Insignia of Rank in the Nahua World: From the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century

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Like a teixiptla, it was a localized god-body; unlike a teixiptla, it was an ‘amorphous aniconic mass’ (190).

Its many virtues notwithstanding, I have several concerns about the work. First, although convinced of the necessity of the five, teotl-defining qualities, I am less convinced of their collective sufficiency. I worry that Bassett’s analysis of just three cases—teoxihuitl, teotetl, and teocuitlatl—serves as an insufficient inductive base to ground a generalization about the essence of a teotl. Relatedly, she omits what would appear to be the most important quality of a teotl: its power, vitality, or agency. Curiously, she attributes these qualities to teixiptlahuan and tlaquimilolli, but withholds them from teteo. Secondly, it is unclear whether Bassett approaches her subject matter from an emic or etic perspective, or if both, how these two fit together. That is, does she adopt an emic stance that seeks to understand how the Aztecs themselves conceived teteo, teixiptlahuan, and tlaquimilolli, or an etic stance that seeks to explains these from a modern, Western academic perspective? For instance, her ethnolinguistic analysis of the three terms is emic. Yet she also claims that the Aztecs’ teteo were ‘solely imaginal’ and ‘existed conceptually as qualitative clusters produced by the religious imagination.’ The ‘teteo, whether as teixiptlahuan or tlaquimilolli, were vital products of human labor and the religious imagination’ (190; cf. also 191). She adds, ‘the magic of the religious imagination [becomes visible in] the ritual manufacture of Nahua god-bodies, the teteo’ (193); and similarly, ‘These challenge our sense of how the Aztec religious imagination engaged in and enchanted the material world’ (200). Is this how the Aztecs understood the teteo? I doubt it. Such etic characterizations appear tantamount to asserting the Aztecs suffered from a Feuerbachian inversion, worshipping and interacting with phantasms of their own ‘magical’ ‘religious imagination.’

Third, given her keen awareness of the potentially distorting effects of cultural imposition, I was surprised that Bassett neglected to interrogate more thoroughly the conceptual repertoire of Western academic religious studies, including such notions as theology, religion, religious needs, religious imagination, magic, enchantment, and the metaphysical vs. natural (material and physical) world distinction.

These reservations notwithstanding, Bassett’s work admirably advances our understanding of teotl, teixiptla and tlaquimilolli. It will unquestionably serve as a continuing reference point for future discussions of these notions.

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Justyna Olko’s Insignia of Rank in the Nahua World is a follow-up to her previous work on the many material forms in which the Nahua of central Mexico expressed status and rank in body adornments. Previously written as a doctoral dissertation, the present volume retains the meticulous textual and visual analysis of its predecessor and centers primarily on early colonial documents. Both types of sources express a native, and particularly Nahua, point of view, not only because they were produced by indigenous (albeit anonymous) authors, but also
because they are based on representational, historical, and literary canons that predate the arrival of the Europeans. Olko’s comprehensive use of Nahuatl terminology is another important aspect of her philological training and research agenda.

Pictographic codices and written documents, however, were not only produced after the conquest, but were also meant to circulate in social settings openly dominated by the Spanish power. In most cases, the documents were produced by native peoples in their attempts to navigate the complex legal system established by the colonial regime. Even Bernardino de Sahagún’s Primeros Memoriales, one of the most important visual and linguistic references cited throughout the text, betrays a colonial situation of knowledge production, as it was created within the confines of Franciscan missionary schools. Olko relies primarily on these sources to reconstruct insignia of rank from the pre-Hispanic and early colonial periods, but, in the opinion of this reviewer, Olko does not sufficiently consider the extent to which the colonial situation may have influenced the depiction of pre-Hispanic iconography.

In the second chapter, the bulkiest of the book, Olko presents status items separately according to body zones, from head to feet. In so doing, the overall principle that may have guided the construction of any given apparel and its deep and multifaceted symbolic associations are lost on readers, even though the author herself is clearly aware of the underlying symbolism of many bodily adornments. Olko skillfully demonstrates, for example, the Teotihuacan and Toltec ancestry of the xiuhhuitzolli, the turquoise diadem universally identified as the royal symbol of the Mexica rulers. Given the overall design of the book, nevertheless, this discussion is fragmented in three parts (45–54, 194–95, and 311–15) and thus the breadth and possible implications of her analysis cannot be fully grasped.

The third chapter offers another systematic analysis, this time aimed at differentiating elite strategies throughout the Basin of Mexico vis-à-vis the hegemonic power of the Mexica and the Spaniards. Olko’s compelling narrative portrays a picture of astute post-conquest reuse of Mexica, Spanish and local power symbols in order to negotiate the current and local standing within colonial society. Again, rather than a pre-Hispanic view, we have a dynamic picture of the diverse forms of indigenous adaptation to the colonial situation, in a manner consistent with the main trend in the conspicuous scholarship on the topic.

The fourth and fifth chapters are interpretative, focusing on the pre-Hispanic and colonial period, respectively. Olko begins by discussing the consistent use of the term -tonal in relation-ship to the possession of valued items on the part of Mexica nobility (311–15). She notes its close semantic relationship with the important Nahua and Mesoamerican concept of tonalli, the heat and vital force inherent to living beings, including not only humans and animals, but also ceremonial and sacred objects. Unfortunately, the author does not push her interpretation any further, missing what I consider to be a key component of power in the Mesoamerican world, namely its divine nature. What are the qualities ascribed to the so-called ‘elite’? What is indeed the base and source of its prestige? Despite the fact that we can count only on a small sample of visual evidence from the pre-Hispanic period, Tenochca sculpture clearly indicates the religious power of the Mexica tlatoani. In the surviving carvings, rulers always present themselves as gods: Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl, Xipe Totec, Tezcatlipoca. Even the Chichimec costume worn by Moteuczoma Xoyocotzin in the so-called Temple Stone is a reference to revered ancestors. The image of these nomadic northern people as ‘pagan savages,’ on the other hand, was likely concocted in the colonial period, as the author amply demonstrates in several passages of the book.

Another source largely underutilized by Olko, but that unequivocally points to the divine roots of Mesoamerican conception of power, is the so-called Codex Borbonicus, an early colonial pictorial document, considered the closest example of a Mexica pre-Hispanic screenfold.
In the section dedicated to the *veintena* ceremonies celebrated throughout the solar year and culminating with the New Fire ceremony in 1507, Moctezuma Xoyocotzin wears the attire of Xiuhcoatl, the Fire Serpent, and is identified as the Mexica tlatoani in the accompanying Spanish text. The big protagonist is nevertheless the Cihuacoatl, the second ranking office and principal priest in the Triple Alliance, whose depiction in the manuscript is in all inextricable from the priest-goddess of the same name. Looking at these examples, it becomes apparent that Mexica and other central Mexican elites omitted this aspect of rulership in the representation of their ancestors and genealogies in colonial documents, because native religion was relentlessly persecuted by Spanish authorities. The tragedy of this persecution can only be seen through scattered sources, such as, for example, the Inquisition trials against the ruler of Tetzcoco Don Carlos Ometochtzin, who was executed in 1539. The turquoise diadem had indeed been relegated to a mere marker of rank, readily identifiable and made equivalent to the Spanish insignia, namely, the Crown. But as Olko also suggests, symbolic continuity does not only exist in forms, but most importantly in meaning, as in the case of the Mesoamerican spear and the European *vara* (staff) that converged in the Nahua *topilli* (staff and officer), which has become a symbol of authority and sovereignty in many Mesoamerican communities (291–98).

Justyna Olko’s book is a valuable and reliable text on the myriad indigenous sources that deal with elite iconography in central Mexico before and after the Spanish conquest. I just happen to disagree with a socio-historical approach that, in my view, fails to consider the hermeneutics of power among the people it sets to study.

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