

Maize Goddesses and Aztec Gender Dynamics

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Volume 88-89, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073849ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073849ar>

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Publisher(s)

Cape Breton University Press

ISSN

1718-1259 (print)

1927-9264 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Collins, G. & Foias, A. (2018). Maize Goddesses and Aztec Gender Dynamics.
Material Culture Review / Revue de la culture matérielle, 88-89, 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073849ar>

Article abstract

This article provides new evidence for understanding Aztec religion and worldviews as multivalent rather than misogynistic by analyzing an Aztec statue of a female deity (Worcester Art Museum, accession no. 1957.143). It modifies examination strategies employed by H. B. Nicholson amongst comparable statues, and in doing so argues for the statue's identification as a specific member of a fertility deity complex—most likely Xilonen, the Goddess of Young Maize. The statue's feminine nature does not diminish its relative importance in the Aztec pantheon, but instead its appearance and the depicted deity's accompanying historical rituals suggest its valued position in Aztec life. As documented by Alan R. Sandstrom and Molly H. Bassett, modern Nahua rituals and beliefs concerning maize and fertility goddesses add to the conclusions drawn from the studied statue and suggest that historical Aztec religion had a complementary gender dynamic.

GABRIEL SILVA COLLINS AND ANTONIA E. FOIAS

Maize Goddesses and Aztec Gender Dynamics

Résumé

Cet article expose de nouvelles données pour comprendre la religion des Aztèques et leur vision du monde sous un angle polyvalent plutôt que misogyne, en analysant la statue d'une divinité féminine (conservée au musée des beaux-arts de Worcester, sous la référence no 1957.143). Il modifie les procédés d'examen qu'employait H.B. Nicholson pour des statues comparables, et ce faisant, argumente que la divinité que représente cette statue peut être identifiée à un membre particulier d'un complexe de divinités de la fertilité – il s'agit plus particulièrement de Xilonen, la déesse du jeune maïs. La nature féminine de la statue n'amoindrit pas son importance relative dans le panthéon aztèque ; au contraire, son apparence et la description historique des rituels consacrés à cette divinité indiquent qu'elle occupait une position privilégiée dans la vie des Aztèques. Ainsi que le documentent Alan R. Sandstrom et Molly H. Bassett, les rituels et les croyances modernes des Nahuas entourant les déesses du maïs et de la fertilité s'ajoutent aux conclusions tirées de l'étude de la statue et indiquent que la religion historique des Aztèques possédait une dynamique des genres complémentaires.

Abstract

This article provides new evidence for understanding Aztec religion and worldviews as multivalent rather than misogynistic by analyzing an Aztec statue of a female deity (Worcester Art Museum, accession no. 1957.143). It modifies examination strategies employed by H. B. Nicholson amongst comparable statues, and in doing so argues for the statue's identification as a specific member of a fertility deity complex—most likely Xilonen, the Goddess of Young Maize. The statue's feminine nature does not diminish its relative importance in the Aztec pantheon, but instead its appearance and the depicted deity's accompanying historical rituals suggest its valued position in Aztec life. As documented by Alan R. Sandstrom and Molly H. Bassett, modern Nahuatl rituals and beliefs concerning maize and fertility goddesses add to the conclusions drawn from the studied statue and suggest that historical Aztec religion had a complementary gender dynamic.

Corn is our blood. How can we grab [our living] from the earth when it is our own blood that we are eating?

(Aurelio qtd. in Sandstrom 1991: 240)

By the early 15th century, a diverse sculptural tradition was expressed in Aztec (or Mexica) art, including tiny figurines, exquisitely carved animals of every shape and size, and monolithic statues of deities. Although some scholars have stressed gender complementarity in Aztec art and religion (McCafferty and McCafferty 1988, 1999; Sigal 2011), others have argued that Mexica ideology and sculptural art were misogynistic (Klein 1988, 1993, 1994; Clendinnen 1991; Nash 1978, 1980). The latter narrative stresses male (warrior) dominance over women, seemingly celebrated in the legend of the Aztec patron god of war Huitzilopochtli sacrificing his sister Coyolxauhqui. A circular stone carving of Coyolxauhqui's desmembered body was found at the base of the Great Temple at Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital (Joyce 2000: 165-66; see also Brumfiel 1991, 1996). Scholars such as Joyce (2000), Brumfiel (1991, 1996), Dodds Pennock (2008, 2018), Kellogg (1995), and the McCafferties (1988, 1999) have been vocal critics of this interpretation. Here we bolster their critique by focusing on pre-Columbian Aztec female maize deities and their continuing importance among modern Mesoamerican Indigenous populations. Contemporary rituals and Aurelio's words that "Corn is our blood" further testify to the enduring centrality of corn (both male and female) to Indigenous identity in Mexico and Central America.

In an early study of maize/fertility goddesses, Nicholson noted that "more [stone Aztec images] probably represent the fertility goddess than any other single supernatural in the pantheon" (1963: 9; Pasztory 1983: 218). The high frequency of these stone effigies of fertility goddesses suggests that they were held in high esteem by much of the empire's population. Furthermore, in contrast to many Mesoamerican civilizations (such as the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, and Toltec) all of which had a male maize god, the Aztecs viewed their maize deities as both female and male, undermining an entirely misogynistic interpretation of Aztec religion. In this article, we analyze an Aztec fertility goddess sculpture in the Worcester Art

Museum (accession no. 1957.143), and present new interpretations about its identification as the young maize goddess Xilonen within the larger cluster of male and female maize deities that remain at the heart of many Indigenous Mesoamerican religions today. We argue that the Worcester Art Museum statue and the many others representing maize goddesses suggest that Aztec worldviews were multivalent rather than simply misogynistic.

The Worcester Art Museum (WAM) Aztec sculpture (accession no. 1957.143) is carved from a solid piece of gray volcanic stone. It is almost completely covered by a red pigment, probably specular hematite.¹ This seated female looks directly forward, wearing a triangular *quechquemiltl* shawl and garment that extends to her shins. The statue's large hands are positioned over her crossed legs. The statue is also carved on the sides with continuations of features found on the front, but its back is unmarked (Figs. 1a, b, c).

The statue's most elaborate part is the head and headdress. This is not surprising, since



Figs. 1a, b, c (opposite)
The Worcester Art Museum's Fertility Goddess, 1450-1521, accession no. 1957.143
© Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts.

one of the vital life forces described by modern Nahua peoples (descendants of the Aztecs)—the *tonalli*—is concentrated in the head. Several prominent features adorn her head, including two large circular earspools, a headband consisting of five flowers, and a headdress with two maize cobs and a central feather ornament (to be detailed further below). Two vertical black bars are painted on each cheek. She also wears a double-strand necklace, with large spherical and tubular beads and a central trapezoidal ornament.

While the lower half of the statue is engraved carefully to depict all fingers, toes, and their nails, the most powerful details are centered on the face and surrounding adornments. The highly naturalistic visage is carved in deeper relief than any other part of the sculpture. The artist's focus on the head suggests that the head and surrounding features were carved as the deity's identifying insignia. The exaggerated size of the head and headdress in relation to the rest of the statue's body further suggests these parts of the sculpture are the most important areas.

Animacy, Divinity and Embodiment among the Aztecs and Nahua

One of the most important categories of Mexica art were god effigies, like the WAM statue, called *teixiptlahuan* (singular *teixiptla* in Nahuatl, the Aztec language). These effigies were considered localized embodiments of deities and divine power that were essential to religious performances and worship (Bassett 2015). Stone *teixiptlahuan* have been documented as corporeal forms of divine beings or forces, and provide a direct window into the expression of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican religion. Rather than seeing these effigies as objects or representations of the gods, the pre-Hispanic Aztecs perceived them as the live bodies of the deities, and many Indigenous Central American groups continue to do so today. In other words, *teixiptlahuan* were the essential actors of Aztec religion and ritual. Religious life was centered on highly ritualized public ceremonies, where *teixiptlahuan* in the form of either costumed priests or statues became the



earthly manifestations of various deities (Bassett 2015: 135).

These figures combined the divine presence in the earthly world with its justification: the view of the whole universe as animate. According to modern Nahua people in Veracruz, everything in the world is animate, except perhaps certain plants and rocks (Bassett 2015: 11-12; Sandstrom 1991). Animacy, defined by the ability to move, exists on a spectrum from *teteo* (deities, singular *teotl*) having the most, to wild and domesticated animals, which have the least (Bassett 2015). Among the *teteo*, Tohueyinanán (Our Great Mother/Goddess) and Tohueyitah (Our Great Father/God) have the most, followed by Dios, the Stars, the Sun (often conjoined with Jesus Christ), and the Moon on the next level; mountains, water, fire and wind on the third highest level; and then *macehualli* (Nahuatl speakers) and *coyomeh* (non-Nahuatl speakers) on the following lower level, and wild and domestic animals on the lowest rung (Bassett 2015: 12-13; Sandstrom 1991: 236).

Among the pre-Columbian Aztecs and their descendants, animacy was and is predicated on a life force which permeated everything and originated with the gods (Furst 1995; Lopez Austin 1988; Townsend 2009). The life force had multiple threads: 1) *yolia*: the life force in the heart; 2) *tonalli*: heat, warmth, and destiny; 3) *ihiyotl*: the life force in the breath; 4) *nagual*: co-essence which is most often an animal, but could also be other natural phenomena, like thunder (Furst 1995; Lopez Austin 1988; Sandstrom 1991). Of these life forces, *tonalli* is the most important for our discussion because it refers to an individual's (or god's) destiny and personality (Furst 1995; Sandstrom 1991). An individual's *tonalli* is inherent in their birthday as reckoned in the 260-day divination calendar (Bassett 2015; Furst 1995; Lopez Austin 1988). As such, the birthday in the 260-day calendar becomes the calendrical name of the individual or god (Townsend 2009: 127). While details differ among Indigenous groups, the belief in multiple life forces or vital essences is widely spread throughout current Mexico and Central America (Furst 1995; Gossen 1996; Monaghan 1998; Pitarch 2010; Sandstrom 1991, 2009).

In the pre-Hispanic Central Mexican worldview, these vital life forces emanated

from the gods (Lopez Austin 1988: 210). Such divinely-given forces were not only essential to humanity, but were fundamental to the entire universe, providing basic necessities such as light and warmth (206). Thus divine interaction with the human world was necessary for everything in the earthly realm, whether human, animal or plant. For the Mexica, the divine body's corporeal presence in the mundane world was a means to maintain the necessary influx of these vital life forces for humanity and surrounding universe. Every moment of existence in the mundane world was a complicated relationship of influences from divine realms, and deities were the conscious providers of those influences (Lopez Austin 1988: 209). The essential corporeal presence of deities on earth was achieved through the transformation of earthly objects (such as statues) or humans (priests or sacrificial victims who "impersonated" the gods) into actual divine bodies existing on the human plane (Bassett 2015).

The complex nature of Mexica religion makes identifying and describing *teixiptlahuan* a difficult task. Dozens of deities were major figures in Mexica religious life. These *teteo* could also have different manifestations, changing their aspects and roles according to cardinal directions and days of the year. In addition, *teteo* could be expressed in intricate combinations that referenced multiple deities in a single statue or depiction, bringing multiple aspects together into one *teixiptla*. All of these possibilities for variation in *teixiptlahuan* have led to debates about the nature of divinity among the Aztecs, including whether they were individual gods or simply manifestations of a widespread life force energy that defined a unified pervasive divinity (Maffie 2014). While it is beyond the scope of this article to engage with the details of this debate, there is a rising consensus that Nahua religion specifically, and many Mesoamerican religions more broadly, was pantheistic in that "the entire universe and all of its elements partake of deity ... everybody and everything is an aspect of a grand, single, and overriding unity" (Sandstrom 1991: 238), while at the same time, these groups recognized individual deities within the larger unity (Bassett 2015; Lind 2015; Sandstrom 1991).



Figs. 2a, b (below left) **c, and d** (below, right)

Group of Aztec statues of fertility goddesses comparable to the WAM statue: a. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (no. 11.0-02997; Archivo Digital de las Colecciones del Museo Nacional de Antropología. INAH-CANON); b. Head of Xilonen, the Goddess of Young Maize, 1400-1500, The Art Institute of Chicago no. 1986.1091 (note two vertical bars carved on each cheek); c. Metropolitan Museum no. 1979.206.1386; d. Metropolitan Museum no. 1979.206.407. Note also that a, c, d are carved on the back or top of the head with the calendrical name “7 Serpent” (Chicomecoatl).



Iconographic Analysis of WAM Statue

The only study of statues similar to the WAM Aztec fertility goddess was authored by the foremost Aztec scholar H. B. Nicholson in 1963, where the WAM statue was not mentioned. In his 1963 article, Nicholson examined a group of six Aztec female statues, representing fertility goddesses and sharing many features with the WAM sculpture. The six statues described by Nicholson are found in museums all over the world (see, for example, Figs. 2a, b, c, d).²

Nicholson suggested that this group of fertility goddess statues often blend insignia from two Aztec deities, both important for fertility: Chalchiutlicue and Chicomecoatl. Chalchiutlicue (translated as “She of the Jade Skirt”) is a water goddess of streams, rivers and lakes (Fig. 3), while Chicomecoatl (translated as the Aztec calendrical name “7-Serpent”; *chichome*, “7” and *coatl* “serpent”) is the deity of mature maize and plant growth (Fig. 4). He suggests that such insignia sharing was due to the Aztec belief that a divine life force pervaded everything in the world (1963: 22). According to this view, similar features between representations of supposedly discrete deities reflect an Aztec theology that emphasized a more singular, widespread divine force which could be manifested in different individual forms. Below we will provide a separate, more differentiating interpretation of these common insignia.

The group of six fertility goddess statues described by Nicholson in 1963 all share a “near-identity of style” (21). They are seated, although all except the WAM statue have their legs tucked under them. In fact, most Mexica statues of women or female deities are shown in this gender-specific kneeling position (Pasztory 1983; Diel 2005). The WAM piece’s exceptional cross-legged position is highly unusual and unique in this group of otherwise comparable fertility goddesses. In all well-preserved cases, these statues have carefully carved hands resting on the knees, a feature which appears in other female deity statues (e.g., Fig. 3).

Adding to their similarity, all six statues and the WAM fertility goddess are adorned with a wreath of five to seven flower blossoms around their foreheads, a feature rare in most Aztec fertility goddesses (Nicholson 1963: 16). However,



Fig. 3.
Stone statue of
Chalchiutlicue, goddess
of streams, rivers and
lakes. Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
accession no. 00.5.72.



Fig. 4 (below)
Stone statue of
Chicomecoatl, goddess
of mature maize. Note
the two corn cobs held
in her right hand.
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, accession no.
00.5.51.

these wreaths connect with modern Nahua beliefs that maize deities have a female aspect called “5-Flower” and a male aspect called “7-Flower,” as described by Sandstrom in his ethnography of the Nahua community of Amatlán, Veracruz. He writes:

The corn spirit exists in both male and female aspect. The male aspect is called *chicomexochitl* (“7-flower”) and the female aspect is *macuili xochitl* (“5-flower” both terms in Nahuatl). [...] When I pressed the villagers for more details about the corn spirit, they replied that 7-flower and 5-flower are divine twin children with hair the color of corn silk. (1991: 245)



Here, contemporary Nahuas’ recognition of intertwined male- and female-deity complexes continues similar understandings in pre-Hispanic Mexica religion discussed later in this article.

Five statues and the WAM fertility goddess all wear identical circular earspools decorated with tassels that drape down over the figure’s shoulders. Nicholson identifies the double tassels as indicative of mixed Chalchiuhtlicue-Chicomecoatl figures, but equally plausible is that these earrings are symbols shared by both the water and maize goddesses (Nicholson 1963).

All six statues as well as the WAM fertility goddess wear a jade “necklace with a trapezoidal pendant” (Nicholson 1963: 21). This pendant has been interpreted as the symbol *chalchihuitl*, “jade” or “precious” (11). The *chalchihuitl* brings the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue to mind, whose name literally translates to “She of the Jade Skirt.” Nevertheless, variations of this pendant also exist in depictions of maize goddesses (11), and may simply symbolize how valuable and beloved all goddesses were in Mexica worldview by being adorned with rich jewelry that reflected value in both name and substance (Bassett 2015: 124-25). Durán (1971) provides another explanation for this jade ornament: he writes that Chicomecoatl had a second name, Chalchiuhciquatl or “Woman of Precious Stone” (222).

The double parallel black bands painted on the WAM statue’s cheeks and carved on the face of the statue in the Art Institute of Chicago (Fig. 2b), may be associated with rain (Nicholson and Berger 1968: 11). They are reminiscent of the parallel blue stripes found on temples dedicated to the rain god Tlaloc, Chalchiuhtlicue’s consort (Nicholson 1963: 13). However, they are often associated with both water and maize goddesses, and may indicate the wish of their sculptors for rain to bless the fertility goddesses and/or maize crops (12). For example, Pohl and Lyons (2010: 43) show a clay statue of a goddess decorated with a black vertical stripe on each cheek (Fig. 5). Cheek bars are present even though the statue

Fig. 5. Clay statue of Chicomecoatl depicted with black bands on her cheeks. Note corn cobs in her hands, and the goddess’s typical large paper headdress decorated with flowers or rosettes in each corner, comparable with Fig. 4. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, no. 11.0-11111; Archivo Digital de las Colecciones del Museo Nacional de Antropología. INAH-CANON.

is confidently identifiable as Chicomecoatl: the sculpture holds two corn cobs in each hand and wears the goddess's typical large rectangular *amacalli* headdress. Furthermore, as described below, young girls participating in the great spring festival honoring Chicomecoatl in Tenochtitlán were painted with black tar on the cheeks (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book II, 63), which may be similar to the marks on the Worcester Art Museum's statue.

In spite of such possible rain-related insignia, the group of statues that Nicholson examined are tightly linked to maize goddesses. Three of the statues in the group are clearly related to the maize goddess Chicomecoatl because they are carved with this deity's calendrical name of "7-Serpent" (Nicholson 1963: 21-22): two of these have no corn cobs in their headdress (Figs. 2c, d), while the third does (Fig. 2a). The presence of corn cobs in the headdresses of three of these statues (for example Figs. 2a, b) as well as the WAM goddess, also identifies them as maize deities. The two maize cobs, and their fine tassels that fall on the side of the goddesses' heads as silky hair, are known as "*cemmailt*, the double maize ear symbol, so diagnostic for the deities of this plant" (18). Between the two ears of maize, sits a cluster of short, medium and long plumes identified as a *quetzalmiahuyotl*, or "quetzal feather-maize tassel" (18). The *quetzalmiahuyotl* is connected to fertility deities that appear in both Aztec sculptures and codices, although the meaning of this symbol is unclear: is it metaphorically stating that tasselled corn is precious like quetzal feathers (Nicholson 1963: 19-20)? Olko (2014: 69) has also suggested that the *quetzalmiahuyotl* simply denotes and emphasizes divine identity.

The five-flower headband worn by most of these seven Aztec female statues, including the WAM Aztec fertility goddess, intimates one more association with a third pre-Columbian deity: Macuilxochitl (*macuil*, "Five" and *xochitl*, "Flower"), who was "the young flower-solar deity" (Nicholson 1963: 22). Interestingly, Macuilxochitl is a male god in the same water-agricultural fertility deity complex as Chicomecoatl, and represents the influence of solar heat over agricultural fertility (Nicholson 1971: 417). At the same time, we suggested above that the five-flower or seven-flower headband worn by these figures may also connect with modern Nahua beliefs about twin

corn spirits: one female, called "5-Flower," and the second male, called "7-Flower" (Sandstrom 1991: 245). Sandstrom associates both of these corn spirits with pre-Hispanic Aztec deities: "Seven-flower ... was related to Pilzintecutli, the lord of young maize ... Five-flower was patron of dances, games, and love and was the sibling of Centeotl, the 'God of Corn'" (1991: 145; see also Caso 1958: 46-47).

Furthermore, stories about Maize Gods/ Maize Heroes (often twins, sometimes female-male, and other times both males) are abundant in modern Indigenous mythologies across Central America and Mexico, and especially along the Gulf Coast (Braakhuis 2009; Chinchilla 2017; Sandstrom 1991). These Maize Gods or Maize Heroes are associated with the Sun, Rain and Lighting-Thunder Gods (Braakhuis 2009; Chinchilla 2017; Sandstrom 1991), which may explain why we see such associations in the WAM sculpture, or at least suggest that those associations are not unusual. After all, maize agriculture requires both water and sun.

Nicholson's analysis of this group of Aztec fertility goddess statues concluded that the different elements of these *teixiptlahuan* were discrete markers of individual deities, brought together into one statue. According to his interpretation, the WAM fertility goddess emphasized the combination of overall divine forces that permeate various aspects of life, such as corn, fertility, and water (Nicholson 1963). These *teixiptlahuan* would then be a potent representation of *teotl* as a life force or vital essence that transcended individual deities, and instead permeated and existed between all divinity in Nahua thought as "a numinous impersonal power diffused throughout the universe" (Pohl and Lyon 2010: 34).

Reinterpretation of the WAM Fertility Goddess Statue

While not denying the pantheistic nature of Aztec religion (as described above), a closer look at the WAM fertility goddess suggests a different interpretation of which deities—and even how many—are depicted in the statue. Many scholars have pointed to the interrelated nature of Mexica fertility and water deities. Townsend (2009), Nicholson (1971), and more recently Paulinyi

(2013), have all outlined the existence of a Mexica fertility and water goddess complex, with parallels in male gods and relationships to deities from the older Teotihuacán civilization. This complex, titled Rain-Moisture-Agricultural Fertility by Nicholson (1971), included five major sub-complexes: 1) the Tlaloc subcomplex for deities associated with water, rain and moisture; 2) the Centeotl-Xochipilli subcomplex for deities related to maize, flowers, sun warmth, pleasure, singing and dancing; 3) the Ometochtli subcomplex of deities associated with the maguey plant and the alcoholic drink pulque, which is made from the plant (called *octli* in Nahuatl); 4) the Teteoinnan subcomplex for earth mother goddesses, including Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina, Cihuacoatl, Coatlicue, Tlazolteotl, Itzpapalotl, and Xochiquetzal; and, 5) the Xipe Totec subcomplex of gods related to fertility and renewal—best known for the flaying of the sacrificed individual and the wearing of the skin by the priests (Nicholson 1971).

These gods often appear in male-female pairs, including Tlaloc (Rain God) and Chalchihuitlicue (goddess of streams, rivers and lakes), and Ometochtli (god of *pulque*) and Mayahuel (goddess of the maguey plant). Such male-female pairs strongly support gender dualism and complementarity rather than gender hierarchy (see also discussion in McCafferty and McCafferty 1988). Two such male-female pairs are present among maize deities. One of these existed between Xilonen (“She of the Tender Maize Ear”) as the goddess of young, green corn, and Piltzintecuhtli (Young Maize Lord). The Mexica also paired Chicomecoatl, the goddess of mature maize, with Centeotl, the Mature Maize God.

As agricultural fertility and rain/water were intertwined, Mexica deities such as Chicomecoatl, Chalchihuitlicue, and their male counterparts, Centeotl and Tlaloc, were all associated with both fertility and water. They shared some combination of identifying features, including images of corn, headbands, flowers, tassels, garments, and colour associations. Recognizing these *teteo*’s nature as a complex of deities with shared diagnostic features makes it unnecessary to treat all features as signifiers of a specific individual deity. This approach opens the door to examining the WAM statue as a single goddess.

If the statue is treated as a *teixiptla* representing a single goddess, several characteristics fall

into place. First, it becomes clear that associations with the water goddess Chalchihuitlicue may simply be a product of shared features amongst the fertility deity complex. The possible *chalchihuitl* and black cheek bars can be explained through shared symbols of divinity, instead of being exclusive markers of Chalchihuitlicue. Although Nicholson points to their association with Chalchihuitlicue and water, they are found on statues which are definitively representations of Chicomecoatl or Xilonen (see Fig. 5 or 2b). The WAM *teixiptla*’s red colouring would also make more sense if it is not an image of Chalchihuitlicue, who is usually depicted with the colours blue, white, or green (Nicholson and Berger 1968: 10-12). The *chalchihuitl* jade ornament on the WAM statue may simply associate it with the preciousness of jade or even with its green colour that symbolizes verdant growth, charging the statue with additional valences of fertility, without necessarily linking it with the goddess Chalchihuitlicue.

Alternatively, these multiple references to water may be interpreted in a different way, following Sellen’s analysis of Zapotec storm-god effigy vessels and censers (2002). Sellen suggests that important rain rituals attended the maize agricultural cycle, especially at the stages of early corn sprouting and young green corn, a critical moment in the maturing of the crop, when the right amount of rain or water was required for its growth. Because of the importance of water to young corn, symbols of both corn and water/rain deities were combined in these effigies to ensure an abundance of rain to the young maize crop (Sellen 2002). In the case of the WAM Aztec statue, the rain-associated black marks on her cheeks and the *chalchihuitl* jade pendant may have served to ensure that sufficient rain arrives to the young plants.

Based on this line of thought, the WAM Aztec statue does not embody Chalchihuitlicue but rather one of the other two female maize goddesses within the fertility complex, either Chicomecoatl or Xilonen, as suggested by the maize cobs in the statue’s headdress. The WAM goddess’ flower headband also points to a relationship with a maize deity instead of Chalchihuitlicue. Nicholson and Berger’s (1968: 10) analysis of Aztec fertility goddess statues point to a different headband associated with Chalchihuitlicue, which consists

of three bands wrapped around the head, tied with a big knot in the back, and decorated with circular elements (possibly cotton balls) above and below the bands (see Fig. 3). Furthermore, the Chalchiuhtlicue headbands are usually coloured in white or blue, and only rarely in red (1968: 10). Different headband colours are very important as they correlate to individual deities: while Chalchiuhtlicue is strongly associated with blue (Nicholson and Berger 1968: 10), Xilonen and Chicomecoatl have been associated with the colour red on their faces, clothing, and adornments (Grigsby and de Leonard 1992).

Descriptions of the major festivals celebrating Xilonen and Chicomecoatl before the Spanish Conquest provide more insight into the identification of the WAM statue as Xilonen or Chicomecoatl. Xilonen was celebrated during the eighth of eighteen *veintenas*, or twenty-day months of the Mexica solar calendar of 365 days (Grigsby and de Leonard 1992: 115). This period lasted from July 5th to 24th, and was known as *Huei Tecuilhuítl*, or the Festival of the Great Lords (Paulinyi 2013: 135). *Huei Tecuilhuítl* coincided with the time when the first tender green maize becomes ripe in the Valley of Mexico, an apt moment to celebrate the goddess of young maize (135). On the tenth day of the month, a young woman costumed as Xilonen's *teixiptla* was sacrificed after eight days of eating, dancing, and singing in public spaces (Sahagún 1950-1982, Book II: 14-15; 96-107). Sahagún describes how the Xilonen *teixiptla* was dressed comparably to the WAM's statue:

Her face was painted in two colors: she was yellow about her lips, she was chili-red on her forehead. Her paper cap had [maize] ears at the four corners; it has *quetzal* feathers in the form of maize tassels; ... Her neck piece consisted of many strings of green stone; a golden disc went over it. {She had} her shift with the water lily {flower and leaf design}, and she had her skirt with the water lily {flower and leaf design} ... Her shield and her rattle stick were chili-red. (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book II, 103)

The woman was decapitated after being dressed in this manner, and allowed to play music using her red rattle (Both 2010; Dodd Pennock 2018: 291). Only after her sacrifice were people

permitted to eat tortillas of green maize and the cane of green corn (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book II, 105; Frazer 1999). Women, known as Xilonen's offering priestesses, danced for the goddess before her sacrifice:

Likewise the women danced, those who belonged to Xilonen. They were pasted with red feathers and they were painted with yellow ocher. Also, thus were their faces divided: they were yellow with ocher about the lips, and they were light red with arnotto on their foreheads. They had their wreaths of flowers upon their heads; their garlands of tagetes flowers went leading. (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book II, 104)

The costumes of the Xilonen *teixiptla* and priestesses share several features with the WAM statue. The priestesses wore wreaths of flowers just like the flower garland of the WAM sculpture. The *teixiptla* and priestesses were painted red (although only on their foreheads), but they also carried other red elements in their attire; the WAM statue is completely red. The *teixiptla* had maize ears and quetzal feathers in her headdress and so does the WAM effigy.

While Xilonen was celebrated in the eighth month of the Mexica solar year, Chicomecoatl and Cinteotl/Centeotl were celebrated in the fourth month, called Huey (Uei) Tozoztli, or Great Vigil (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book II, 7-9, 61-65), which started April 13 (Durán 1971: 422). The festival dedicated to Chicomecoatl and Cinteotl began with four days of fasting by all people, as well as the decoration of their houses with reeds or fir branches sprinkled with sacrificial blood (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book II, 7, 61). Meanwhile, the *calpulli* (clans, wards) temples were cleaned, *atole* was prepared by the women, and small maize stalks gathered from the fields and decorated with flowers were placed there as offerings to the gods (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book II, 7, 61). Sahagún describes how the youths and the priests "departed to their fields, to get Centeotl. In as many places as lay their fields, from each field, from each they went to take a stalk of green maize" (Book II, 62). The young girls then carried mature ears of maize on their backs to Cinteopan, the temple-pyramid dedicated to Chicomecoatl, to be blessed by the goddess (Book II, 7, 63). There they "enacted skirmishes in the manner

of battles” (Book II, 7) and exhorted the young warriors to be courageous (Dodds Pennock 2018: 297). The blessed maize was later taken home to be the planting seed for the following year (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book II, 7, 63). The girls “bound the cobs of maize in groups of seven ... and wrapped them in paper which was reddened” (Book II, 63). They were themselves adorned with red feathers on their arms and legs, and their faces were painted; “on each they stuck two {circles} of tar, which were flecked with iron pyrites” (63).

In the temple’s courtyard, the Chicomecoatl *teixiptla* was created out of dough: “They formed her image as a woman. They said: ‘Yea, verily, this one is our sustenance; that is to say, indeed, truly she is our flesh, our livelihood; through her we live; she is our strength’” (64). Sahagún then describes how the Chicomecoatl effigy was adorned:

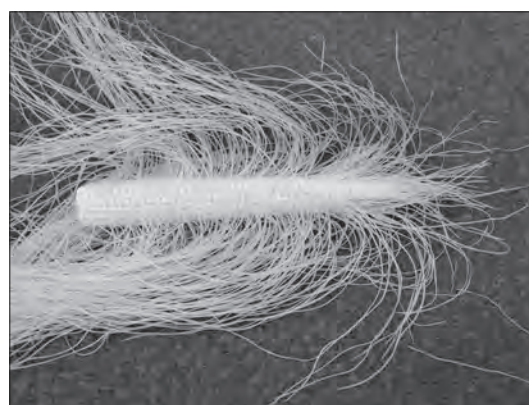
she was anointed all in red³— completely red on her arms, her legs, her face. All her paper crown was covered completely with red ochre; her embroidered shift also was red [and decorated with water flowers] [...] The ruler’s shield was painted with designs, embellished in red. She was carrying her double ear of maize in either hand. (Book II, 65, Book I, 13)

All types of food, especially of maize, were presented as gifts to her because “they said that she was the maker and giver of all those things which are the necessities of life, that the people may live” (7). After more dancing and singing, the Great Vigil ended (65). The anointing of the Chicomecoatl effigy in red paint is strikingly similar to the all red WAM statue. However, in contrast to the Xilonen *teixiptla* who had corn in her headdress, the Chicomecoatl *teixiptla* held the double ear of maize in her hands. Beyond the direct links between these festivals and the WAM statue, these rituals are important because they show that women played active and central roles as priestesses, dancers, participants, *teixiptla*, and goddesses.

Although the rituals and iconography described above link the WAM statue with both Chicomecoatl and Xilonen, we suggest that the WAM statue’s creator implied its status as the latter. Both Chicomecoatl and Xilonen are fertility goddesses closely associated with maize

Figs. 6a, b (below) and c (next page)

The growth of a maize cob (a cob is the fertilized female part of the plant): a. Young maize with silk. Fertilization begins on the bottom of the cob and travels upwards to its tip, producing mature kernels along the way. As the cob matures, maize silk is present amongst the youngest or unfertilized areas, occupying an ever-decreasing area towards the cob’s tip. © RL Nielsen, Purdue University; Nielsen 2016; b. a tuft of silk falls like yellow hair at the top (or end) of the maize cob, and does not occur in unhealthy cobs. © RL Nielsen, Purdue University; c. fully fertilized or mature cob has little to no silk. Image courtesy Encyclopedia Britannica.



and plant growth, and therefore share many diagnostic characteristics. In pictorial depictions, the two deities are sometimes indistinguishable (Paulinyi 2013: 88). But Chicomecoatl is linked to the mature maize plant, while Xilonen is closely related to young green maize. With this in mind, the significance of the fine and long silk tassels falling from the maize cobs on both sides of the statue's headdress becomes clear (Fig. 1). Young cobs are characterized by maize "silk"—long, thin fibers that emerge from undeveloped kernels (Fig. 6a). A maize cob before full maturation ends up with a long tassel of silk at its upper end (Fig. 6b), while the cob has many developed kernels below (Nielsen 2016), something depicted exactly in the WAM statue, which shows fibers falling from the tip of a cob with mature kernels (Fig. 1c). At full maturation, maize has little to no silk (Fig. 6c). Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that silk, and maize cobs, only occur on female flowers. Thus the WAM statue, with its full tassels of fine silk framing the corn cobs, presents young green maize and femininity, and points to Xilonen—the virgin deity of young maize—instead of the mature Chicomecoatl.

The WAM statue, as well as the other six in Nicholson's group, are differentiated from the most common images of Chicomecoatl which are rendered with a very distinct rectangular headdress as seen in Figs. 4, 5, 7. Typically, Chicomecoatl is shown wearing a massive rectangular paper headdress, called *amacalli* ("paper house"), with two to four rosettes at its corners (Nicholson 1963: 9; Pasztory 1983: 218). She usually carries two maize ears (*cemmailt*) in one or both hands, rather than having these corn cobs in her headdress (Nicholson 1963; Pasztory 1983). Xilonen is also sometimes shown with a ritual *amacalli* headdress, often ornamented with a *quetzalmiahuyotl* plume (Evans 2004: 405). As seen in Figs. 4, 5 and 7, Chicomecoatl's headpiece is one of the most ornate in the Mexica pantheon, and is extremely similar across different depictions. Chicomecoatl's ever-present headdress is easily distinguishable from the WAM statue's ornamentation.

Nevertheless, the close link between Xilonen and Chicomecoatl is brought to life in that three of the seven statues in this group are carved with the calendrical name "Seven Serpent" or



Fig. 6c (above)



Fig. 7 (left)

Chicomecoatl's large paper headdress, *amacalli*, which is consistent across depictions such as this statue. Note that she holds the double ear of maize in both hands. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 00.5.28.

Chicomecoatl. We suggest that this does not contradict our identification of the WAM Aztec statue as Xilonen, but rather connects Xilonen with the life force, destiny or *tonalli* of the mature Maize Goddess, inherent in the calendrical name of “7-Serpent” or Chicomecoatl. As Xilonen and Chicomecoatl are deities of the same substance (maize) across different stages in time, their *tonalli* is similarly related if not completely shared.

Features of the WAM statue of Xilonen and comparable effigies reveal some of the ways that *teixiptlahuan* were treated by the Mexica. During ceremonies, revered *teixiptlahuan* were often dressed in real garments, feathers, and valuables (Berdan 2007). The Art Institute of Chicago’s statue of Xilonen (Fig. 1b) has holes on either side of its neck where a necklace would have been inserted (Art Institute of Chicago, n.d.). Similar decorations may have adorned the WAM piece, but this is less likely because it has no holes and it is already depicted with two necklaces. The depressions in the eyes and/or mouth of these statues are also significant because they may have held inlays of shell, obsidian, pyrite, or bitumen (tar) (Nicholson 1963: 11). Bassett (2015) describes how such inlays, common in Aztec statues, gave sight to the depicted gods, because the reflective materials inserted in the eyes made the statues appear to be returning one’s gaze. This enlivens the sculpture with the vital animacy (life force, *tonalli*, etc.) of that deity. The dressing and/or adornment of effigies continues to be an important part of modern Nahua ceremonies (see below).

The physical origins of the WAM statue are unclear, but Nicholson (1963) traces the group to the Toluca basin, west of modern-day Mexico City. The Toluca basin was conquered in 1475-76 by the Mexica Emperor Axayacatl (r.1469-1481) (Townsend 2009: 99) and actively participated in Mexica sculptural tradition by the time of Cortés’ arrival (Nicholson 1963: 21). After the Aztec conquest, the valley site of Calixtlahuaca was transformed into a Mexica colony by bringing in Aztec colonists from the Valley of Mexico (Townsend 2009: 106). Although five of these statues have no provenance, two are known to be from the Toluca basin, and one specifically from the site of Tenancingo in the Toluca Valley (Nicholson 1963). Based on the known provenience of these two statues in the group and their

high similarity in style and iconography, we support Nicholson’s conclusion that all were probably manufactured by closely-aligned sculptors who may have been originally based in a local school of carving in the Toluca Basin (Nicholson 1963; Pasztory 1983).

Maize Goddesses and Aztec Gender Dynamics

The WAM statue, together with Nicholson’s group of six highly similar goddesses and the hundreds of other fertility goddesses, provides a caveat to ideas about pre-Hispanic Mexica gender-power dynamics. Here we are not talking about the political rituals conducted by the Aztec emperor or the imperial priesthood, which may have been imbued with the overarching Mexica male warrior (more misogynist) ideology (Conrad and Demarest 1984). Instead, we want to better understand the general society and its general views on gender dynamics. Nash (1978, 1980), Klein (1988, 1993, 1994) and Clendinnen (1991) have concluded that Mexica women were oppressed in a male-dominated society. However, authors such as Joyce (2000), Kellogg (1995), McCafferty and McCafferty (1988, 1999), and Dodds Pennock (2008, 2018) have suggested a more equal relationship between men and women in the Mexica world. First, Joyce (2000) and Kellogg (1995) have pointed out that the male bias of the Spanish accounts may have influenced the Conquistadors’ description of the Mexica. Second, the frequency of male-female deity pairs as described here in the case of the maize goddesses and gods, suggests gender complementarity. As mentioned above, Xilonen (the Young Maize Goddess) was paired with Piltzintecuhtli (the Young Maize Lord), and Chicomecoatl (the Goddess of Mature Corn) was paired with Centeotl (the God of Mature Corn).

Third, McCafferty and McCafferty (1988) describe the opportunities afforded Mexica women to rise in status, wealth, and power in the trade guild (*pochteca*), in the marketplace (where women not only sold a variety of goods, but also served as administrators), in the production and sale of cloth and textiles, and in the priesthood (where women officiated in rituals, but also served as curers and midwives). They conclude that Mexica gender relationships were not

hierarchical, but in dialectical opposition (47). In a similar fashion, Kellogg (1995) concludes that Mexica gender dynamics can be seen as gender parallelism.

Fourth, Joyce underscores that both male and female deity impersonators were sacrificed during annual festivals, and that both females and males were encouraged to think of themselves as warriors defeating Huitzilopochtli's elder-siblings, known as Huitznahua, when they conquered neighbouring lands (2000: 168-69). The McCafferties (1988: 50) also note that females were represented as warriors: for example, the goddess Xochiquetzal was a warrior when she manifested as her coessence Itzpapalotl (Obsidian Butterfly); women giving birth were described as warriors in battle (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book VI, 167), and if they died during childbirth, they were deified as the Sun's companions, just like men who died in battle (Sahagún 1950-1982: Book II, 37, Book VI, 162-63).

Fifth, Dodds Pennock also notes that far "from being oppressed, many women in Aztec culture were respected and influential" (2018: 277). She notes that "there is little evidence for the patriarchal 'policing' of female bodies" in Aztec society because divorce was allowed from either husband or wife, because of the absence of primogeniture, and because of the emphasis on fathers to care for and raise their sons after weaning (277). Her analysis of female power in Aztec thought led her to conclude that "in mytho-historical terms [women] ... often exceeded their male counterparts in importance" (2018: 278).

Finally, the exquisite detail of the WAM piece and the other similar statues suggests great appreciation of Xilonen and Chicomecoatl. Even more importantly, the close similarity between WAM, the Mexican Museo de Antropología statue (Fig. 2a) and Chicago's Xilonen (Fig. 2b) *teixiptlahuan* imply an established and standardized system of representation for that goddess. Authors such as Evans (2004) have suggested that Aztec gender imbalances led to central, urban sites being dedicated to male deities, while female goddesses were mainly worshipped informally amongst rural communities. We disagree with this interpretation, as the WAM and Chicago Xilonen statues, with their high craftsmanship and standardized themes, highlight that the Aztec state was invested in creating multiple unified and easily recogniz-

able portrayals of female goddesses for central temples, not only for households among small, rural communities. In particular, the Chicago Art Institute Xilonen sculpture was of a scale worthy of an urban temple: its preserved head measures 32.4 x 20.3 x 12.1 cm, basically larger than life-size, and originally it would have been at least twice as large (Nicholson 1963).

The Enduring Power of Maize Dual-gender Gods in Modern Mesoamerica

Among modern Nahuatl-speaking communities of Veracruz on the Gulf Coast of Mexico, corn remains the most important enduring symbol. Sandstrom writes:

Chicomexochitl [7-Flower, male aspect of the corn spirit] ... is more than a mythic culture hero symbolizing the central importance of corn in Nahua life. It plays a deeper metaphysical role in the Nahua view of the universe and the place of human beings in the natural order.... In Nahua thought, human beings are part of the sacred universe, and each of us contains within our bodies a spark of the divine energy that makes the world live. This energy ultimately derives from the sun, *toteotsij*. [...] This energy is carried in the blood (*estli* in Nahuatl), and it is renewed when we consume food, particularly corn. [...] Corn, then, is the physical and spiritual link between human beings and the sun. (1991: 246-47)

In the Nahua pantheon in Amatlán, Veracruz (the village studied by Sandstrom), corn is the principal of the seed spirits, who resides with their mother *Tonantsij* (earth mother) in a cave, which "is also occupied by thunder (*tlatomoni* in Nahuatl) and lightning (*tlapetalani* in Nahuatl), spirits which are associated with the rain dwarfs" (247). Thus, there is a close association between the maize, earth, and rain gods, all so important for agricultural fertility. As mentioned earlier, the corn spirit was seen as twins, one male and one female: Chicomexochitl ("7-flower") was the male twin, and Macuilxochitl ("5-flower") was the female twin (245).

The centrality of corn to modern Nahua people and more generally to all Indigenous groups

of Central America and Mexico, is underscored by the dominance of myths about the Maize God or Maize Hero, sometimes seen as twins (including male and female pairs). Sandstrom (1991) collected several such myths in Huasteca Veracruzana during 1985 and 1986. These myths follow the same patterns seen across a broad expanse of Mesoamerica, as discussed by Braakhuis (2009) and Chinchilla Mazariegos (2017). In one story, “the grandmother of chicomexochitl kills him and tries to hide the body.... No matter what she does he reappears to face her with the crime,” pointing to the constant rebirth of corn even though it is “killed” at the yearly harvest or when the corn is eaten by humans (Sandstrom 1991: 245-46). In variations of this story, the grandmother kills the Maize Hero and throws him in the water where he is rescued or reborn (Braakhuis 2009; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2017). Another story connects the Maize Hero with his father, the Deer Spirit, called *masatl* in Nahuatl, whom the hero tries to resuscitate (Braakhuis 2009; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2017; Sandstrom 1991: 246).

Another myth from Amatlán recounts how corn was rediscovered. Chicomexochitl withdrew to live inside a sacred mountain called Postectitla (Sandstrom 1991). Without corn,

the villagers went hungry. One day people saw red ants carrying grains of corn emerging from a cave in the mountain. At this point, the water spirit *sa hua* struck the mountain, causing the peak to break off and allowing fire to escape from inside the earth. Thunder and lightning spirits ... sprinkled water on the fire to prevent the corn from burning, but were only partially successful. (246)

It led to the invention of white, yellow, red, and black corn varieties (246).

The parallel between this story and that told by Q'eqchi Maya is uncanny: in a time before maize, when mankind ate only fruits and roots, a fox found leaf-eating ants carrying maize grains, and when he tried it, he liked it very much (Thompson 1930: 132). When all the other animals tried the corn and liked it, they told man who asked the Mams, lords of the mountains, the plains and thunder, to help them reach the corn that was locked away inside a mountain

(132). Yaluk, the greatest of the Mams, struck the mountain at its weakest point:

when the thunderbolt burst the rock asunder, it had burnt much of the maize. Originally all the maize had been white, but now much of it had been badly burnt and had turned red. Other grains were covered with smoke, and they had turned yellow. This is how the red and yellow maize originated. (Thompson 1930: 134)

While details and names differ, there are so many similarities between the mythology of the Maize God(s)/Hero(es) across Mesoamerica to suggest that these stories are predicated on common ideas shared by Indigenous groups.

Maize is also at the heart of ritual life among modern Nahua. For example, in Amatlán, Veracruz, one of the most important rituals is called Chicomexochitl after the maize spirit (Sandstrom 1991: 286-88). It takes place in late February or early March, in honor of the seed and rain spirits, and to ensure crop success and rain (Sandstrom 1991: 286-88). It is an elaborate ritual lasting 12 days (286). A main altar is built inside the house of the sponsor. Upon it sits the most important object of the ritual: a sealed box with seed effigies made out of paper. Sandstrom describes the next stages of the ritual:

The shaman directs assistants to open the seed box and to remove and wash the clothes worn by the paper images. As the clothes are drying on the line, assistants lean the naked seed children up right at various places on the altar table and on the earthen floor below. After the cleansing outside in which he expels dangerous *ejecatl* or wind spirits, the shaman enters the house followed by helpers carrying live turkeys and chickens. The shaman grabs a large bird, cuts its throat with a pair of scissors, and carefully drips the blood over the large array of paper images laid on the altar. He repeats this with several additional sacrificial birds, taking care that blood falls on to the paper images and adornments on the floor that forms the display to the earth. He then fills a shallow dish with blood, and using a turkey feather as a brush paints each paper image with it. When I asked what he was doing, he replied, “This is their food.” (1991: 287)

Additional altars are built and decorated with “paper images, leaf and marigold adornments, and copious food and drink offerings” (287). Among these, two altars are specifically dedicated to the fire spirit and the water spirit, while a third one in the form of a cross is dedicated to the sun (287). During the next eleven days, off and on, chanting, dancing, and offerings are given to the spirits in front of the altar as copal smoke rises and surrounds the altars and the people (287). The twelfth day is the culmination and end of the ritual: new offerings are placed on the altars, the seed box is refilled with the paper images which have been redressed in their clean clothes and even decorated with additional jewelry. Meanwhile,

the shaman chants intensely. In his chant he lists the offerings and implores *tonatsij* [the earth mother] and her children, the seeds, to support the village in the year to come. He chants before each altar, beseeching the sun, water, and earth to be kind to the people even though they often offend the spirits through their activities and occasional evil intentions. (Sandstrom 1991: 288).

A similar ceremony, also called Chicomexochitl, was observed by Bassett (2015) in a different locality in the same Huasteca Veracruzana region during the summers of 2006 and 2010 (14-25). Just like in Amatlán, the main gods propitiated in this ritual are paper effigies embodying the Chicomexochitl family, and the primary goal of the ritual is to ensure the arrival of rain for the crops (21). Bassett describes the creation of these effigies as a critical process of animation: “

During this ... annual celebration, participants manufacture a family of six *totiotzin* [gods], and in the process, the inanimate objects [the paper figures] ceremonially transform into animate entities, a ritual act that effects change along the spectrum of animacy.... Over a period of a few days, the *tepahtihquetl* (ritual officiant [or shaman]) cuts ordinary store-bought *amatl* (paper) into *tlatecmeh* (paper figures of natural deities used in ceremonies) that come to embody the highly animate Chicomexochitl, Tohueyinanán (mother), Tohuehitatah (father), and their four

children, whom participants venerate throughout the year. (15)

The Chicomexochitl are seen as boys and girls, who are adopted by the family sponsoring the ritual, and feted throughout the year by this same family (Bassett 2015: 21). Although Bassett does not clarify which gods Chicomexochitl represents, it is quite likely that they are all four maize spirits, not only because they have the name of the Maize God among the Nahuatl speakers of the Gulf Coast (Braakhuis 2009), but also because they are children, both male and female, as the male and female corn twins of Amatlán.

The ritual culminates in the pilgrimage of the whole community to the summit of their sacred mountain, called Xochicalco (“Flower House” in Nahuatl) which is considered the home of the Chicomexochitl (Bassett 2015: 17-18). Bassett described the ceremony thus:

Once the group arrives on the *altepetl*’s summit, the *Tepanhtihquetl* hangs the bag containing the Chicomexochitl effigies above the center of the summit’s principal altar. [...] Participants cover the largest altar table with sheets of paper cutouts representing beans, corn and chilies. Members of the sponsoring family hold two chickens and a turkey while the *tepahtihquetl* feeds them sips of soda and beer. After ‘intoxicating’ the birds with these luxury beverages, the *tepahtihquetl* uses scissors to cut their necks.... The birds’ blood soaks into the paper cutouts and the earth. (2015: 19-20)

The many similarities between this ceremony and the ritual by the same name observed by Sandstrom in Amatlán illuminate the continuing centrality of maize in the lives of modern Nahua people, the descendants of the pre-Hispanic Aztecs. Where modern Nahua communities render Maize Gods in cutout paper effigies, their ancestors represented those same deities in stone, as in the WAM Aztec statue.

Conclusions

The WAM statue features symbols and characteristics that can be individually attributed to multiple Aztec deities. But a close analysis of the statue suggests that it embodies a specific maize

deity, instead of being an amalgamation of multiple divine figures. Comparing the statue to others described by Nicholson (1963) and examining several of its major components—perhaps most importantly, its headdress—reveals the statue as Xilonen or Xilonen-Chicomecoatl, who are both important female maize deities only separated by their identification with different stages in maize growth. The WAM statue's characteristics most closely align with those of Xilonen, the goddess of young maize. Features on the statue which are often associated with other divinities (such as the *chalchihuitl* stones or the black bars on its cheek) are likely general markers of divinity and value, or signs that encourage rain for the young maize plants.

The WAM statue as a young female maize deity supports the idea of Aztec religion not as the misogynistic ideology that modern scholars sometimes argue it is. Instead, the male-female duality that is found with Maize Gods/Goddesses and other divine figures attests to a profoundly complementary gender dynamic. The importance of this male-female duality continues from pre-Hispanic times into modern Nahua rituals, such as those studied by Sandstrom and Bassett in modern-day Veracruz.

Notes

We would like to thank the curatorial staff of the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts and of the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA, especially Jon Seydl, previously the Director of Curatorial Affairs and Curator of European Art at the Worcester Art Museum, and Elizabeth Gallerani, Mellon Curator of Academic Programs at WCMA. Their help was indispensable and made this research possible. We would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers whose comments greatly improved this work. All errors of fact and interpretations remain our own.

1. This red pigment is highly significant as red is the colour of blood, and *tonalli*, one of the life forces, is found in blood according to the pre-Hispanic Aztecs and their descendants, modern Nahua people (Furst 1995; Sandstrom 1991). Blood was also the preferred offering to the gods in pre-Hispanic times. Even today, in Nahua rituals, blood from sacrificed birds is brushed onto paper cult figures representing deities or spirits (Sandstrom 1991; see also further discussion in the latter sections of the article).

2. The six statues are: (1) Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, no. 11.0-02997 (Nicholson 1963: Fig. 6); (2) British Museum, London, according to Nicholson, but the artifact could not be located in 2020, so its location is unknown (1963: Fig. 7); (3) Museo de Historia y Arqueología, Toluca, Mexico (1963: Fig. 8); (4) Palacios Collection, and now in Metropolitan Museum, New York, no. 1979.206.1386 (1963: Fig. 9); (5) Museum of Primitive Art, previously, and now Metropolitan Museum, New York, no. 1979.206.407 (1963: Fig. 10); and (6) the McNear fertility goddess now at the Art Institute of Chicago, no. 1986.1091 (1963: Figs. 1-3).

3. Durán (1971: 222) also describes Chicomecoatl's *teixiptla*, confirming that all her garments were red, as well as her paper tiara. As Chicomecoatl was the deity of harvest, Durán places the great festival honoring Chicomecoatl in early September rather than April.

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