

The Blue Eyebrow In the Cacaxtla Murals

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Unless otherwise specified photos courtesy of Sector Tlaxcala

Red Temple, detail.

The Cacaxtla murals are of great value in studying pre-Hispanic Tlaxcala because of their colors, state of preservation and the symbols they depict. Though they belong to a single period and culture, they have contradictions; that, together with partial interpretations, leads to conclusions that are far from their true meaning. This article contends that the society that created them already had a notion of an omnipresent, abstract god, the recipient and origin of all minor gods, some of them very old.

The series of monuments that concern us, close to the colonial sanctuary of San Miguel Arcángel (Archangel Saint Michael), have been studied since 1975 when the first mural was discovered.

Immediately after their discovery, scholars precipitately assumed the truth of the link that historian Diego Muñoz Camargo had made in 1576 between this place and the Olmec-Xicalancas group, attributed with being tri-ethnic. Historic sources from Cholula, Tlaxcala and central Mexico in general are quoted abundantly in reference to this group; so, scissors and glue in hand, people have pasted together a history about the place based on granting these texts absolute credibility.

My point of view is different, since, when these facts are examined and compared among themselves as well as with those discovered in excavations at the site and its surrounding areas, important contradictions emerge.¹ While this issue has been dealt with in other articles, I refer to it because several authors base themselves on them to explain the history of Cacaxtla and the symbolism of its paintings.

Cacaxtla's buildings contain several groups of mural paintings: the group of five murals in Building A; the mural of the battle, formed by two sections of the same scene; the two murals in the Room of the Stairs; the two murals and the banquet painted in the Red Temple; the painted pillars of the

Temple of Venus; the borders of the "Hall of the Serpents"; and the Chimalli mural.

Numerous fragments of other murals and multicolored reliefs have also been recovered, showing us extensive production over a long period; therefore, in the future, we may find other examples of this religious expression.

The murals were painted between A.D. 744 and A.D. 800 approximately, although the territory was inhabited both before and after by other dwellers.

Detailed observation of the paintings brought to my attention the repeated presence of a symbol, the "Blue Eyebrow."

When trying to characterize this element in Cacaxtla, the first thing that became clear is that it is not exactly an eyebrow; while it does occupy the place an eyebrow would be on a face, it does not look like an eyebrow or the hair that an eyebrow would have. That is why I call it "Element C" or the "Blue Eyebrow."

During the Post-classical period in central Mexico, human beings' eyebrows were part of the spiritual center that was the eye, closely linked to the acquisition of knowledge and the perception of its surroundings.²

People in the pre-Hispanic world did not perceive a radical difference between Man and animals. Proof of it is the contemporary belief in *naguales*, sorcerers who turn into animals. For this reason we suppose that the eye had the same function and value in animals. An example of this is the amulet of the eye of a deer used today.

The eye and eyebrow in Cacaxtla's representation of non-humans are conventional and symbolic, which implies a social convention to be understood.

While the blue eyebrow is linked in meaning to water and the jaguar, the concept represented is much broader and richer than has been supposed.

In the first place, it is exclusively associated to zoomorphic representations, and, in one exception in a face that, while formally anthropomorphic (the mask of Tlaloc in the receptacle held by a figure on the northern door-jamb in Building A), it is actually the symbol that distinguishes the god.

Also, the blue eyebrow is present in the mythical animals and in clothing made of animal skins.

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The old man's mask and spiraled eye make him impersonal. Red Temple, east mural.

The concept represented by the blue eyebrow is much broader and richer than has been supposed.

While formally the skin of an animal used as clothing is a dead, inert animal, in the case of the representations I am referring to, it is an active element in the meaning, and is even the central motif of the image, since the figures wearing the clothing are immersed in the symbolism of the whole.

This is the case of the figure in the northern mural in Building A, whose features are insufficient to identify him or differentiate him from any other figure in the murals, just as happens with the old man depicted in the east mural of the Red Temple, whose mask and spiraled eye make him impersonal.

In point of fact, the individuals are invested by the clothing they wear to personify the deity; on the other hand, the paintings do not narrate feats of famous men, since the individuals represented

are only vehicles for the divinity to manifest itself. The mark we are dealing with is found on animals who our Western taxonomic system places in different zoological orders (birds of prey and birds of precious feathers, carnivorous and herbivorous mammals, mollusks, crustaceans, snakes, chelonia, batrachia and fishes). At the same time, the Mesoamerican religion linked these animals to different aspects of the divinities, to different moments of the agricultural cycle, to the higher levels of the cosmos, the underworld and to several stars, among other things.

As with the human figure, the animals are not only naturalistic representations that illustrate a predominantly aquatic environment, since in addition to the blue eyebrow, they all have in common a protective covering or abode from where they exit



Red Temple, detail.

In Cacaxtla, the omnipresent God is represented by the blue eyebrow, which never appears on the human faces.



Southern door-jamb of Building A.

UNAM Institute for Aesthetic Research Photo Archive



Northern door-jamb of the same building.

UNAM Institute for Aesthetic Research Photo Archive

or “are born”, such as the scales on the fishes and serpents, the plumes on the birds, the shell of the tortoises and the shells of the mollusks and crabs.

In this regard, a human figure that is exiting from inside a *Strombus* shell held by a priest painted on the southern door-jamb of Building A is especially important since this puts the human figure on the same iconographic plane as the rest of the animals depicted.

On its counterpart, the northern door-jamb, we can see two other births: the water that is coming out of a vessel with the face of *Tláloc*, which the figure carries in his arms next to a cloud serpent, and a flowering plant that is born from the navel of God, who with his ocelot clothing represents the earth.

The murals’ creators had already developed the concept of a God that ordered all existence. This god, although present in the night and its stars, symbolized by the skin of the ocelot; in the daytime sky, represented by the diurnal birds; in the world of the dead in the paintings of the Red Temple: in the fish, tortoises and herons, and in the clothing of

men and women who represent the planet Venus, could not or should not be shown in a single form.

This deity whose name we do not know manifested among the people as the god of the rain, of the sun, of each of the stars, of death, etc., in each case with different clothing, which, when reproduced for use by the priests in their ceremonies, conferred on them the supernatural qualities of that particular minor god.

In the *Cacaxtla* paintings, the omnipresent God is represented by the blue eyebrow, which never appears on the human faces, but is always on the mythical animals, in the clothing, in the dates and symbols represented there and even in the names of the characters. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Andrés Santana Sandoval, “La identidad de los habitantes de *Cacaxtla*,” “Ubicación cronológica del Gran Basamento y sus pinturas” and “La Ceja Azul en las pinturas murales y su significado,” *Cacaxtla. Proyecto de investigación y conservación* (Tlaxcala, Mexico: INAH-Gobierno del Estado de Tlaxcala, 1990).

² Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología* vols. 1 and 2 (Mexico City: UNAM, 1984).