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## Questioning a Queen? A Gender-Informed Evaluation of Monte Alban's Tomb 7

3

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ARCHAEOLOGY PRESENTS AN OPPORTUNITY to critically evaluate norms of behavior for past societies. At the same time, however, the historical tendency has been to reproduce behavioral patterns that are suspiciously close to the ideological constructions of modern society (Hodder 1984; Shanks and Tilley 1988; Trigger 1989; Wylie 1991). The reconstructed past has often been lacking in powerful women, much as recent Western history has generally relegated female actors to the periphery (Conkey and Spector 1984; Wylie 1991). Yet recent archaeological analyses (and reanalyses) have revealed biological females buried with enormous wealth (Bell 2002; McCafferty and McCafferty 1994a), suggesting that women did have access to resources well beyond what was suspected even ten years ago. Since these discoveries correspond to a revisionist awareness of women's historical position, the question arises as to whether or not gender blindness has obscured earlier noblewomen (cf. McCafferty and McCafferty 1994b). For example, excavations in the Maya world have recently discovered both the founding queen of the Copan dynasty (Bell 2002) and the royal grave of Lord Pacal's mother, from whom he inherited the Palenque throne. These are essentially the only Maya noblewomen ever discovered. Is this coincidence? Or is it a result of an engendered archaeology that does not *intrinsically* associate wealth with males?

Several years ago, we conducted a reanalysis of the Tomb 7 burial at Monte Alban as an experiment in "regendering" the principal individual of the tomb (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994a). Tomb 7 is one of the richest burials known from Mesoamerica, with over five hundred objects of precious materials and intricate workmanship (Caso 1969). The tomb was excavated in the 1930s by Alfonso Caso, one of the premiere Mexican archaeologists of the twentieth century and a brilliant iconographer. Caso and his physical anthropologist, Daniel Rubin

de la Borbolla (1969), identified nine individuals in the burial context, including the principal skeleton that they called Individual A: an adult "male" who was interpreted as a deity impersonator based on iconographic references to the monstrous god Xolotl.

Because of the excellent quality of Caso's publication on the tomb, extensive information is available for subsequent analysis. We became interested in the burial contents because of the high number of spinning and weaving artifacts associated with Individual A. Based on our previous studies of pre-Columbian gender relations (McCafferty and McCafferty 1988, 1991, 2000; also Brumfiel 1991; Hellbom 1967; Sullivan 1982), it is apparent that spinning and weaving were closely associated with female gender identity (figure 3.1). Thus it was curious that

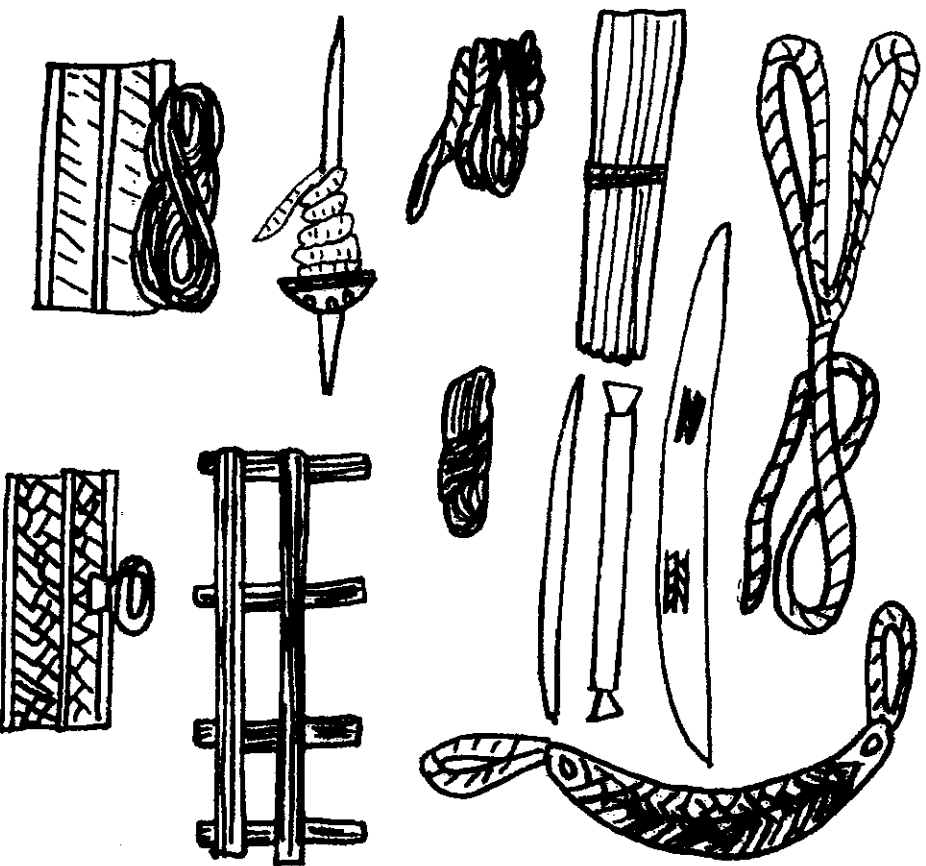


Figure 3.1. Spinning and weaving objects used to mark female identity. (After Sahagun 1950–1982, Book 2:139.)

the "male" occupant of Tomb 7 would be buried with spindle whorls, spinning bowls, and thirty-four weaving barmes and picks made of carved bone

Reconsideration of the skeletal remains of Individual A suggested that the biological sexing of the skeleton was not as clear-cut as had been previously supposed. Rubin de la Borbolla, for example, claimed to have sexed every bone of the skeleton (1969), including rib fragments and phalanges—a level of identification that is simply impossible without DNA testing. More easily sexable bones, such as the pelvis, were not present from the skeleton, presumably due to poor preservation, so the male biological sex was ambiguous at best (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994a). In fact, several bones that were present indicated a female sex for the skeleton—the most obvious of these, the mandible, was depicted on the excavation plan in articulated context with the skeleton but was omitted from the burial inventory, perhaps because the sexable characteristics of the mandible (which Rubin de la Borbolla identified as female in a separate list) did not correspond to the male identification. Our conclusion, published in *Current Anthropology* in 1994, was that the artifacts imply a female gender, while the biological sex may have also been female, though this was less clear. We suggested that the tomb was actually a shrine dedicated to an aspect of the earth-fertility goddess cult, analogous to the *Mixtec Lady 9 Grass* or the *Aztec Cihuacoatl*.

Since our initial study, numerous scholars have reevaluated our analysis. *Current Anthropology* commentators moved the analysis in interesting directions and were generally in agreement with our conclusion. However, Flannery and Marcus (1994) accused us of "manipulating" the data to support our own "politically correct" agenda, while asserting that the carved bones were too small to have functioned as weaving tools (but see G. McCafferty and S. McCafferty 1994).

Middleton, Feinman, and Molina Villegas (1998) discounted the material evidence as "contextual" but went on to suggest that the skeleton was a "composite" of spare parts, and so was not really an individual at all. This interpretation, however, revolved around the identification of two left clavicles but ignored previously discussed evidence to the contrary (the osteological inventory correctly identified both a right and a left clavicle) that substantially undercut their argument (G. McCafferty and S. McCafferty 1994). Their conclusion that Individual A was merely a pile of bones glosses over the fact that it was in articulated anatomical position for a flexed, seated bundle burial.

An unpublished study by Alexander Christenson, who was allowed to restudy some of the bones from Individual A, came to the tentative conclusion that the postcranial skeleton was not necessarily from the same individual as the skull, in part based on differential weathering of the bones (personal communication, 1999). Christenson identified some postcranial bones as probably female, while the skull fragment was likely male. Unfortunately, Christenson was not able to

complete this reanalysis; it is hoped that in the future, a comprehensive reanalysis, including DNA testing of the bones, will be accomplished.

In another unpublished study, David Cooper (personal communication, 2001) tentatively identified the meningial lesion on the interior of Individual X's skull, based on the published photograph in Rubin de la Borbolla (1969), as a pathological condition that occurs in mature females in 95% of cases. This possibility again needs to be clarified with inspection of the actual cranial fragment.

The most detailed consideration of the material objects from Tomb 7 is presented by Byron Hamann (1997), who accepts the spinning and weaving identification as evidence of a female-gendered theme for the assemblage. However, Hamann relates these artifacts to similar objects carried by female members of the Zacchila dynasty in the Codex Nuttall and suggests that the tomb may correspond to one of the noblewomen of that lineage, perhaps Lady 4 Rabbit, who came from the Mixtec city of Tlantonngo to marry the Zapotec Lord 5 Flower and thereby found the dynasty. Under this interpretation, Tomb 7's Individual A would have been a *caticia*, or Mixtec queen.

In the remainder of this paper, we will examine these two hypotheses: (1) our suggestion that Individual A was a religious figure, or (2) that she was a Mixtec noblewoman. Evidence for contextualizing the burial assemblage is available from ethnohistorical sources, including both Colonial period accounts and pre-Columbian pictorial manuscripts known as codices. In both cases, women are represented as major cultural actors in a variety of social contexts: as rulers, warriors, wives, and ritual practitioners.

The Mixtec have long been noted as a culture in which women received high esteem, where they could and did inherit title to kingdoms and where in cases of marriage alliances they could designate female heirs to continue their matrilineal line (Spores 1974, 1997). In the Codex Becker II (1960), noblewomen are indicated in a system of matrilineal descent.

In his recent article "Mixteca *Caticas*: Status, Wealth, and the Political Accommodation of Native Elite Women in Early Colonial Oaxaca," author Ronald Spores (1997) elaborates on the lives of several prominent women in the decades following the Spanish Conquest. For example, Ana de Sosa was the *caticia* of Tututepec, a prominent city-state on the Pacific coast. She was "the wealthiest and most powerful woman in southern New Spain in the mid-16th century" with vast landholdings and numerous houses. Her personal property included gold, silver, coral, turquoise, and jade jewelry, precious feathers, and vast quantities of textiles. Other *caticas* included Catalina de Peralta of Teposcolula, the Spanish administrative capital of the Mixteca, and Maria de Saavedra of Tlaxiaco, who was recognized as "the greatest *caticia* of the Mixteca." These women were able to successfully administer

their queendoms, defend them in Spanish courts, and accumulate enormous wealth in the process.

A second source for information on pre-Conquest queens is found in the pictorial codices. Of the tens of thousands of codices that probably once existed, only a handful has survived. These generally present mythical historical events, often in the form of long-term genealogies reaching back into mythical time with the founding of localized dynasties. Women are not represented as often as men in the codices, though in some accounts they are more prominent relative to others.

Noblewomen are often depicted in marriage scenes, seated on jaguar skin seats or on woven mats across from their husbands, frequently offering a ceramic vessel containing whipped cacao as a symbol of the marriage ceremony (figure 3.2). Within the Mixtec ideology of gender complementarity, marriage is necessary to make a man and a woman complete—unmarried adults are considered children regardless of age (Monaghan 1995). Men contain a sexual heat known as *yji* that, when transferred to women through intercourse, can result in pregnancy. Women, in turn, transform raw materials into cooked food, returning the *yji* to the men. The majority of the codex images represent women in the process of entering into this reciprocal arrangement (McCafferty, McCafferty, and Hamann 1994).

Other women are represented in more active roles. Lady 6 Monkey, for example, embarked on a number of adventures before her marriage. She consulted with elders and the oracle at Skull Temple, she waged war and captured victims for sacrifice, and she made offerings of incense on pilgrimage (figure 3.3).

Other important women were Lady 3 Flint Shell Quechquemil and her daughter of the same calendar name but with the personal name Jewel

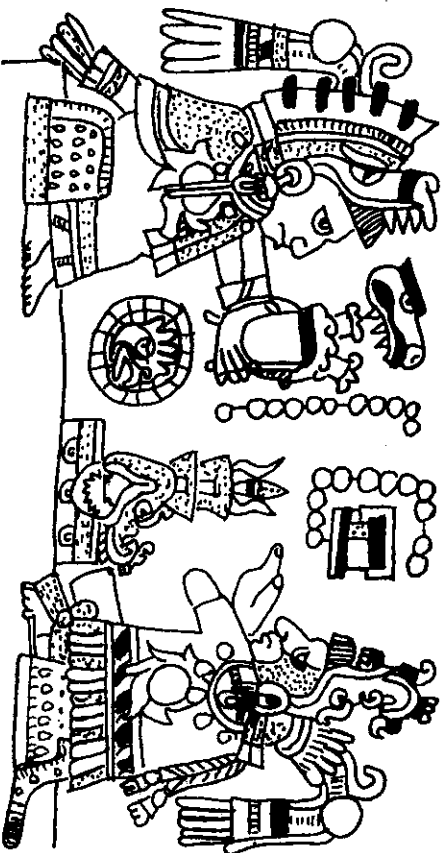


Figure 3.2. Marriage scene. (After Codex Nuttall 1975:31.)

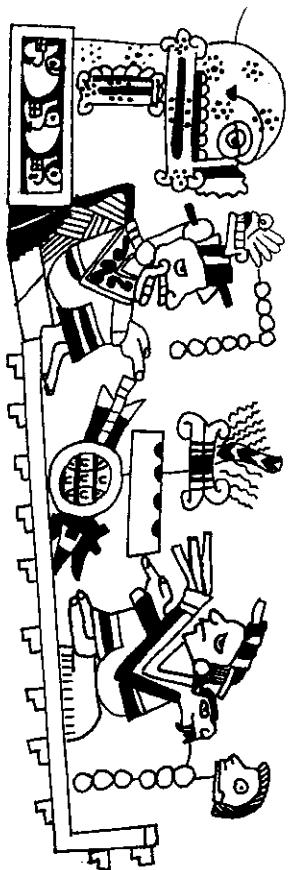


Figure 3.3. Lady 6 Monkey as warrior consulting oracle. (After Codex Selden 1964: 8-1, 7-4.)

Quechquemil. The mother, 3 Flint Shell Quechquemil, was married in the underworld (figure 3.4) and so was probably divine. She visited other supernatural beings before helping to found a new dynasty at the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. Her daughter continued to associate with powerful supernaturals (figure 3.5) and eventually married another divine figure, Lord 12 Wind, who descends

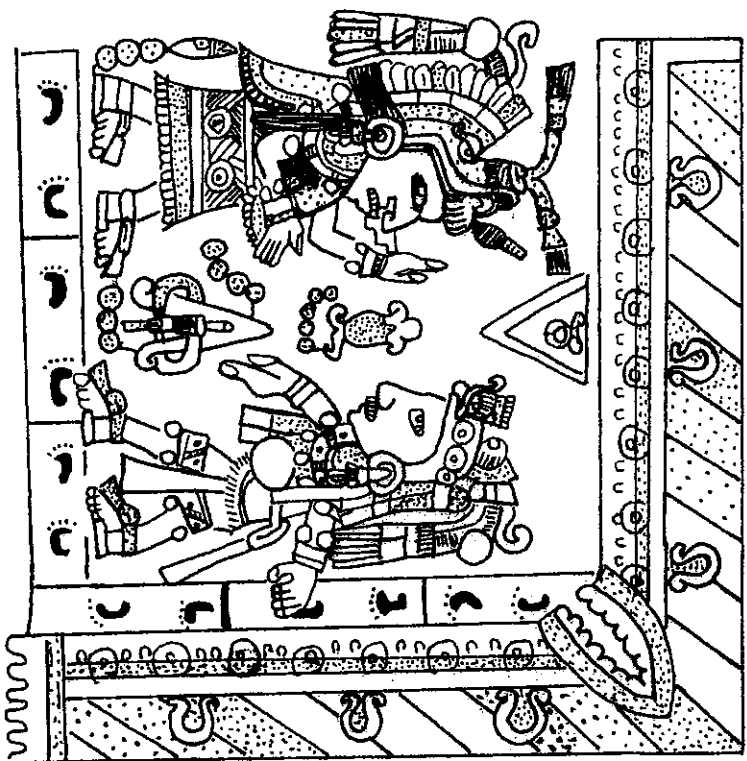


Figure 3.4. Lady 3 Flint Shell Quechquemil in the underworld with Lord 5 Flower. (After Codex Nuttall 1975:14.)

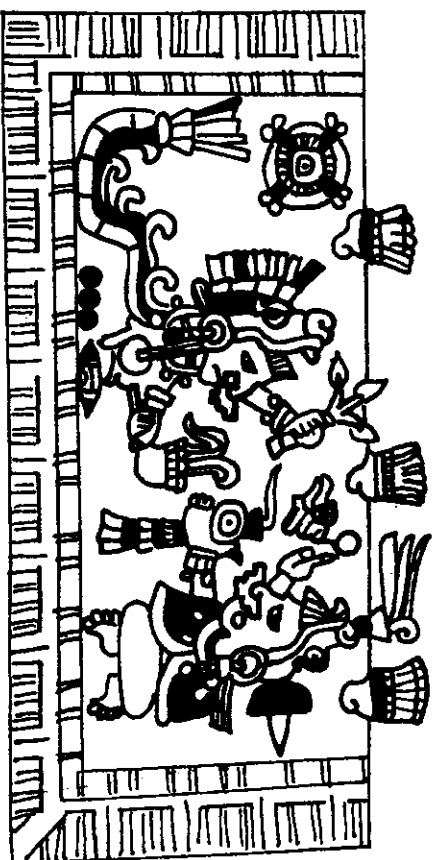


Figure 3.5. Lady 3 Flint Jewel Quechquemil consulting with supernaturals in a watery underworld. (After Codex Nuttall 1975:15.)

from the heavens for their elaborate marriage scene, attended by many of the deities of the Mixtec pantheon.

Another woman who appears prominently in the codices is Lady 9 Grass, characterized by a skeletal jaw and often associated with the Skull Temple that has been tentatively identified at the site of Chalcatongo. In some scenes, Lady 9 Grass is clearly a supernatural figure, one of the primordial Mixtecs, as she is shown battling the stone people in the so-called War of Heaven (figure 3.6), which may have established the Mixtec's hold on their homeland (Pohl 1994). A mortal Lady 9 Grass, probably a deity impersonator, also acted as an oracle, consulting on political decisions for noble visitors to her shrine (figure 3.7).

The Mixtec codices therefore represent mortal noblewomen as political actors, similar to the historical accounts collected by Spores (1997). Ritual activities are much less prominent, though they are more prevalent, among semidivine figures such as Ladies 3 Flint and Lady 9 Grass. Lady 4 Rabbit, the subject of much of the obverse of the Codex Nuttall (1975) since she is the culmination of a lengthy genealogy beginning with Lady 3 Flint (Hamann 1997; McCafferty, McCafferty, and Hamann 1994), is represented as a political figure through her marriage with the Zapotec Lord 5 Flower (figure 3.8).

In comparing this ethnohistorical model for Mixtec women's social roles to the material culture of Tomb 7, the results are not altogether clear-cut. The precious jewels from the tomb compare well with the wealth in exotic materials noted for the Colonial-period Mixtec *aristas*, particularly Ana de Sosa of Tututepec (Spores 1997). The prominence of spinning and weaving equipment in the tomb corresponds to similar objects carried or worn as costume elements by women in

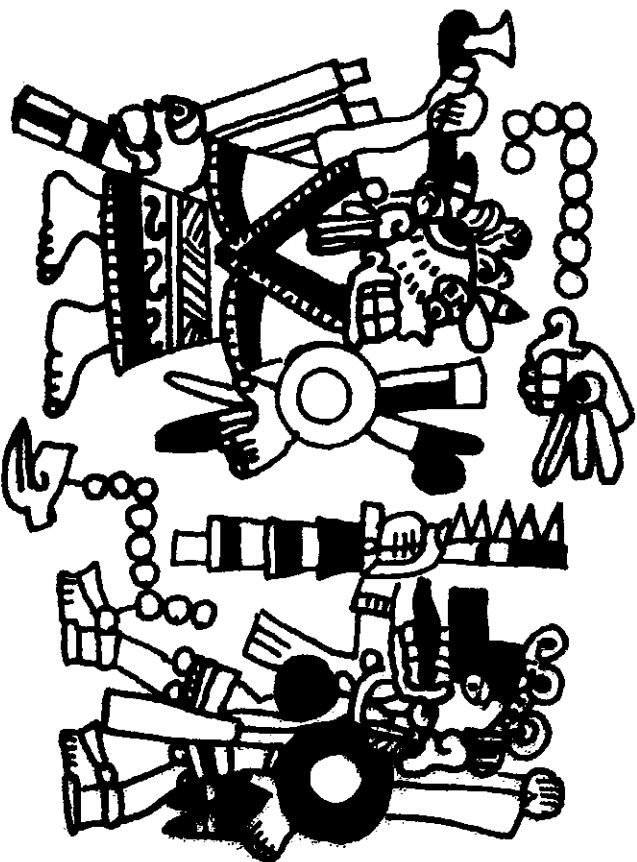


Figure 3.6. Lady 9 Grass battling stone men in the War of Heaven. (After Codex Nuttall 1975:20.)

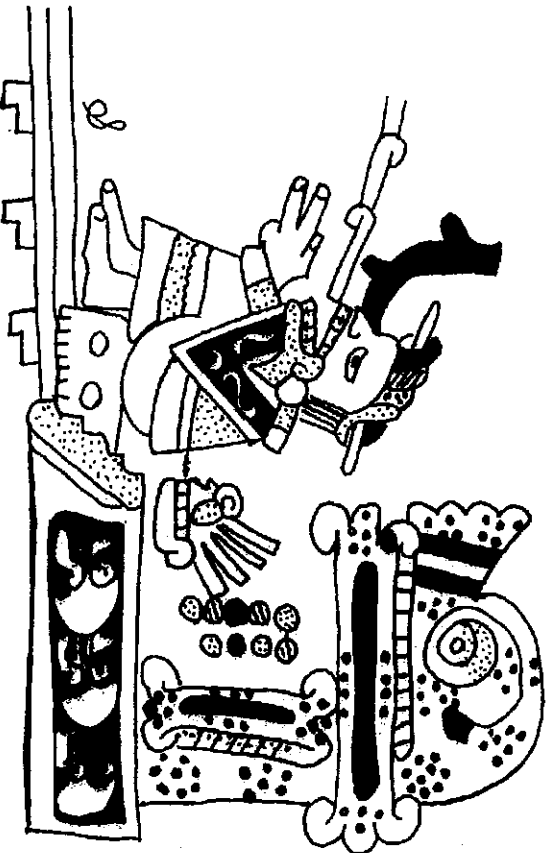


Figure 3.7. Lady 9 Grass in Skull Temple as oracle. (Codex Selden 1964:6-4.)

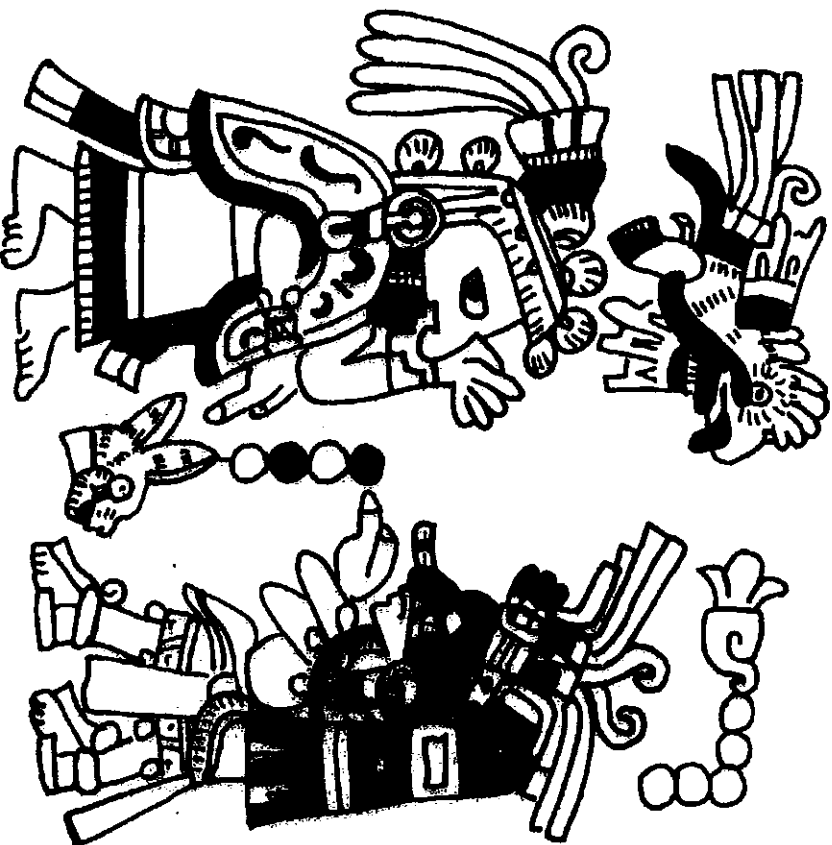


Figure 3.8. Lady 4 Rabbit and Lord 5 Flower at red and white bundle place. (After Codex Nuttall 1975:33.)

the Zaachila dynasty, which Hamann (1997) interprets as emphasis on female production as an element for the legitimization of the dynasty.

Other characteristics of queenly behavior are less accessible from this burial context. An aspect of Tomb 7 that is not clearly identified in the ethnohistorical model relates to ritual practice. Whereas codical queens are occasionally seen offering incense and wearing costume elements of supernatural females, this dimension of noble behavior is not well represented. It is more apparent in the mythic historical actions of Shell Quechquemil and her daughter Jewel Quechquemil through their activities in the Underworld. In one scene, for example, Lady 3 Flint Shell Quechquemil holds a weaving pick and an incense burner while helping dedicate the Temple of the Feathered Serpent (figure 3.9). This scene may relate to a Zapotec myth in which weaving tools were used to create the cultural landscape (in Parsons 1936; also McCafferty, McCafferty, and Hamann 1994).

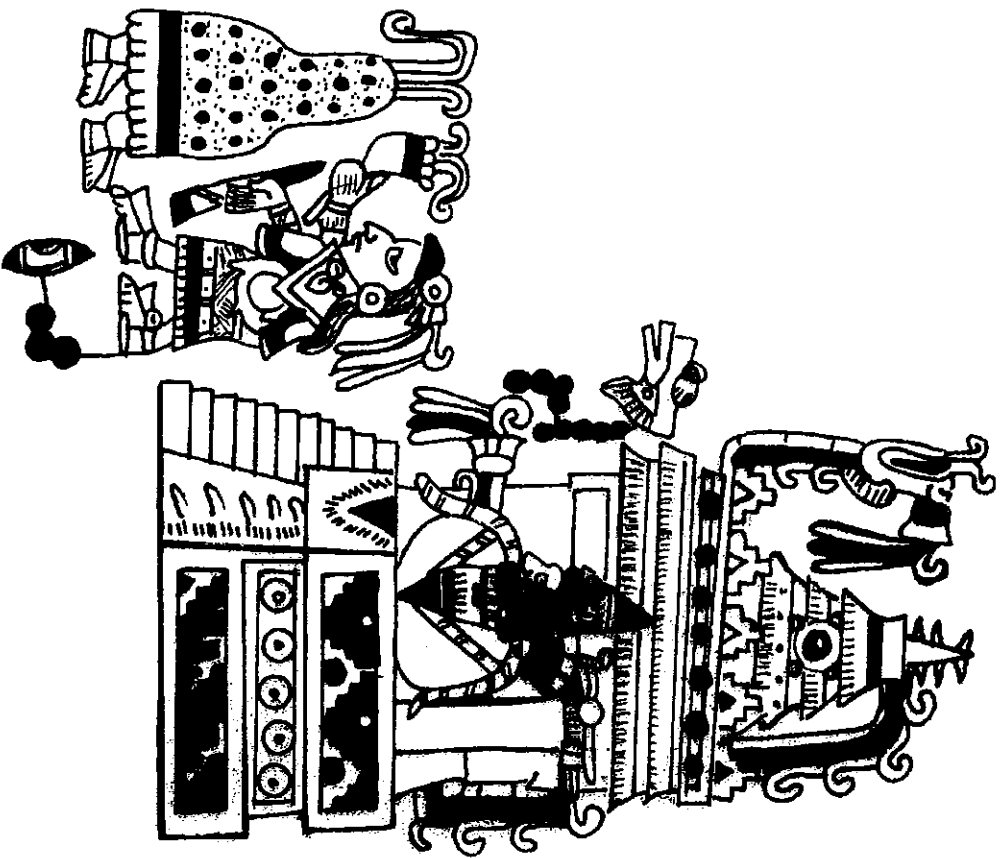


Figure 3.9. Lady 3 Flint Shell Quechquemil dedicating Temple of the Feathered Serpent (Codex Nuttall 1975:15.)

If neither of the above hypotheses is clearly supported, then perhaps Tomb 7 is better described as a shrine, since there was an altar holding a human skull that had been modified into an incense burner and then decorated with mosaic plaques of shell and turquoise, with a bone knife projecting from the nasal cavity (Caso 1969; figure 3.10). Identical skulls are represented in connection with members of the Mixtec earth-fertility complex, particularly Lady 9 Monkey (figure 3.11).

Furthermore, the tomb was apparently entered on multiple occasions, as evidenced by the disturbance to the originally primary interments. This theme of periodic visitations into tombs also occurs among the Zapotec of the Oaxaca Valley,

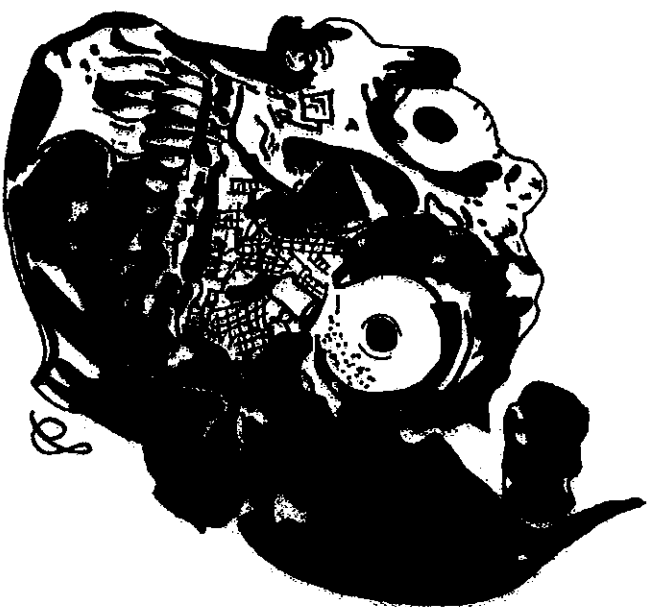


Figure 3.10. Mosaic skull from Tomb 7. (After Caso 1969: lantina IV A.)

particularly at Cerro de las Campanas where mural art was periodically repainted, presumably during consultation and offerings to lineage ancestors (Miller 1995).

Finally, Individual A itself is unique in that she is set at the focal point of the shrine with other skeletons in audience. Individual A is the most complete and retains the best skeletal integrity in terms of articulation consistent with a seated bundle burial (figure 3.12). This focal location, the integrity of the skeletal remains, and the wealth associated with Individual A all contribute to the interpretation that she was the focus of activities in the shrine.

As noted, ancestral shrines were an important aspect of Zapotec and probably Mixtec religions and so would be consistent with the hypothesis that Individual A was a noblewoman. The best example of such a context is known from Zaachila, where two tombs were found beneath the house floor of a central mound (Gallegos 1978; Paddock 1966). While grave goods analogous to those of Tomb 7 were found at Zaachila, the group burials were mixed so specific objects could not be associated with particular individuals.

The characteristics of the material objects found associated with Individual A allow an alternative interpretation. The spinning and weaving tools can be associated with representations of central Mexican earth-fertility goddesses in Mixtec, Borjia-group, and Aztec iconography (McCafferty and McCafferty

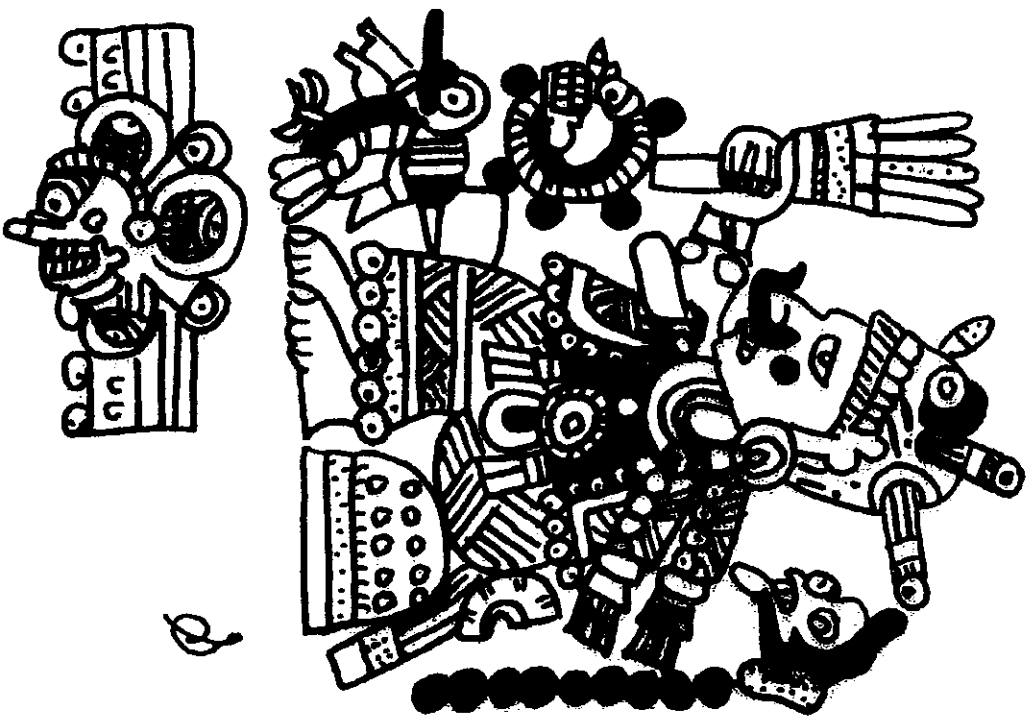


Figure 3.11. Lady 9 Monkey with jeweled skull. (After Codex Nuttall 1975:10.)

1991; Sullivan 1982). Spindle whorls were often worn in the headdress as a symbolic association with textile production. Weaving batterns were carried in the hand as further identification with weaving, but also because the battern known in Spanish as a *machete*, is the structural equivalent for a male weapon (McCafferty and McCafferty, in prep.). The delicate carvings on the Tomb 7 batterns employ the Mixtec writing system, including many calendrical sequences, and may have been used in divination (Marcus 1983), a practice often associated with women. One of the carved bones was inlaid with turquoise mo-



Figure 3.12. Detail of Individual A showing integrity of skeletal articulation. (After Caso 1969: Plano III.)

saic, in a style directly associated with the Aztec earth-fertility goddess *Cihuacoatl* (Sahagún 1950–82, Book I: II; figure 3.13). Another characteristic of *Cihuacoatl* was the use of obsidian earspools (Sahagún 1950–82, Book I: II; figure 3.13), of which several were found among the tomb goods. A heavy golden brooch with the image of a spider may also be related to the goddess complex associated with spinning and weaving (figure 3.14).

In summary, the objects found in Tomb 7 present a fairly consistent iconographic identification with the supernatural females of the central Mexican earth-fertility complex, including the Mixtec Lady 9 Grass. Other than the overall wealth of the burial complex, there is little to support this as a noble burial. But since noble status does not necessarily preclude ritual practice, it remains possible that Tomb 7 enshrined a queenly person who was also affiliated with a goddess cult, and after her death this aspect of her personae rose to prominence.

Another aspect of this feature may in fact move away from the importance of Individual A as a biological being. In Mesoamerican practice, deity impersonators could be chosen from the general populace, occupy the office for a set period of time, and then be sacrificed. Their role was simply to embody the godhead, while others had the responsibility of acting as oracular interpreters for the impersonator. The same could have been true of sacred relics, or mummified ancestors. Certainly, “ancestor bundles” are a prominent theme in the Mixtec codices (figure 3.15). Thus, the principal individual in Tomb 7 may have been more of a vehicle for oracular knowledge that was then communicated by mortal interpreters in the

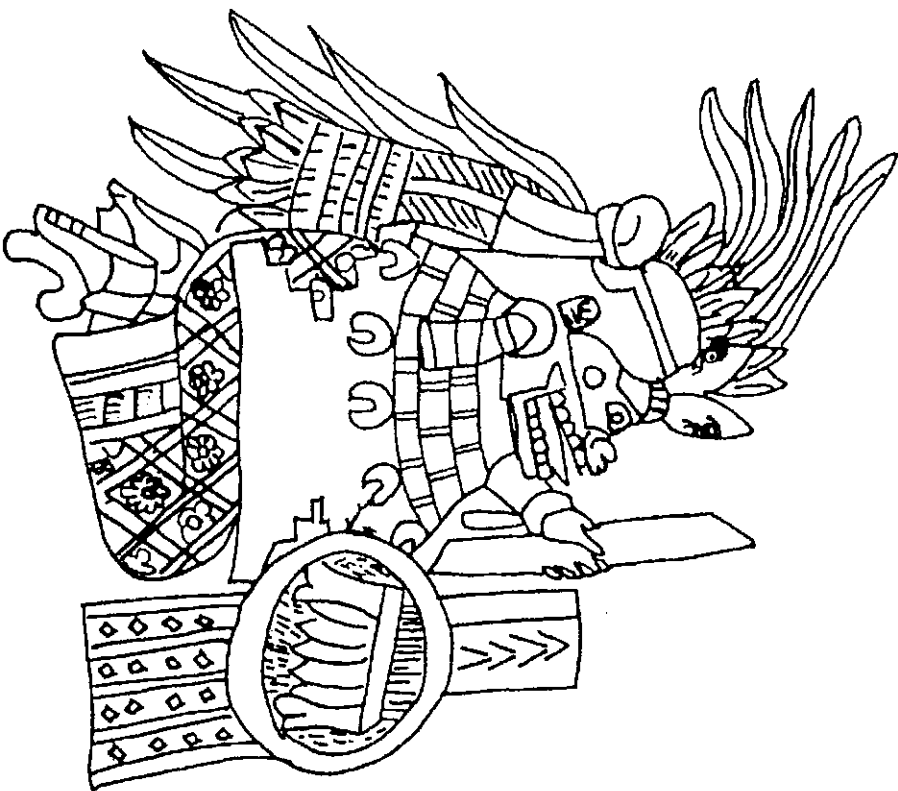


Figure 3.13. Aztec earth-fertility goddess Cihuacoatl, holding weaving batten as staff. (Codex Magliabecchiano 1983:33.)

shrine, and who themselves may have constituted the additional burials found in the tomb (figure 3.16). Also, the bundled remains often having a head placed on top might explain the possible incongruity of a male cranium associated with female postcranial remains.

As Wylie (1991) and others have argued, a feminist archaeology is not simply designed to "add women and stir." It is a more profound critique of a normalizing methodology that produces a faceless, uniform past (Tringham 1991). Instead, an engendered past recognizes a multitude of social identities tightly woven into a network of contrasting personae that may be situationally emphasized or minimized depending on contextual expectations or strategic intent. In our initial analysis of Individual A at Tomb 7, we emphasized the biological and gender

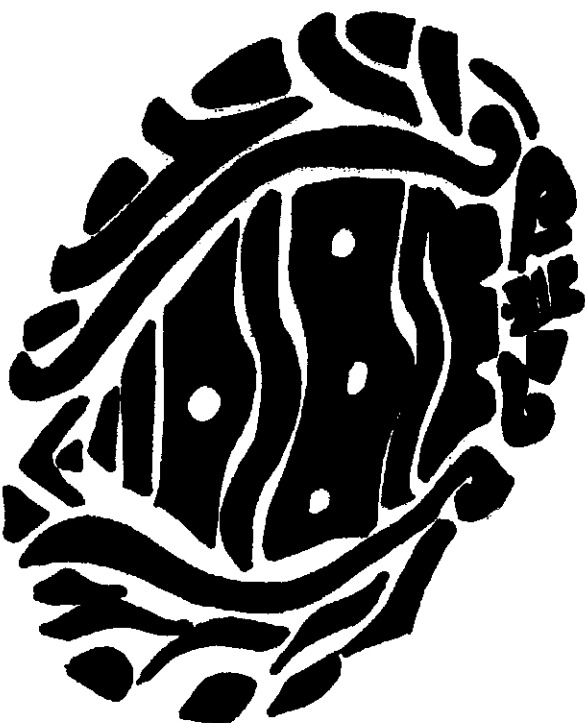


Figure 3.14. Gold brooch with spider motif from Tomb 7. (After Caso 1969: lamina XVII.)

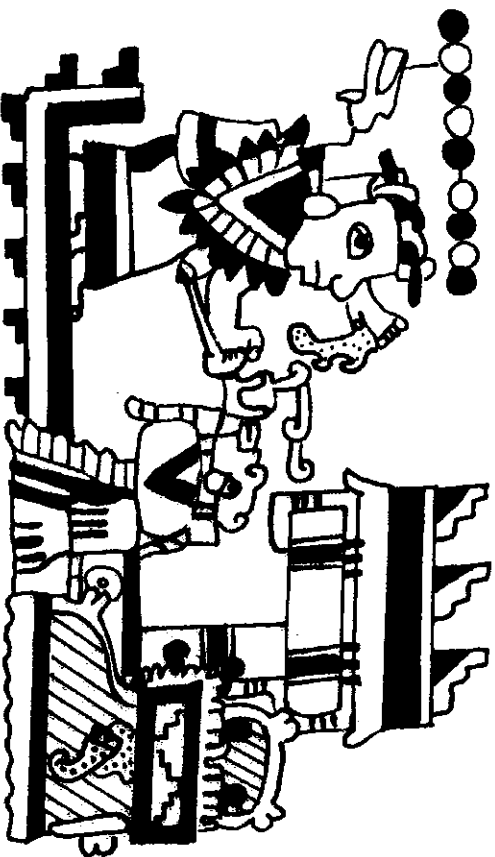


Figure 3.15. Lady 9 Wind offering incense to mummy bundle. (After Codex Selden 1964:5-3.)





Figure 3.16. Woman acting as oracle before deity impersonator. (Codex Magliabecchiano 1983:66.)

elements that suggested that she was female. But gender is only one of several social identities represented. The wealth of the deposit may reflect a noble status, possibly that of a queen. While this remains a possibility, we see an even more prominent identity in the religious role of the individual in death as the focus of an oracular shrine. In this persona, the bundle, perhaps even including a composite of different individuals, became a channel to the supernatural that could be accessed by ritual interpreters.

### Acknowledgments

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## Many Wives, One Queen in Shang China

4

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SINCE THE BEGINNINGS OF SYSTEMATIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELDWORK in China in the late 1920s, recovered data as well as early literature have clarified many aspects of late Neolithic and early dynastic sociopolitical organization. Political order in the Central Plain where dynastic centers were first discovered can be described as highly centralized, with a political hierarchy that dominated the economy as well as adjacent peoples and territories. Although the rules of succession have not been fully explained, lists of rulers have been reconstructed for the earliest dynastic period (Xia, Shang, Zhou 2000). The names of some of their spouses have been retrieved.

What I shall try to convey in this chapter is what the archaeological material and literary documents might indicate about the complex interplay of gender, status, and royal political power in pre-Empire China. Although literally thousands of tombs have been excavated and dated to the dynastic period, only two are clearly those of royal women, and they are both queen consorts of the late Shang period (c. 1250 B.C.E.). They are buried at the last capital of the Shang Dynasty called Yinxu, or Anyang in present-day China (Figure 4.1). First I shall survey the roles played by legendary queens and reflect on the attitudes those legends describe, then compare how the two actual queen consorts were commemorated in burial, and finally I will offer an explanation for the way they were memorialized at death.

### According to Legend

According to legend, the birthplace of Chinese civilization was along the Yellow River. Pan Gu, primal man, was followed by the Three Sovereigns, the lords of Heaven, Earth, and Humankind, who ruled for tens of thousands of years and