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# Allegory in the Cacaxtla Murals

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The first thing that surprises you when you look at the Cacaxtla murals is the sensation that you are seeing something that belongs somewhere else: these paintings' formal language, theme and enormous number of iconographic details come from the Mayan tradition. And although this observation does not suffice, nor is it enough to explain the meaning of the work, it is important not to disregard it. Good arguments have been made for

the idea that the groups responsible for Cacaxtla's rise belonged to that variety of multi-ethnic league—simultaneously warriors and traders—that the literature calls Olmec-Xicalanca (made up of Mixtecs, Popolocs, southern Nahuas and perhaps another ethnic group). But even if the Olmec-Xicalancas were the largest group in the Cacaxtla fief during its golden age, the artists who produced the palace paintings must have been trained within the Mayan sphere of influence. Perhaps the Xicalanca component of the league, which seemingly came from Tabasco, was responsible for bringing with it secrets of the artistic tradition centered in the Usumacinta basin.

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The Cacaxtla murals (the one of the battle on the talud of Building B, and the images of isolated individuals on the portico of Building A) were painted between A.D. 650 and A.D. 750, which explains a great deal about their appearance. Right at that time, Teotihuacan stopped being the indisputable power that dominated a large part of Mesoamerica; and the “peripheral” cultures, as the Mayan culture had been considered in relation to the Teotihuacan system, began to have an impact on the central highlands and left very clear signs of their iconographic and stylistic preferences. In Xochicalco, in what is now the state of Morelos, a city whose zenith was contemporary with that of Cacaxtla, we can appreciate the stamp of several cultural traditions. A series of priests are seated on the talud of the Quetzalcóatl pyramid in Xochicalco; their style reflects not only clear Mayan origin, but particularly, a certain link to the city of Copán.

Cacaxtla and Xochicalco together express very well the ebb of the contraction of the Teotihuacan system. However, an important difference exists between the two sites: while Xochicalco is a mosaic of eclecticism, Cacaxtla has a strong Mayan personality to which other elements of different origin adapt subordinately. The Mayan personality of the Cacaxtla murals is seen in the naturalism of the scenes: the soft contours, the anatomical proportions, the superposition of the figures, which gives the scenes depth. The individuals’ gestures, the dramatic portrayal of pain, the emphasis on the adversary’s being physically subdued, as well as the clothing, head-dresses, arms and ornaments are all typically Mayan. Also, we should note another important feature of Cacaxtla’s paintings: while in Teotihuacan—and no less in Xochicalco—we find the monotonous repetition of identical figures that parade in what are apparently processions, in Cacaxtla, we see the

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*The Mural of the Battle, detail. Artists were using more the language of allegory than of history.*

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magnificent deployment of a series of figures that are all distinct and doing different things. In other words, when we observe the Teotihuacan murals, we have the feeling that something is being prayed or sung; in Cacaxtla, we feel that something is being narrated. This is the Mayan legacy.

#### THE ALLEGORY

Some authors who have written about Cacaxtla state that the mural of the battle relates a specific clash; they see this magnificent painting as historic testimony of a specific victory of the Olmec-Xicalancas over the Mayas that they imagine took place. The dramatic realism of the warriors who bend over in pain spilling their intestines outside their bodies and who, exhausted, let their heads loll, easily leads the viewer to the conclusion that it is a real

event. However, the idea that the painting commemorates a specific battle has no basis in fact.

The scene's apparent realism is immediately mitigated by the improbably simultaneousness of the actions depicted. We can see warriors who attack with dart-blowers, a weapon useful for combat at a distance, together with others who are thrusting their lances into the chests of their adversaries; some are binding the arms of their captives with cords while others are cutting their victims with sacrificial knives. One of the "sacrificers" is barely touching a fallen adversary's chest with the point of his flint knife, which is enough for a stream of blood to burst forth at heart level. The artists may be depicting wounds and forms of attack that really occurred in the wars of the time, but when they bring them all together in a single scene, they are using more the language of allegory than that of history. More than depicting a concrete battle, they seem to be allud-

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to war as a whole.



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*The Mural of the Battle, detail. The Mayan character is seen in the naturalism of the scenes.*





The north wall painting represents the feminine part of the cosmos.

ing to war as a whole, from the initial approach of the armies, with their dart-blowers, to the outcome, with the sacrifice of captives.

Showing the intestines of the vanquished, which for us is an upsetting detail, should be read in terms of the Mesoamerican religious tradition as a form of exalting human sacrifice, in the same fashion as the tablets of Monte Albán's so-called "dancers." The symbolic emphasis on sacrifice can also be seen in details such as the depiction of a fleshless shin-bone (a trophy that victorious warriors used to keep after the sacrifice), the placing of a *chalchihuite*, or jade bead, on the warrior's wound and the representation at several places in the mural of the glyph known as the bleeding heart.

#### THE OPPONENTS

And in this allegory of war and sacrifice, who are the opponents? In the first place, we should say that

this is not a battle with losses on both sides, which, once again, removes us further from a historical account. All the figures dressed as birds are the vanquished, the wounded, the defeated; and all those who wear skins, claws or jaguar trophy heads are the victors, subjecting the others. The birds have long feathers and the pointed beaks of rapacious species; they seem to be a hybrid between an eagle and a quetzal. Birds versus felines: we could say very little about this struggle if we did not know that it was one of the most common symbolic formulations of the Mesoamerican Postclassical period. It expressed the indigenous peoples' conviction that the cosmos was animated by the constant struggle between opposing forces: the masculine, sky, sun, the force of the bird, usually exemplified by the eagle; and the feminine, earth, water, moon, that of the feline, generally represented by the jaguar.

On a second level of understanding, the Cacaxtla "battle" could be understood as an allegory of the struggle between opposites, or the allegory of the cosmic conflict, of war *par excellence*. The paintings on the portico of what has been called Building A, situated on the highest level of Cacaxtla's palace complex, reinforces the idea that this evocation of cosmic opposition was a central concern for the elite and local artists. The painting on the north wall (an area associated with the underworld and death, the feminine part of the cosmos) represents a man dressed in a jaguar skin standing on the body of a large serpent, also covered in jaguar skin. This figure is accompanied by a calendar "date": 9-reptile eye. On the south wall (an area associated with the sky and life, the masculine sector of the cosmos), we see a figure disguised as an eagle standing on a plumed serpent and accompanied by the "date" 13-eagle feather. Not only is the clothing of both the men and the serpents related to the two cosmic extremes, but the calendar-type references are also significant: in Mesoamerica something we could call a visual synecdoche (a deer antler is used to allude to the deer and the practice of running long distances, or a jaguar claw is used to allude to the jaguar and its ferociousness). A reptile eye can be read as a metaphor for the terrestrial world; the eagle feather as a metaphor for the celestial world; the number nine coincides with the num-

ber of levels of the underworld, while the number 13 corresponds to the number of celestial levels or layers.

If we accept the thesis of the cosmic opposition, we would still need to ask ourselves why in the mural of the battle, one of the two forces triumphs over the other. Are not both forces necessary, just as are man and woman, day and night? In one part of this mural is a majestic figure with a cloak of stars, who is uninjured although his hands may be tied. Surrounded by dark threatening forces, this figure with his elegant bird clothing remains standing. In the same way, at midnight, the army that accompanied the sun toward dusk has been defeated, but the sun survives. After this temporary defeat, the sun emerges victorious in the next morning's dawn, gaining strength as it rises, and vanquishes its enemies until it reaches its zenith.

This is the way that the struggle of opposites seems to have been conceived and expressed in Mesoamerican thought and art: a struggle that is never tied be-

cause a tie would be a quietus. It is a struggle that always progresses. Only for a few seconds, at dawn and at dusk, the forces seem to balance each other: moments of anguish. An instant later one force grows until it subjects the other, but as soon as the moment of excessive domination arrives, the opposite force begins to recover ground.

Is the mural of the battle, then, an allegory for the nocturnal sky at midnight? I believe so, but it could also be understood as an allegory of the apogee of the nocturnal—and therefore, humid—forces. Several of the feline figures are facing a mask of Tlaloc, the god of rain, and both on the upper portico walls and on the door-jamb, we can observe receptacles, streams of water and the effigy of the god of rain himself. Was the idea to celebrate the abundance of water or to pray for rain in the most burning part of a prolonged drought? We must look for the answers and continue to deepen our understanding of this exceptional work. ■■



*The Mural of the Battle*, detail. The warriors' pain is depicted with dramatic realism.