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A Teotihuacan Censer in a Residential Context: An Interpretation

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A TEOTIHUACAN CENSER IN A RESIDENTIAL CONTEXT

An interpretation

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Abstract

This article describes an elaborate "theater-type censer" found around a burial in a residential apartment compound of the Late Xolalpan phase excavated at Teotihuacan. It consists of a richly dressed human figure associated with representations of plants and food, clouds and flowers, and butterfly symbols. Its context and the associated elements attached to the censer evoke fire, death, and fertility symbolism.

Without doubt, one of the most intriguing deities related to Teotihuacan was the Butterfly God. It also appears in urns of the Monte Alban IIIA phase in Oaxaca that show strong Teotihuacan influence (Boos 1964:78). There are no representations of this deity in the Formative horizon, nor in the Maya area (Franco 1959), yet it became common among the Mixtecs, Toltecs, and Aztecs after the Classic period.

In Classic Teotihuacan, adornos, molded plaques for censers, seals, painted or incised vessels, and murals show representations of the butterfly. There is also a whole palace (the Quetzalpapalotl Palace) that could be related to it; in this structure, Acosta (1964:59-60) found stones with shell, maize cob, and jadeite bead depictions.

One of the most impressive Teotihuacan ceramic objects is the "theater-type censer," which shows a series of symbols normally related to a central figure. They could have been used in domestic ritual. In them, two elements are constant: butterflies and birds (Séjourné 1959:113). During the Xolalpan phase (A.D. 400-650), we find examples of this class of object in residential compounds such as Tetitla (Berlo 1984: Pls. 6, 9, 10, 19, 20, 23, 26), La Ventilla (Berlo 1984: Pls. 7, 22, 83b), and Zacuala (Berlo 1984: Pl. 15). There are other examples from Azcapotzalco (Berlo 1984: Pl. 8), and Kaminaljuyu and Escuintla in Guatemala (Berlo 1984: Pls. 80-82a, 85-87, 89-100, 106-115, 130). Most of these censers show representations of a human face wearing a butterfly nose plaque. Unfortunately, only a few come from well-defined contexts, such as the burials at Tetitla and Tlamimilolpa.

As part of the "Old City of Teotihuacan; First Phases of Urban Development" Project, directed by Linda Manzanilla (Barba and Manzanilla 1987; Barba, Ludlow, and Valadez 1987; Manzanilla and Barba 1990), a Teotihuacan residential compound of the Late Xolalpan phase was excavated in N6W3 of Millon's grid (Millon 1973) (Figure 1). This residential compound was a small "middle-class" domestic unit, which covered 20% of Tetitla's surface. Archaeofaunal, phytolithic, pollen, ar-



Figure 1. An aerial view of the apartment compound excavated at Oztoyohualco, Valley of Teotihuacan.

chaeobotanical, chemical, and archaeological analyses were undertaken to discriminate activities inside the rooms. In the floor of room 21 (in the eastern section), Pit 6 was excavated; it contained the burial of a young adult male, 22 to 23 years old, in a flexed dorsal decubitus position, and the cranium—intentionally deformed, in a tabular oblique manner—lay toward the north (Civera 1988).

This burial (Number 8) was accompanied by a theater-type censer that was dismantled before depositing the fragments around the corpse: the chimney was located to the west of the body; the lid of the censer and the censer's human face (face up) to the east of the cranium; the representations of plants of economic value to the south; the four petal flowers, feather rings, and the mica to the east and west. Linné (1942:172) found a theater-type censer dismantled in a similar manner in Burial 1 at Tlamimilolpa.

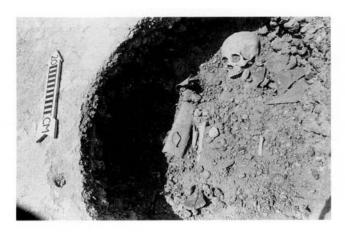


Figure 2. Burial 8 located in room 21, with the censer's parts detached and dispersed around it.



Figure 3. Another view of Burial 8 (a deeper layer).

In addition to the theater-type censer, the objects interred with the burial included seven miniature vessels, two miniature plates, slate fragments, shell, and one jadeite bead.

Once the offerings were deposited within the burial, the pit was filled with small pyroclastic fragments (*tezontle*) (Figures 2 and 3), extracted from local caves and probably copying them, and the stucco floor was rebuilt on top.

DESCRIPTION

According to Berlo (1984:27-28) the component clay parts of a theater-type censer are (1) a base, consisting of a biconical shaped vessel, within which incense is burned (it was not present in this particular burial), (2) a conical lid with handles on the sides, (3) a chimney attached to the back of the lid, (4) an armature for the addition of (5) associated elements (adornos), and (6) a face (Figure 4a-c).

The lid is in the shape of a truncated cone with a height of 34.5 cm and a base diameter of 20.5 cm. The porous clay is a brownish-red color (Munsell 5YR 4/3) and was fired at low temperature causing it to be friable. The truncated, cone-shaped

chimney affixed to the upper back of the lid is 10.5-cm long, with an oval-shaped base which has a maximum width of 9 cm and a minimum width of 6.5 cm. To the sides of the lid the two handles protrude. The joining of the lid and handles was done while the clay was in a leather-hard state. Before the chimney was joined, an oval shape was perforated in the lid to allow the smoke to escape.

According to Berlo, this chimney shape, wide at the bottom and narrow at the top, falls within the last period of censer production, her "Innovation Phase": A.D. 450-700.

By establishing a relationship between the length of the head and the height of the lid and chimney, Berlo develops a proportional canon for theater-type censers. The censer we are referring to in this essay has a proportion of 1:6.5, a ratio which characterizes the Innovation Phase (Berlo 1984:50).

The body of the human figure, the face being the focal point of the composition, serves as scaffolding for the form, as it provides the support for the headdress and the rectangular plaques which also act as armatures, as various elements (adornos) are affixed to them. The plaques are in front of and parallel to the chimney, surrounding the face which is recessed within a symmetrical frame.

The human figure is 18.5-cm high and 16-cm wide. Standing on the lid of the censer, with feet apart and toes pointing forward, his arms are raised to chest level and in each hand he holds a rectangular plaque.

It is important to note that censers and representations of the Butterfly God (or his priest) with full-body human figures are rare. A painted vessel with a Butterfly God found at Kaminaljuyu was described by Kidder and was cited by Caso (1949:Fig. 11). It also has a butterfly pectoral.

The face of the figure seems moldmade, as on the back of the head concave traces caused by a tool's pressure can be observed (see Múnera 1985). The features, stylistically Teotihuacan, are sharp and crisp. A rectangular band painted horizontally in pinkish-white color crosses the eye area; the lacrimal region and the folds of the eye are outlined in black.

The figure's wardrobe consists of black earplugs with circular rings attached; a nose plaque formed by a thin polygonal slab painted greenish-black with a yellow border, identified as an attribute specific to anthropomorphic representations of a Butterfly Deity (von Winning 1987: vol. I, Chap. IX, Figs. 10-13; Berlo 1984: Pt. ii), and called *yacapapálotl*; a necklace and bracelets made up of large beads with traces of black; a skirt which reaches midthigh (and which in the Kidder vessel was interpreted by Caso as a woman's garment) and a loincloth which falls to the knees; a cape divided in two lateral sections held up by two green flowers with long stems, similar to lilies; a band with three bells painted pale pink which wraps around the calf; and sandals with a central tassel. The clothing, skirt, loincloth, and cape have applications of a Teotihuacan merlon shape on the borders, painted in a grayish-pink color.

The figure wears a large headdress which consists of six sections: two lateral and four central sections (Parts 1 to 4). We shall describe the central sections first (Figure 5).

Parts 1 and 2. The first two parts are convex forms. The smaller half-circle-shaped section (19-cm wide and 9-cm long) ends in short black feather forms and is directly affixed to the chimney chute; a larger section (33-cm wide and 13-cm long)



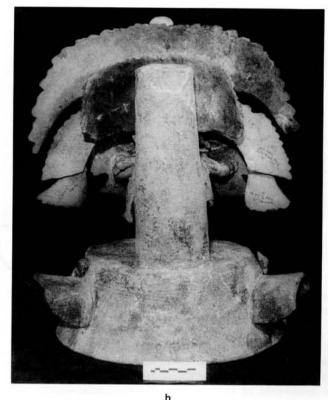




Figure 4. (a) Frontal, (b) back, and (c) lateral views of the theater-type censer.

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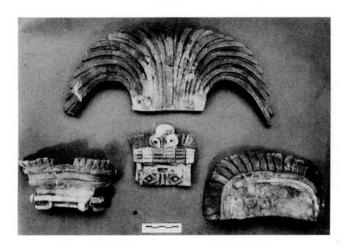


Figure 5. Parts of the headdress.

ending in long feathers painted dark greenish-black, overlaps the half-circle.

Part 3. The third section is a rectangular plaque (10.5-cm long and 9.5-cm high) similar in form to that which Langley (1986:156, Fig. 45b) calls "Manta of the MC type." The plaque is constituted by four registers. On the lowest register, the plaque has two rhomboid shapes with rings at the center; the rhomboid shapes are flanked by rectangles, two on either side, three at the center (fire motifs; see Langley 1986:252; von Winning 1987: vol. II, Chap. 2, Fig. 5a-d) with traces of black and yellow (Munsell 7.5 YR 6/8). The second register is a motif which refers to the year sign (von Winning 1987: vol. II, Chap. III, Fig. 2). In the middle register, one observes six columns of small rectangles, each column in a different color (from right to left: green, black, yellow, black, white, grayish-pink). The last register ends in feather forms and a triple scroll with traces of yellow, white, and grayish-pink. The triple scroll is referred to by Langley (1986:296) as "Trefoil G," and could represent three flames of fire (von Winning 1987: vol. II, Chap. 2, Fig. 4), and by extension, smoke. The Triple Scroll also resembles a butterfly's antenae and proboscis.

Part 4. The fourth section of the headdress (maximum length: 15 cm; minimum length: 10.3 cm; height: 8 cm) is formed by five horizontal bands and concludes in short, black feather forms; the lower band carries a motif formed by two right angles which are joined at the apex by a horizontal strip painted white, while the remaining bands have traces of a pinkish-grey (Munsell 7.5 YR 7/2).

These four central parts are superimposed, forming layers. The first three parts are behind the figure's head, whereas the fourth is attached to the figure's forehead, concealing the plaque with the rhomboidal shapes.

The two lateral sections of the headdress are long, curving forms which are attached to the second part of the central section. The outer edges are bordered by black feather forms. Hanging from these sections are two feather tassels adhered by the original Teotihuacan "cementing substance."

The two rectangular plaques on three sides terminate in long projecting greenish-black feather forms. Within the feather form, a frame is created by two parallel strips on all sides; the innermost are yellow, the exterior grayish-pink.

In order to classify and describe the elements (adornos), a division was made between those associated with the figure and those related to the lid. This division is based on evidence extant on other media of the Teotihuacan culture. Certain elements that we have associated with this human figure always appear related to anthropomorphic figures; whereas the elements attached to the lid do not appear related to human figures, yet always appear as "sustenance" ("mantenimientos") falling either from the hands of an important figure (von Winning 1987: vol. II, Chap. IX, Fig. 2d), dropping from the upper part of the composition (Séjourné 1966: Fig. 93) or as a core cluster (Langley 1986:106, 113). It is interesting to note that some of these symbols also appear associated elsewhere; for example, there is a polychrome plaque found in Offering 38 at Tetitla which depicts the tortilla, the tamal bundles, and the malinalli (twisted grass) related to other symbols (Figure 6).

ELEMENTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE FIGURE (FIGURE 7)

Thirteen 4-petal flowers with feather ring and mica. The rings vary
in diameter, one large ring (10 cm), eight medium rings (8 cm), and
three small rings (5 cm). These could have formed part of the headdress, although there is not sufficient space nor cement traces to
hold all of them.

At the center of the ring a roundel of mica is inserted, surrounded by four yellow petals with a white outline. The flower in turn is encircled by black feather forms. Taube (in Langley 1986:318) suggests that forms of this general kind are mirrors worn on the chest, the forehead or as *tetzcacuitlapilli*. *Metzcuitlatl*, the moon's excrement, was the Mexica word for mica (Sahagún 1963:235).

The largest of them was probably the center of the butterfly which was part of the pectoral of the human figure, and which had the wings attached to it.

- 2. Two 4-petal flowers. These (2.5 cm in diameter) do not show traces of color, and belong to a form Langley (1986:31, Nos. 160 and 107) terms "quatrefoil." Heyden (1977:24) considers the form a part of womb symbolism, referring to fertility, creation, the place of return and rest, comparing it to the the cave beneath the Pyramid of the Sun.
- 3. Two feathered eyes. These are semicircular forms with a black pupil within a pink iris which is partially surrounded by black feather forms. The elements are similar to what von Winning identifies as "bird eye" (1987: vol. II, p. 68), and particularly resembles an owl eye (von Winning 1987: vol. II, "Los glifos," Chap. I, Figs. 5e and 5f). Yet they are the butterfly's eyes, as can be seen in different representations (Caso 1949:80; Boos 1964:78).
- 4. Two upper portions of butterfly wings: trapezoidal plaques (5.5-cm long and 4-cm high) bounded by feather forms on two sides. The white background is surrounded by a raised yellow border with four semicircular shapes and three pointed forms projecting inward onto the background. Langley (1986:331) calls the form "Object O," and points out that the shape is possibly the stylization of a butterfly wing as seen on several Teotihuacan vessels (i.e., von Winning 1987: vol. I, Chap. IX, Figs. 5, 7a, 7b, and 8). These formed part of the pectoral.
- 5. Two lower portions of butterfly wings (Langley 1986:300; von Winning 1987: vol. II, Chap. I, Figs. 4a and 4b; Kubler 1967:43).

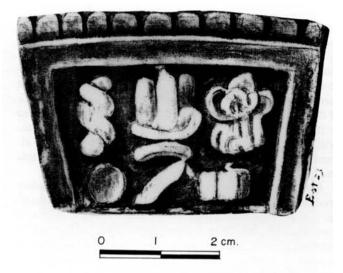


Figure 6. Plaque from Offering 38 at Tetitla.

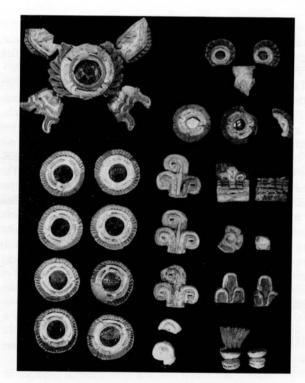


Figure 7. Elements associated with the figure.

The shape is fungiform with three tails at the base; over the white background a black undulating line crosses and outlines the shape horizontally. At the top of the form a small volute projects inward onto the background. Von Winning (1987: vol. I, Chap. IX, Fig. 7a) classifies similar forms as the lower wing form of a butterfly.

Four feather tassels or butterfly antennae. These elements have a semicircular form with traces of grayish-pink color, and with a yellow tie which gathers the long black feather forms. Von Winning

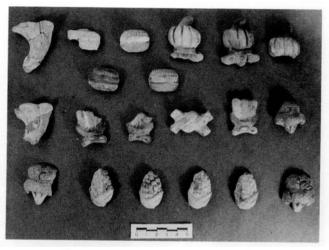


Figure 8. Elements associated with the lid.

(1987: vol. I, Chap. IX, Fig. 17) identifies the shapes as butterfly antennae.

- 7. Two trimountain symbols or cloud accumulations (von Winning 1987: vol. II, p. 11; Langley 1986:274). It is a trilobed form 3.8-cm long and 4-cm wide, with lateral lobes which are smaller than the central lobe; the background of the shape is black, surrounded by a white border. Tobriner (1972) notes that this form is a symbol of a fertile mountain.
- Four triple scrolls. These elements are of the same form as the triple scroll described as part of the third section of the headdress.
- Two mantas of the MC type (Langley 1986:156). These elements were described earlier as the lower register of the third part of the headdress.
- 10. One small bird. The three dimensional form is similar to the representation Langley (1986:303) presents as "bird dorsal"; he identifies the bird (following Armillas) as an owl. Regarding the frontal view of the head, Langley notes that it typically appears as an adorno on offertory censers.

In evaluating the proportion of the different types of *adornos* in the Diego Rivera Collection, Séjourné (1959:119) concluded that 475 were feathers, 183 butterflies, 137 bird heads, and 118 flowers.

ELEMENTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LID (FIGURES 8 AND 9)

- Four ears of corn (Figure 9a). These are painted pink or white, while the husk pulled down is painted green. The rows of grain taper toward the tip of the form (3.8-cm high, 2.4-cm wide).
- Three Cucurbita fruits (Figure 9b). The form consists of a black stem, a grayish-green circular segmented body, and a black horizontal band beneath a yellow flower (3.1-cm high, 4.8-cm wide).
- Two Cucurbita flowers (Figure 9c). This edible flower is a curved, elongated form painted yellow while the stem is painted a pale green (5.1-cm high, 5-cm wide).
- 4. Two cotton buds (Figure 9d). The form consists of a three-pronged stem painted yellow, from which the cotton, in spirals represented in a trilobed manner, emerges. The central lobe spins clockwise and the side lobes spin inward on the form. The surface of the clay is textured with dots. Langley (1986:296) calls the form "trefoil E, ref-

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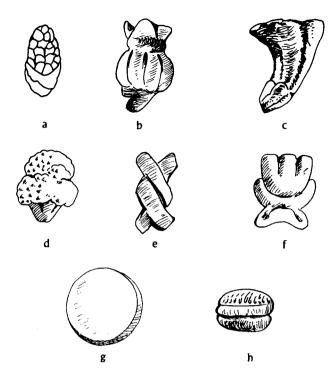


Figure 9. Elements associated with the lid.

erence 696" and identifies it as an open cotton bud (4.7-cm high, 3.3-cm wide).

- One unidentified bud. This shape is similar to the cotton bud, though the form is smaller and the direction of the central spiral varies. There are no traces of color.
- Two twisted grass symbols (malinalli) (Figure 9e). The shape is formed by two interlaced bands, one painted yellow the other white (4-cm high, 2.5-cm wide).
- 7. Four curved elements, *xonecuilli*. The open "S" shape has tapering ends and is painted grayish-pink. It could represent one of the forms of bread the Mexica used during their festivities:

... ofrecían en su templo, o en las encrucijadas de los caminos, pan hecho de diversas figuras. Unos, como mariposas, otros de figura del rayo que cae del cielo, que llaman xonecuilli, y también unos tamalejos que se llaman xucuichtlamatzoalli, y maíz tostado que llaman ellos ízquitl (Sahagún 1985: Bk. I, Chap. X, 35).

In the Florentine Codex, the representation of edible water worms called *izcauitli* is similar in form to the curved elements described (Sahagún n.d.: Bk. XI, Chap. V, No. 33).

- 8. Three *tamal* bundles (Figura 9f). The form consists of three vertical oblong shapes, painted white, yellow, and pink within a black concave pedestal vessel with incisions painted pink. Taube (1989) provides several representations of this element.
- 9. Three disks (Figure 9g). A grayish-pink disk with a diameter of 3.3 cm. These forms could be representations of *tortillas*.
- 10. Three bowls of froth (Figure 9h). This element is formed by three sections: the lower band is pink; the center band is white, and the clay forming the superior band is textured and painted yellow (3-cm long, 2.3-cm wide). This form has not been identified, but we suggest that it could be a bowl containing a frothy liquid such as chocolate or pulque, or even huauhtli seeds. The bowl also could contain spider or insect eggs as Furst (1974:201) suggests.

The censer was probably constructed in the following manner: first the figure's lower body and trunk were modeled; then the skirt, arms, and head were attached. The armature is made up of the headdress and plaques, and the elements are then moldmade and affixed to the figure and lid. All plaques and elements are on the front of the censer, which indicates that the form was meant to be seen primarily from the front. The back of the lid and figure most probably did not have elements added to them as traces of the Teotihuacan "glue" are not present. With the exception of the four triple scroll forms which were affixed with a fine white paste, the joining of the various elements and the armature was done using a fine yellow paste.

Berlo (1984:33-34) has identified two methods for censer production: in the first, the nonfired armature and the elements are joined by soft clay pellets when the clay is in a leather-hard state, and the entire form is subsequently fired. Linné (in Berlo 1984:47) reports that the soft-clay pellets are a yellowish clay that when found as a cementing substance, indicates the piece was assembled and fired as a whole.

In the second method, the armature and the elements are fired independently; after firing the parts are joined using a "lime-stucco glue." Berlo, upon having examined hundreds of prefired elements (adornos), has determined that the lime stucco "glue" is a "white lime compound." The censer we refer to in this essay has traces of both types of cementing substance, suggesting there were two stages of construction during which the various elements were attached.

The conservation of the censer was based on the premise set forth by international conservation treaties (see Carta de Venecia 1964) which state that the form must be viewed as a whole, not as a conglomeration of parts. The censer is a composition which can be and was physically dismembered; yet the parts are not independent, as the elements of the composition subordinate their individual value to create a significant totality. The censer was found during a controlled excavation and data are available to practice a correct restoration in order to reestablish the form's potential unity. As a guide to the placement of the elements, the traces left by the original cementing substance were followed (the shapes of the marks in the censer's body were matched with the cement rests on the adorno's back). Where traces were not available to determine the position of elements, these were not attached to the composition, but were displayed separately.

INTERPRETATION

The Butterfly Deity

The figure on the censer is related to the Teotihuacan Butterfly Deity described by von Winning (1987: vol. I, Chap. IXb, p. 117, Figs. 9-11) and Caso (Boos 1964) (Figure 10). Characteristics and functions specific to butterflies provide a variety of meanings for its graphic representations. Only in images which appear in mural painting is the butterfly represented in its entirety. In ceramic representations, the body parts of the butterfly (wings, thorax, head, proboscis, and antennae) are schematized (von Winning 1987:117). These schematized ceramic forms are joined into diverse compositions, which, depending on their association with other elements, can make reference to death and fertility.



Figure 10. One possible reconstruction of the figure. Not all the elements were inserted.

The censer referred to in this essay has two specific units which allude to the butterfly complex: the nose plaque, a form identified by Seler (in von Winning 1987:119) as *yacapapálotl*, and the pectoral formed by the two sets of wings and the large feathered ring with the mica at the center (Figure 11). The two feathered eyes over the figure's face have been also identified as the butterfly's eyes by Boos (1964:78).

Fire and Death Symbolism

Kubler (1967:9) refers to a butterfly complex which is generally associated with flower and mountain forms; these elements are interpreted by Kubler as related to funerary symbolism and the afterlife, suggesting that the butterfly may be an image for the soul, as it was in the Postclassic horizon.

In modern Mazatec lore, the butterfly is related to the souls of the dead (Cowan 1953:93), and this is also a belief common in Europe, Japan, the Pacific Isles and the American continent (F & C Standard Dictionary of Folklore 1949:94). In some North American groups, such as the Hopi, the butterfly is a clan symbol, related to rain clouds. The Cherokee also relate the butterfly to fire (Franco 1959:202). Yet it is normally the nocturnal itzpapálotl (Rothschildia orizaba), the obsidian butterfly, that is related to the fire made with flints (Hoffmann 1931).

Von Winning (1987: vol. I, p. 115) compares the coloring and the fragility of the butterfly's wings to the flower, whereas Aguilera (1988) notes the similarity between the fluttering motion of a yellow butterfly and the movement of a flame, thus explaining why the Fire Deity has it as its symbol. Seler



Figure 11. Butterfly pectoral that could have been attached to the human figure's chest.

(1961:714) pointed out that the butterfly, as the creature of the Fire God, is the representation of the dead. Seler (1961:715) also added that the *cihuateteo* (women who died during childbirth) and the warriors who died during battle lived in Tamoanchan as butterflies.

Sahagún (1985: Bk. XI, Chap., V, p. 657) describes diverse varieties of butterflies. According to Beutelspacher (in Valle 1988), the butterfly identified in this essay is a diurnal species, probably *Papilio multicaudatus*, a butterfly common to the Mexican central plateau temperate and cold regions. A contemporary myth from Michoacan reveals that the monarch butterfly is considered the soul of the dead, which explains why great multitudes of butterflies arrive during the month of November, the month during which All Saint's Day is celebrated.

Another element on the censer which relates to death is the owl, represented in a three-dimensional form. Here we must underline the fact that the censer in question was found associated with a burial, thus establishing a close relationship to the funerary world. Also, the pyroclastic fragments which were deposited within the burial pit are of the same material from which the natural caves are formed in the Teotihuacan Valley. Therefore we might consider that by covering the corpse and associated funerary offerings with this rock, the Teotihuacanos were reproducing a cave.

Acosta (1964:62) also believed that at Teotihuacan, the butterfly is associated symbolically with the quetzal bird, whereas at Monte Alban, it was related to the jaguar.

Fertility

The butterfly complex, as well as being associated with death, is associated with fertility (von Winning 1987; Pasztory 1976:157). The elements affixed to the lid of the censer represent plants, processed food, and objects of economic importance. Therefore the elements that seem to fall from the figure's hands, and from the upper area of the lid's composition, reiterate the fertility concept.

Cave and underworld are closely interlaced with the concept of fertility, as one can see in the representation of seeds within a cave beneath the main figure in the mural painting of the "Tlalocan" at Tepantitla.

The death-fertility complex, a major subject presented by the censer, is referred to in the hymn to Ometeotl quoted by Sahagun's informants in the *Florentine Codex*, a hymn which Pasztory (1976) relates to the principal deity of the "Tlalocan" of Tepantitla:

Madre de los dioses, padre de los dioses, el dios viejo, tendido en el ombligo de la tierra, metido en un encierro de turquesa.
El que está en las aguas color del pájaro azul, el que está encerrado en nubes, el dios viejo, el que habita en las sombras de la región de los muertos, el señor del fuego y del año.

(León-Portilla 1961)



Figure 12. The censer with all its elements.

RESUMEN

Este artículo describe un incensario "tipo teatro" hallado alrededor de un entierro en un complejo residencial de la fase Xolalpan tardía que fue excavado en Teotihuacan. Consiste de una figura humana ricamente ataviada, asociada con representaciones de plantas y alimentos, nubes y flores, y símbolos de mariposa. Su contexto y los elementos asociados a dicho incensario evocan simbolismos de fuego, muerte y fertilidad.

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