

# La Huasteca in Time and Space

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## LANGUAGE AND TERRITORY

The Huastecs are related to the Maya without doubt. However, this group branched off from the main macro-Mayan linguistic group about 3,500 years ago, at that time located at Cuchumatanes on the border of what are now Guatemala and Mexico. That is where the Mayan languages diverge. Therefore, the material and ideological culture of the people we now know as Huastecs have nothing in common with those of the Mayan culture that flowered in the first centuries of our era.

Rather, all the data tends to indicate that by the last centuries of the second millennium before Christ, the Huastecs had already reached the northern part of what is today the state of Veracruz and the south of Tamaulipas. For several centuries before the Spaniards arrived, they shared a vast territory with Nahuatl, Tepehua and Otomí speakers, a territory that extended through the north of what is today Puebla, eastern Hidalgo, the southeast of San Luis Potosí, the south of Tamaulipas and the north of Veracruz.

The environmental mix of coast, coastal plains and mountains varies the climate from rainy tropical to

▲ God of Death on the back of a sculpture from Ozuluama, Veracruz. Xalapa Anthropology Museum.

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semi-dry with temperatures ranging from 18 to 40 degrees Celsius. Agriculture was just as important economically—the main crops were cotton, several types of chili peppers and corn—as hunting and gathering. The exploitation of other natural resources led to the creation of a network of roads that linked the coast and the coastal plain to the mountains and highlands; salt was particularly important. Rivers, streams, lagoons and even the sea were very important for trade of raw materials and luxury items that spread throughout the extensive water network, for communication and cultural exchange and because of the flora and fauna they offered the inhabitants.

THE HUAXTEC CULTURE  
IN THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

Before the eighth century, Huastec culture was different from that of other

peoples of pre-Hispanic Mexico. In the eighth and ninth centuries, it began to feel the influence of Mesoamerican ideology and contribute to enrich that of many peoples of that broader area. A century later, its integration into the Mesoamerican cultural sphere was clear. It is in this period that important changes took place which can be seen in archaeological data and later in historical sources. The presence of aspects of the culture from central Veracruz and the Huasteca area in the tenth to the twelfth centuries in El Tajín is clear. Very little has been researched about the relations between the Huasteca and central Veracruz in the eighth to the ninth centuries, or the discovery of, for example, yokes and traces of central Veracruz iconography in the Huasteca. By the tenth to twelfth centuries, the Toltec presence, and later the Mexica presence in the Huasteca, as well as the Huastec presence in central Mex-



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▲ View of the gateway to the Hidalgo Mountains.  
◀ Quetzalcóatl priest on a stela from Castillo de Teayo, Veracruz.

ico, are clear, both in written traditions or codices and in archaeological evidence.

The story of the nude *tohueyo*, a seller of chili peppers in the Tula market, with whom the daughter of Huémac, the Lord of Tula, fell in love, is only a metaphor included in Friar Bernardino de Sahagún's book *La Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (General History of the Things of New Spain) to emphasize the economic importance that the Huasteca area had for the Toltecs and the rivalry that existed because of the relationship. The sixteenth-century *Anales de Cuauhtlán* (Annals of Cuauhtlán) explains how the Ixcuiname,<sup>1</sup> the goddesses of the Huasteca, introduced sacrifice by arrow shot in the Central Highland through Tula. According to Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, when the Toltec capital was in ruins, Xólotl, "Lord of the Chichimecs," and his wife Tomiyauh,

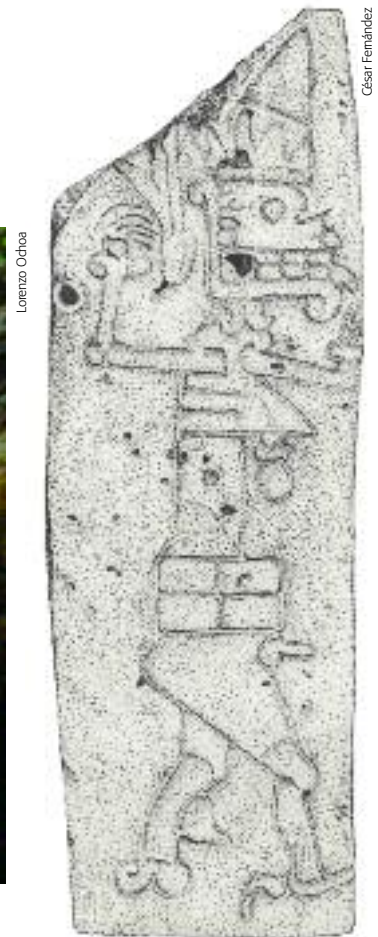
"Lady of the Huastecs," the founders of the great Texcocan line, passed by.<sup>2</sup>

By the fifteenth century, the Mexicas had conquered different parts of the Huasteca: Teayo, Tuxpan, Tzicóac, Temapache, Huejutla, Tamuín, Tempatal and Oxitipa, among others. The importance of the Huasteca for the Mexicas can be seen both in ideology and economy. Several Huastec deities, among them Tlazoltéotl and Mixcóatl, adopted by the Toltecs would in turn be embraced by the Mexica and later returned to the Huasteca with different characteristics. For the Mexicas, Tlazoltéotl was a goddess of carnal pleasures and the devourer of filth, while for the Huastecs, under the generic name "Teem," she was the goddess of women in childbirth who whisked away evil vapors. Mixcóatl, god of the hunt, was the namesake of the Huastecs, who considered themselves "the people of the deer" or "the people descendent of Mixcóatl." *Tenek*, the

The Huastecs, considered themselves "the people of the deer", descendents of Mixcóatl.



▲ The Otontepec Mountains in Citlaltépetl, Veracruz.



Zacamixtle stela depicting the God of Death. Tancoco, Veracruz (drawing). ▶



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▲ Quetzalcóatl on a tablet from Castillo de Teayo, Veracruz. Xalapa Anthropology Museum.

first part of the term *tenek bichim*, meaning deer, is the name the Huastecs call themselves today.

But these were not the only deities. The god of death ruled the Tamzembal, or the underworld; for the Huastecs, this god is associated with evil and putrefaction. Mam, an important god of this culture, was depicted as a stooped old man leaning on a cane used for planting; he is linked to the cult of fertility. Ehécatl, whose original name in the Huastec language is unknown, was the god of the wind who was originally represented as a cross-section of a conch shell, and later as a human body with a large beak. In central Mexico, written and pictorial sources depict him as a representation of Quetzalcóatl, god of the wind, who is described or depicted in Huastecan clothing: a cone-shaped cap with a semicircular fan at the base of the neck, hook-shaped ear jewelry and a necklace in the shape of a cross-section of a conch shell or *eheilacacózcatl*.

Like all the Mesoamerican cultures, their material goods were closely linked to religion. The representation of the planes of the universe have been found in some pectoral made of shell, one of the most refined forms of aesthetic expression of this culture. Some of their customs, known through chronicles, were depicted in murals and their main deities have been sculpted with great majesty. According to Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, they were recognized as great artisans for their cotton weaving; this can be seen in the codex of the Register of Tributes. They also achieved great technical capacity in the manufacture of funeral ceramics, figurine modeling, bone carving and goldsmithing.

Their architecture, sometimes monumental, was very specific: public

structures often had curved lines or circles or forms that included them, as well as rectangular floors with rounded corners as the foundations for temples like Tamtok in San Luis Potosí or Tabuco in Veracruz. The buildings had thin beams to delimit stairways, and they used stucco as finishing that was then sometimes decorated with murals, such as in Tamuín, in San Luis Potosí. They constructed houses of considerable dimensions on low platforms for the most important lords. On occasion, they built ball courts, like in El Águila Zacamiztle and Tepetzintla, Veracruz. Artesian wells have been found at some sites and for security, they erected fortifications or walled their cities, like in Yahualica, Hidalgo, or Metlatoyuca, Puebla.

The lay-out and distribution of the political-religious centers do not seem to follow the norms of Mesoamerican urban organization, which generally reproduced their understanding of the structure of the cosmos, or *Tehuaycatal* for the Huastecs. They understood it to be organized in four parts: the east or *Elelquí*, the west or *Ozalquí*, the north or *Tzaylelquí* and the south or *Quahtalquí*. This conception led them to an understanding of the changing seasons and to register the passage of time by a 365-day calendar (the *tamub*) and another, 260-day calendar (the *tzobnalquí*). They imagined the universe to be divided into three horizontal planes: the celestial plane, the earthly plane and the underworld. These concepts are reproduced in some of their ceremonies to pray for rain.

#### SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

When the Spaniards came, the Huasteca was organized in dominions des-



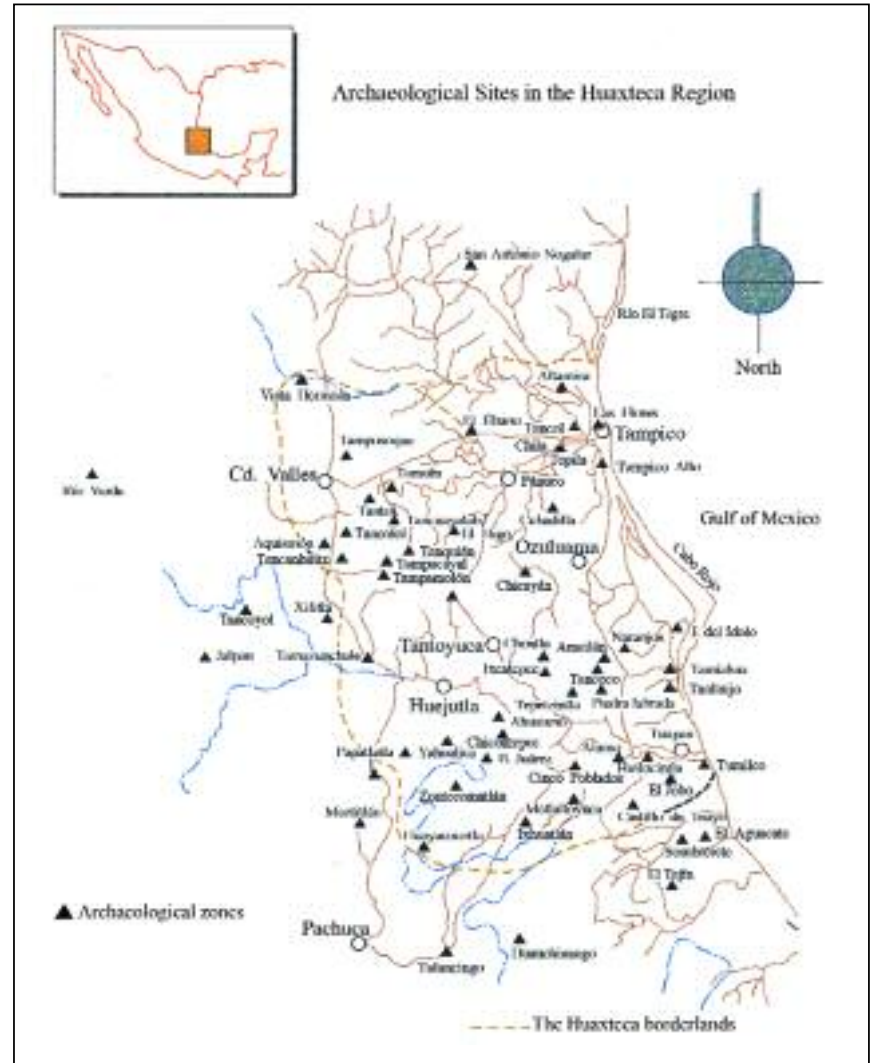
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▲ Scene of the cosmos on a shell pectoral. Tamaulipas. National Museum of Anthropology and History.

cribed as small independent provinces headed up by a governor or lord called *tzalleinic* in Huastec. Heir by paternal line to all the land, he would rent or distribute it to those who needed it, free peasants. The lord resided in the main center, called *bichou*, divided into neighborhoods called *quachmal*. The lord could be accompanied in the *bichou* by certain nobles —although this was not always the case— like the doctor or *zitom*; the wise man or *huytom*; and the *zobnax*, in charge of divination and reading the calendar. Traders and prominent artisans also resided there, while the rest of the population was distributed over a relatively wide area. It is certain that there were two clearly differentiated social classes: nobles and commoners. But it is also possible that there was a third class: slaves in the service of the lord to plow his fields or serve in his home. Both lords and commoners practiced polygyny, although it was limited by the expense of supporting one or more wives. The *tzalleinic* supported the nobility, his relatives, some of whom lived in smaller hamlets called *quamchalab*, where one of his close relatives ruled and might be given the title *ahjatic*, meaning “master” or “lord of the area.” Evidence of this form of organization can be gleaned from archaeological remains.

THE ECONOMY

The area’s political organization is a reflection of its economic development, based mainly in agriculture, fishing, cotton weaving, goldsmithing, ceramics and trade in different raw materials. Agriculture was extensive. In the eighteenth century, Don Carlos de Tapia Zenteno wrote, “The men [had]



three and even four harvests a year, although cultivation did not benefit from any but the aid of the elements or instruments other than rough stakes.”<sup>3</sup> Until now there has been no evidence of intensive agricultural techniques, but they were outstanding producers of corn, cotton, beans, squash and a broad variety of chili peppers. They caught many species —dry fish, shrimp and skate eggs— in the lagoons and rivers that they salted and sun dried. They used salt not only as a condiment, but also for medicinal purposes. In the sixteenth century, Richard Hakluyt emphasized the importance the Huastecs gave it, writing,



▲ Cut shell pectoral showing Eheilacocoxcatl, the symbol of Ehécatl, the God of the Wind.

Casa de la Cultura SIP

In those countreys they take neither golde nor silver for exchange of any thing, but onely Salt, which they greatly esteeme, and use it for a principall medicine for certaine wormes which breed in their lips and in their gummes.<sup>4</sup>

From the Huasteca came honey, hens, fine feathers, ceramics, copper bells, carved shells, raw cotton, small blankets called *quachtli*, used by the Mexicas as coin, and beautifully embroidered textiles that they distributed in local and regional markets. They used the rivers and lagoons as waterways for this trade. On land they blazed real trails and improvised paths. Several of those roads were kept up until the colonial period and, with some modifications, were later even used to build new highways. The impact of colonization transformed the old order. The rhythm of commercial traffic

changed and the ideological structures permeated by Western thought are still preserved in customs, fiestas and ceremonies. **MM**

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Ixcuinanme" is the plural of Ixcuina, one of the names of the goddess Tlazoltéotl, mother goddess par excellence, who originated with the Huastecs.

<sup>2</sup> Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras históricas* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Don Carlos de Tapia Zenteno, *Paradigma Apologético y noticia de la lengua huasteca* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, 1985), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hakluyt, *The principal navigations, voyages, traffiques and discoveries of the English Nation*, vol. 6 (London: n.p., 1927), p. 273.

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▲ Mam, God of Fertility with a planting stick.



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▲ The Huastec Mountains, San Luis Potosí.