artistic influence has also been challenged after the identification of precursors of supposedly Toltec traits in Classic Maya art and architecture, not least of which is the atlatl (G. Kubler 1961). Regardless of a resolution to the thorny and still much-debated subject of the (real or constructed) ethnic identities of the inhabitants of Chichen, the differentiation of certain warriors through costume elements, including dart-throwers, seems to have been intended as a marker of group identity, ideology, or affiliation.

This pattern was not limited to the Maya region; it is also seen in central Mexico. At the site of Cacaxtla, dating to the Epiclassic period after the decline of Teotihuacan as a major power in the region, a wonderfully preserved mural painting—completed in a Maya style despite being located so far outside of the Maya region—depicts a battle between two factions. Here, the leader of the victorious warriors, who are clad in jaguar pelts and have brown skin, is shown wielding a dart-thrower and wearing a Storm God mask (fig. 15.1). In contrast, members of the losing side are shown with avian headdresses, red skin, and intentionally elongated foreheads. This clear distinction between the opposing sides, as well as the incongruity of an undeniably Maya painting

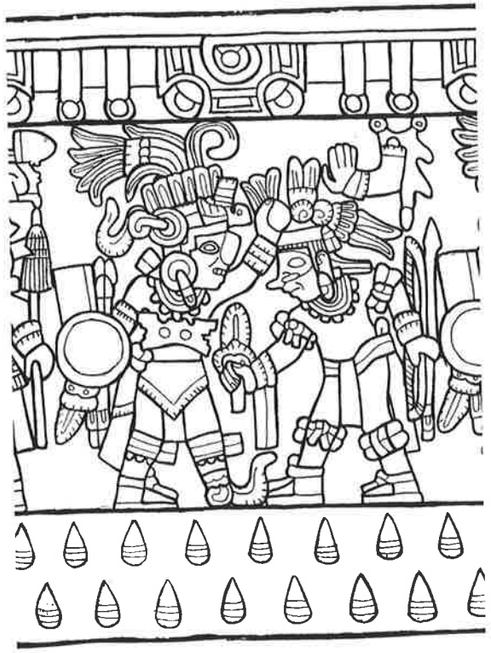

Fig. 15.2. Conquest of Acolhuacan, from the Stone of Tizoc. Drawing courtesy of Emily Umberger.

style at a central Mexican site, has led many scholars to posit a literal clash between two ethnic groups.[2] At the same time, this constructed scene has also been interpreted in allegorical terms, expressive of such dualities as day/night and sky/earth (Escalante Gonzalbo 2002; Graulich 1988). The latter gains support through comparison with Aztec representations from the Postclassic period.

On the Stone of Tizoc, a massive cylindrical monument recounting a series of past conquests, we see pairs of figures repeated around the circumference: the victorious Mexica warrior is on the left, clad in the Toltec warrior costume, including a stylized butterfly pectoral, avian headdress, triangular apron, and atlatl; to the right, hair grasped in the hand of his vanquisher, is the conquered warrior whose costume does not include Toltec elements, and who is occasionally depicted carrying either a bladed staff or, in the case of the figure representing Acolhuacan, a bow and arrow in his left hand (fig. 15.2). Emily Umberger (1987, 70) has suggested that the clear differentiation between the costumes of victor and vanquished on this monument represents a conceptual contrast between the civilized Mexica and their uncivilized foe. That this distinction was intended to be metaphorical rather than delineating actual ethnic differences is made clear by other artworks in which the Aztecs emphasize their own humble beginnings as nomadic, uncivilized Chichimeca, depicted wearing animal skins rather than woven textiles and carrying bows and arrows rather than atlatls. After arriving in the Valley of Mexico and establishing their city at the center of Lake Texcoco, they married into local royal lineages, presenting themselves both as conquering outsiders and as the legitimate descendants of the ancient Toltecs, whom they viewed as paradigmatic of civilization itself. Thus, from Early Classic times until the Spanish conquest, rulers from a variety of sites across Mesoamerica sought to legitimize their claims to power through real or imagined associations with a strain of militarism associated with central Mexico (Coggins 2002). This was expressed through a warrior outfit that remained relatively unchanged over the course of more than a millennium, one that, notably, features the dart-thrower as an important component.

The preceding assertion, however, requires two significant qualifications. First, the association of the atlatl with central Mexican martial symbolism was not absolute. Although dart-throwers are most often seen depicted in the possession of victorious warriors and as part of the Toltec military costume, this is not always the case. On the Stone of Tizoc, for example—as well as on the similar, earlier monument variously known as the Cuauhxicalli of Moctezuma or the Archbishop's Stone—the captives are notably clad in Chichimec outfits that contrast with the Toltec costumes of their vanquishers, including, as noted above, the weapons that several hold in their left hands, but they are all shown holding dart-throwers forward in their right hands, seemingly presenting them to their captors (fig. 15.2). Emily Umberger (personal communication 2015) interprets this pictorial convention as possibly representing the surrender of the sacred powers associated with rulership, symbolized as the Toltec-associated

atlatl. Furthermore, in Late Classic Maya art there are many depictions of warriors wearing outfits replete with central Mexican imagery—including Storm God masks and trapeze-and-ray year signs—who carry long spears rather than darts and atlatls. Thus, although the dart-thrower appears to have been regularly incorporated into the Toltec warrior costume and its associated ideology, we should remain cautious about assuming too exact of a correlation.

Moreover, the significance of the dart-thrower—as well as the central Mexican military costume more generally—was not stable across the many centuries during which it was deployed and among the distinct cultures that made use of it. Its specific meanings and metaphorical associations almost certainly varied for people from different places and at different times. In the Early Classic period, for example, atlatls and other elements of the Teotihuacan warrior costume are most commonly seen associated with Storm God imagery. This is the case with Stela 31 at Tikal, where Yax Nuun Ayiín carries both a dart-thrower and a rectangular shield depicting the central Mexican storm deity. Imagery from Teotihuacan itself shows the Storm God wielding an atlatl loaded with an undulating dart representing lightning (Headrick 2007, fig. 7.2). Thus we see an ancient Mesoamerican conception of *Blitzkrieg*, whereby the suddenness, intensity, and destructiveness of a lightning strike are equated with martial activity, and specifically with a weapon whose projectiles descend upon one's enemies from the sky. Unlike the twentieth-century German use of this metaphor, however, the Mesoamerican version carries an extended meaning whereby, just as the violence of the storm is associated with the necessary and crop-sustaining rains, the spilling of blood is also seen as required to provide nourishment to the natural world. Such conflation of violence and life-giving rain can be seen in Middle Formative artworks such as Chalcatzingo Monument 4, but its consolidation into a consistent militaristic iconography appears to have occurred at Teotihuacan.

In addition to these associations with storms, lightning, and rain, central Mexican war ideology, as exemplified through its military costume and use of the dart-thrower, has also been shown to have associations with fire-drilling (creating fire using a string drill), likely originating at Teotihuacan and persisting until the time of the Conquest. This conception of sacred warfare involved a complex assortment of related imagery and ideas that have been outlined by Karl Taube (2000b), most notably the supernatural entity of the fire serpent, *xiuhcoatl* (sometimes translated as "turquoise serpent"), which combined feline, butterfly, and serpent features and was associated with self-sacrifice, rebirth, the creation of new fire, shooting stars, and the obsidian used in projectile points. Thus, when the Mexica tribal deity Huitzilopochtli, with his strong solar and militaristic associations, is shown wielding an atlatl in the Codex Borbonicus, it is in the form of a *xiuhcoatl* (fig. 15.3). The exhaustive record of Aztec thought and culture compiled by the sixteenth-century Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún describes Huitzilopochtli engaging his enemy in battle: "He cast at men the turquoise serpent, the fire-drill—war," directly equating the dart-thrower and dart as a weapon of war with creation of new fire (quoted in Slater 2011, 381, and Taube 2000b, 296). A pair of Postclassic Mixtec dart-throwers now in the Berlin Ethnological Museum are carved as *xiuhcoatl*, their sides bespangled with star signs just as this divine weapon is illustrated in the codices (fig. 15.4; Seler 1904 [1890], 392–96). With their backs covered with hummingbirds feeding on flowers, a poetic metaphor for the sharp points of projectiles flying through the air to extract the blood-nectar of an enemy, the serpents

Fig. 15.3. Detail showing Huitzilopochtli, Codex Borbonicus, page. 34. Drawing by Andrew Finegold.

have paired fire and water scrolls in front of their mouths indicative of their bellicose intentions.

These two interpretations of the role of the atlatl in central Mexican martial ideology, linking this projectile weapon either to the lightning bolt of the storm deity and the violence that accompanied the earth-watering rain clouds or to the *xiuhcoatl* fire serpent and its associations with celestial fire including the sun and shooting stars, are still being negotiated, with scholars continuing to debate various iconographic identifications and the significance of individual costume elements such as eye goggles. Yet, regardless of the specific metaphorical or ideological connotations with which it was associated in any one instance, the dart-thrower appears to have consistently been invoked in ways that point to a singularly metaphysical conception of violence. More than a simple weapon, the atlatl functioned to collapse the dimensions of time and space and create a bridge between the spiritual upperworld and mundane earthly realm. This can be demonstrated through an examination of representations of atlatls being wielded as weapons, as well as the imagery with which surviving dart-throwers were decorated.

In most cases, including those discussed above, dart-throwers are depicted as part of the identifying accoutrements of warrior figures; however, only rarely are they shown as being raised against a foe. Among these occurrences, perhaps the best known—and most dramatic—is from the Battle Mural at the site of Cacaxtla, located in the

Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley of central Mexico. Spanning the talus of a large platform, this painting depicts an extensive scene of bloodshed featuring dozens of figures divided into two factions, as discussed previously. The extreme one-sidedness of the scene—almost all the bird warriors are disarmed, denuded, wounded, and no longer standing, while the jaguar warriors are all upright, clothed, unharmed, and wielding weapons—has led some scholars to interpret this as a scene of (postbattle) sacrifice rather than a battlefield (e.g., Baird 1989, 112–14; J. Carlson 1993, 218). Claudia Brittenham (2011, 78–81), who has conducted the most recent and extensive analysis of this important artwork, has suggested that the scene conflates different moments of a battle and its aftermath—as indicated by the variable use of long-range dart-throwers, close-range thrusting spears, and hand-held knives—and that it presents these disparate temporal moments in a unified composition whose naturalism was intended to invoke the visceral immediacy of combat.

Yet the compression of time in this scene is not simply a result of the alternations of figural groupings each associated with a particular weapon and thus with a distinct moment in the narrative. Rather, an undeniable spatiotemporal collapse can be appreciated even among single pairs of combatants. For though the dart-thrower is a long-distance weapon, on the Battle Mural it is shown being raised against enemies who are both close at hand and already defeated. This configuration is not unique to Cacaxtla: nearly identical, albeit abbreviated, scenes of conquest are carved onto door jambs at the Puuc Maya site of Kabah, also dating to the Epiclassic period. By showing the victors with raised and loaded dart-throwers, the images from Cacaxtla and Kabah allude to the initial moments of battle. Yet these conquerors are shown interacting with foes who have already been subdued, locating the time of each scene after the action and placing emphasis on the outcome.

Such conflation of different moments from a narrative into a single pictorial instant, a phenomenon that Mary Miller and Stephen Houston (1987, 51–52) have described with the musical term "resonance," is relatively common in Late Classic Maya art. These scenes reflect more than mere artistic solutions to the problems associated with visual storytelling, however. They express something essential about the actions they depict through their teleological linking of first causes with final results. From this perspective, the atlatl itself can be understood as a tool to effect this overcoming of both spatial and temporal distance, allowing the wielder to strike an enemy from afar by transferring his propulsive power directly to the dart, which in turn becomes an extension of his very being. This idea is clearly visualized on a carved and gilded dart-thrower now in the collections of the British Museum (plate 24).[3] Here the paired bodies of a warrior

Fig. 15.4. Imagery carved on the back of a Late Postclassic central Mexican atlatl currently in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin. Drawing by Andrew Finegold after Saville (1925, pl. 11).

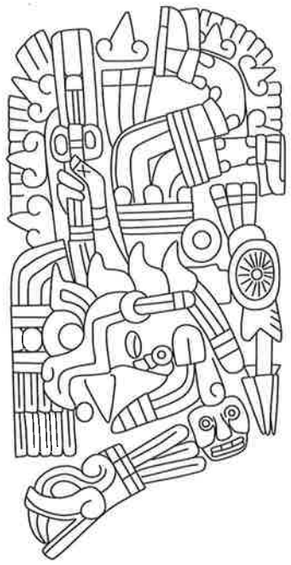

Fig. 15.5. Drawing of the figure carved at the distal end of the back of an atlatl in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection. Drawing by Elbis Domínguez, used courtesy of the artist and Javier Urcid.

figure and a serpent extend in pronounced relief on the weapon's distal end. The image represents a personified projectile, as is indicated both by the longitudinal positioning of the figure with relation to the atlatl and by the dart the warrior holds in front of his fanged mouth. Furthermore, the intertwining of the serpent and human bodies suggests the forward motion of a dart in flight. Thus, this imagery marks the darts released from this weapon as embodiments of the distributed personhood of the warrior who wielded it.

Beyond the collapse of distinct points in space and moments in time, the painting at Cacaxtla also indicates a bridging of the distance between the physical and spiritual realms, with the leader of the victorious warriors represented as an agent of divine power. This individual, identified by an accompanying name glyph as 3 Deer, is shown with stylized Storm God masks in front of his face and on his belt (fig. 15.1). Conquering warriors were commonly represented in the guise of supernatural beings in Mesoamerican art. The Stone of Tizoc depicts each of the victorious Mexica warriors with a missing foot and a smoking mirror on his head, attributes of the deity Tezcatlipoca (fig. 15.2). And in the crowded murals depicting scenes of warfare at Chichen Itza, certain individuals are emphasized with solar disks or plumed serpents winding behind them. The presence of such divine attributes likely marked the victorious leaders with the divine sources of their authority in addition to functioning as allegories equating earthly violence with natural or supernatural forces. However, it seems likely that, rather than purely emblematic or metaphorical images, the divine was understood to have actually been present at such moments, embodied by and acting through the person of the triumphant warrior.

Scholars have begun to understand that, rather than possessing a clearly defined pantheon of gods, Mesoamerican conceptions of the supernatural were much more fluid. The Nahuatl word *teotl*, which was translated as "god" (or "demon") in early Spanish sources, has more recently been seen as referring to a "sacred or impersonal force or a concentration of power." Furthermore, the term *ixiptla*, previously thought to refer to a human impersonator or inanimate effigy image representing a deity, is now understood as referring to the manifestation of *teotl*, giving it physical presence through the arrangement of elements indicative of divine attributes (Boone 1989, 4).[4] Thus, the divine was something that was not merely invoked but rather conjured; not something that was impersonated but rather materialized. In a process of transubstantiation, an individual could become an *ixiptla* through his costume and adornments, thereby conflating his own being with that of the deity now rendered present. In her exhaustive inquiry into the nature of Aztec deities and their representations, Molly Bassett (2015, 132–40) describes the relationship between *teotl* and *ixiptla* as one of prototype and index, in which the *ixiptla* both represents the *teotl* and renders it present. In the painting at Cacaxtla, 3 Deer is depicted as an *ixiptla*, and his conquest is

therefore shown to be the terrestrial accomplishment of a ruler who was acting as an agent for the supernatural power of the Storm God.

Because multiple deities could share a single quality, the identification of specific supernatural beings depends on configurations of multiple elements. The dart-thrower, for example, was an attribute of several Postclassic central Mexican deities, including the Storm God, Tlaloc; the solar and war deity, Huitzilopochtli; the god of fire and time, Xiuhtecuhtli; and many others. In all cases when it was used as an element in an *ixiptla*, in addition to its obvious martial status as a weapon and concomitant militaristic allusions, the atlatl's physical functioning as a device to effect a transfer of energy and to collapse distance seems to have informed the symbolic connotations that became associated with it—fire drills, lightning bolts, meteors, and solar radiation, to name a few. This last example can be seen in the imagery carved on a dart-thrower in the Bliss Collection of Dumbarton Oaks (fig. 15.5). Here, on the distal end of the shaft, we see a figure descending from a solar disk. This eagle warrior is a personification of *tonalli*—a word referring to the tangible heat of the sun, but also to the life force present in the blood of all animate beings (Haly 1992, 287–88). This energy is represented as the loaded atlatl he holds ready to discharge, capable of striking a person's body at a distance like the rays of the sun, whose warmth is felt on the skin.

Javier Urcid (2010, 216–17) has interpreted the descending eagle personage and the four pairs of captor and captive figures depicted along the shaft of this weapon as alluding to a Voladores ritual, in which figures descend from a tall pole on slowly unwinding ropes, and suggests that such a ceremony would have been performed alongside the sacrifice of prisoners taken in war. Although I am largely in agreement with his analysis of the imagery as related to the sanctification of martial activity, I believe his conclusion is too narrow. Rather, both the imagery on the dart-thrower and enactments of the Voladores ritual should be understood as related but distinct representations of a similar theme: the dominion of the sun's energy—*tonalli*—which infuses all life. The Voladores ceremony was a reification of community, with performers descending from a pole serving as an axis mundi that centered time and space and linked the sun above to the earth below. The atlatl, through its associations with the collapsing of space and time, was a common element of the *ixiptla*—that is, in the imaging and materialization of a variety of deities—and as such also functioned as a portable axis mundi linking the mundane world with the divine. Through the manipulation of this weapon—whether in battle or as a ceremonial object—an individual had the potential to became a deity image, a vessel through which the divine could become manifest. Thus, the imagery on the Dumbarton Oaks dart-thrower does not depict a Voladores ritual but rather represents the infusion of the weapon itself with *tonalli*.

This imagery proclaims the divine justification for conquest. Beyond merely sanctioning militaristic actions, it represents supernatural forces as being at their root cause. Solar energy acts through the warrior-as-*ixiptla* and is indicated to be cognate with the dart launched from his atlatl. Moreover, there is something tautological about this metaphysical proposition. For to claim that one's hand is guided by divine force is to imply that the projectile will meet its mark, just as the heat of the sun's rays strike a person's flesh no matter where he stands. Thus, an essential element of the *ixiptla*-warrior—necessary to proclaim the individual *as* an *ixiptla*, a manifestation of *teotl*—is the presence of a captive. We see this in many representations, including the alternating captor and captive figures below the solar warrior on the shaft of the Dumbarton atlatl,

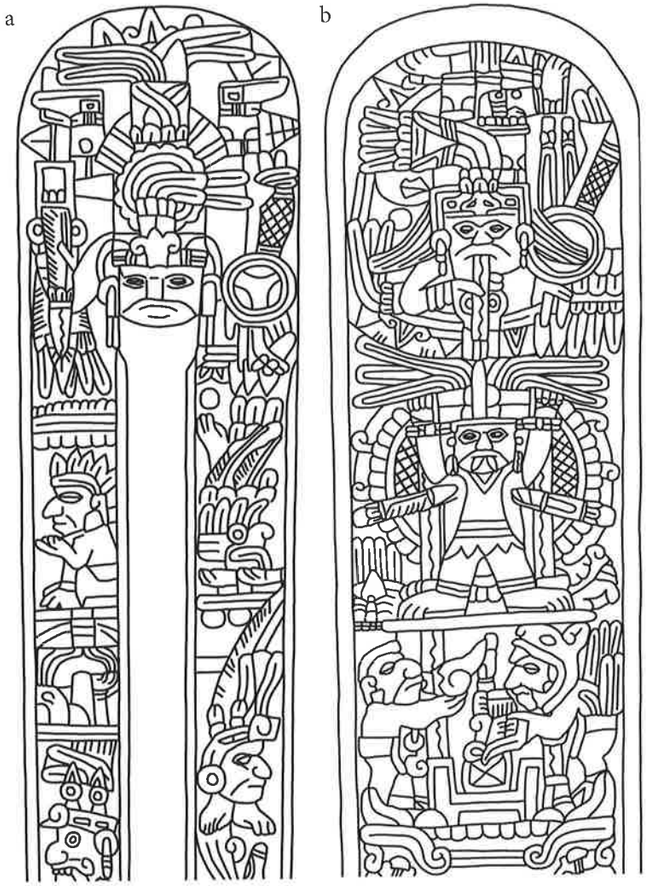

Fig. 15.6. Drawings of the carvings on the front (a) and back (b) of the distal end of an atlatl in the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico "L. Pigorini," Rome. Redrawn by Andrew Finegold after drawings by Gianfranco Calandra.

and the pairing of victorious warriors sporting divine attributes with captives on monuments such as the Aztec Stone of Tizoc and the Cacaxtla Battle Mural. The conflation of separate moments of battle and sacrifice in the latter artwork in particular is thus not merely a matter of narrative compression but rather a reflection of a specifically teleological understanding of the events.

The pan-Mesoamerican practice of removing captives from the field of battle for later immolation in precisely orchestrated rituals undoubtedly had materialist and ideological motivations as a public display of the conquering regime's power, but it also had metaphysical underpinnings. Whether characterized as debt payment (*nextlaoalli* in Nahuatl; Carrasco 1999, 188; James Maffie, personal communication, 2015), in alimentary terms as food for the gods (Carrasco 1999, 174–76; cf. Graulich 2000), or as an act of world creation or renewal with mythological significance (Umberger 2007; Stuart 2003), sacrifice played an important role in perpetuating the universe. As a controlled, ritualized event, the death of an enemy warrior could be transformed, either

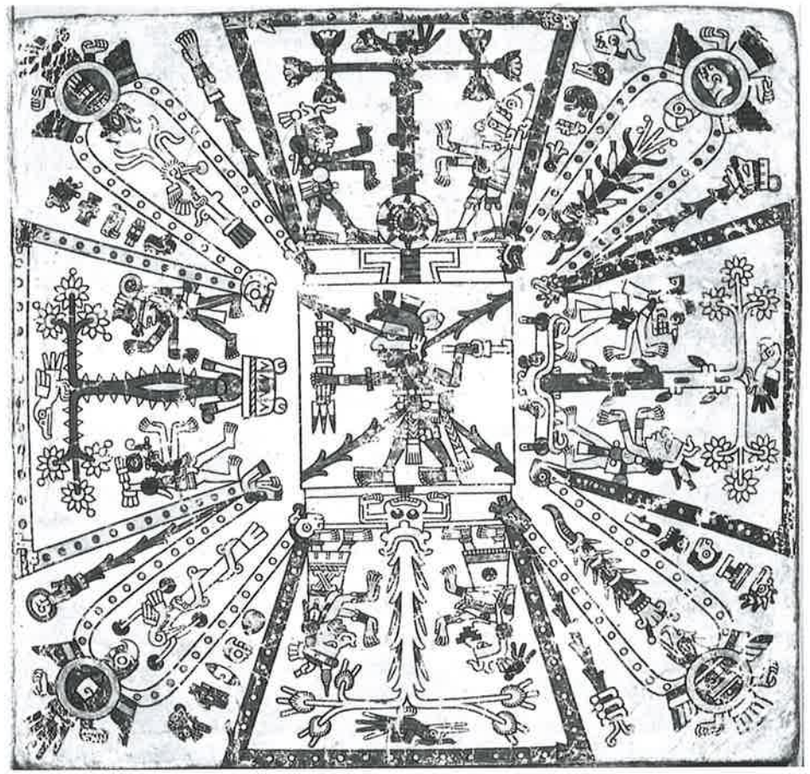

Fig. 15.7. Frontispiece of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer. Photograph Courtesy National Museums Liverpool (World Museum).

into an offering or into a (re)presentation of divine violence associated with cosmic forces. The imagery on a carved and gilded wooden atlatl from the collections of the Museo Pigorini in Rome does a good job illustrating this (fig. 15.6; also see McEwan and López Luján 2009, 204).[5]

Here, deities are again seen descending from a solar disk forming the distal end of the weapon. On the front, the hook onto which darts are slotted is carved as the face of this sun god, equating the projectiles with the solar rays this deity emanates. On the back, the same idea is conveyed by the atlatl that the sun god holds to his mouth. Directly beneath him stands a figure marked with divine attributes, including the fangs of the Storm God and a large disk behind him, possibly representing the smoking mirror of Tezcatlipoca. This figure is bound to a scaffold, his limbs extended to form a St. Andrew's cross, and two darts pierce his sides. He is a sacrificial *ixiptla*, a war captive turned deity image whose death is an illustration of the transference of divine energies at the heart of Mesoamerican religious ideology. Raised above the earth, the drops of blood that fall from his wounds were understood both to be literally infused with *tonalli*—the life-heat that radiates from the sun and is present in the blood—and to be analogous to the fertilizing rain. Reaching across both physical and metaphysical distance, the atlatl is shown to create wounds that link heaven and earth

and transform the human into the divine. Below the scaffold, a basin is flanked by two figures, one of which drills new fire as the other blows a conch shell trumpet. Thus, as with the quote from Sahagún describing Huitzilopochtli's war making, an analogy is again made between dart-thrower and fire drill, explicitly linking solar energy (*tonalli*) and fire-drilling with warfare and sacrifice.

No Mesoamerican artwork illustrates the structure of this metaphysical relationship better than the frontispiece of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (fig. 15.7). Here, we see the 260-day ritual calendar structured as a Maltese cross representing the four cardinal directions, with pairs of deities flanking world trees in each arm. This cosmogram shows time and space to be mutually interdependent dimensions. At its center is Xiuhtecuhtli, the god of time and fire. In one hand he grasps a bundle of darts, and in the other he raises an atlatl, suggesting this deity's ability to touch human life from a distance and the eventual subjection of all life to the vicissitudes of time. The violence of this process is indicated not only by the metaphorical use of a weapon to represent it but also by the blood that flows to Xiuhtecuhtli from the dismembered body parts of the god Tezcatlipoca, scattered at the four corners of the image. Violence is thus represented as being an inevitable, and even a foundational, force at the center of a well-ordered universe. Life—fire, time, sun, rain—is understood to require repayment in kind, and, through the presentation of captives as *ixiptla* in sacrificial rituals, warfare is shown to be the earthly manifestation of divine processes, integral to the continued unfolding of the cosmos.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this chapter was presented as a public lecture at Dumbarton Oaks in November 2013. I am appreciative of Miriam Doutriaux for inviting me to speak and providing me with photographs and drawings of the atlatl in the Dumbarton Oaks collection. I also thank the audience members at that talk, as well as James Maffie, Emily Umberger, Ellen Hoobler, and two anonymous reviewers, for helpful feedback and suggestions.

Notes

1. My thanks to Allison Foley, who allowed me to join her anthropology class during an atlatl demonstration at Skidmore College in 2013.

2. See Brittenham (2015, 133–39) for a discussion of the historiography and problems associated with this issue.

3. For a detailed analysis of this specific dart thrower, see Whittaker (2015).

4. Although these terms and the ideas they convey are specific to speakers of Nahuatl from Postclassic central Mexico, a similar dynamic has been proposed by Stephen Houston and David Stuart (1996, 297–300) with regard to Classic Maya notions of divinity.

5. A second, nearly identical dart-thrower is in the collection of the Museo di Storia Naturale dell'Università di Firenze (Florence). The close correspondence between the two led Hermann Beyer (1934) to conclude that the example in Rome, which came to light only in the 1930s, was a modern copy. However, a pair of atlatls in Berlin, collected from a Mixtec family in Oaxaca in the 1880s by German geologists Drs. Lenck and Felix, along with two additional examples, are carved with very similar designs, suggesting that dart-throwers were often produced in pairs or as sets (Seler 1904 [1890], 388).

Afterword

From Primitivism to Multiple Modernities and Beyond

Esther Pasztory

I would like to thank all those who wrote articles for this volume. I feel very much honored. It has been my privilege to have taken an active role in the fields of primitive and pre-Columbian arts for more than forty years as student and professor at Columbia University. My discovery of primitive art was a part of my discovery of America, where I came suddenly as a Hungarian refugee at the age of thirteen in 1956. As a college student, I was exposed to the art of most of the world and was astonished by the kingdoms and treasures of faraway places, the kinds I had been fascinated by as a child. Now not only could I read about these places, but there were opportunities to do pioneering work and I found that exciting.

When I chose primitive art as my area of specialization in art history in 1965, I did not realize how new a field it was since it was in the art history department at Columbia and had two professors: Paul Wingert and Douglas Fraser. The slide room had a special walled-off section for primitive and pre-Columbian materials, with a constantly growing collection of thousands of slides. It was my student job to catalogue them with color-coded guide cards. My professors were planning for a big future. There were half a dozen incoming graduate students in one year, many more than the later one or two. In one year we learned to recognize and name most canonical primitive and pre-Columbian art styles throughout the world. Names such as Ife, Kwakiutl, Maori, Moche, and Teotihuacan were everyday to us yet remained unknown and mysterious to others. We felt very special. Fraser divided up the globe into sections and made each one of us responsible for an area before we even knew what was there. Primitive and pre-Columbian art was not just a field of study but a movement, and we were its foot soldiers.

Although the primitive and pre-Columbian arts were "discovered" by modernist artists like Picasso as early as 1900, we were among the first few generations to turn to its academic study. In fact, we were certain that primitive and pre-Columbian arts were greater than modern art. We saw modern art as weak, derivative, and even effete in comparison to a primitive and pre-Columbian art that was strong, original, and socially embedded. My generation came along when great early pioneers had already mapped the fields in survey books. In pre-Columbian art Kelemen, Covarrubias, and Kubler had organized and defined the material. In primitive art our own Wingert and Fraser did the same. They were not experts in any particular field; they saw the areas as a whole. That project had been completed when we entered.

My generation's task was to burrow deeper into individual cultures and their arts. I switched from African to pre-Columbian art because I enjoyed working with traditions