



Head of Xilonen, Goddess of Young Maize

A.D. 1400/1500

Aztec (Mexico), Tenochtitlan, Mexico

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education

Division of Teacher Programs

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Basalt

32.4 x 20.3 x 12.1 cm (12 3/4 x 8 x 4 3/4 in.)

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This sculptural fragment depicts Xilonen, the youthful **Aztec (Mexico)** goddess of new **maize** (corn). Carved in the round, this dark grey **basalt** bust was originally painted in bright naturalistic colors; the two indented strips in her cheeks most likely would have been filled with **turquoise** or shell. Rising from her floral headband is a pair of large, realistically represented ears of maize, the long tassels flowing down her back. This feature, along with the **rhomboid**-shaped pendant around her neck, identifies her as Xilonen, whose name derives from the **Nahuatl** words *xilotl* (tender ears of maize) and *nen* (benefit or good).

The many existing carvings of Xilonen suggest her importance in Aztec culture as one of three female maize deities representing stages of crop growth and maturation; Xilonen's **teotl** (divine power) embodied fertility. The Aztec believed that representations of deities were imbued with the teotl of the gods themselves. Sculptures of Xilonen and other deities played a role in the great festivals held in the open plazas and temple platforms. While this particular sculpture likely would have functioned as an **effigy** for worship in a communal temple, the cult of Xilonen was also observed in the home.

Before the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century, the Aztecs dominated large parts of **Mesoamerica**. They came to the **Valley of Mexico** as the last in a series of successive migrant groups that settled in the region beginning in the 13th century. Centuries earlier, the same region had been home to the great civilization referred to by the Aztecs as **Teotihuacan** (Place of the Gods). While the inhabitants of Teotihuacan had long since disappeared, the Aztec discovery of its spectacular ruins served as a model for the cosmological layout and cultural identity of their own capital city of **Tenochtitlan**, the ancestor of present-day Mexico City which was founded on an uninhabited island on **Lake Texcoco** in 1325. The Aztecs together with the neighboring Acolhuas of Texcoco and the Tepanecs of Tlacopan formed the Aztec Triple Alliance, also known as the Aztec Empire, and extended their rule east to the Gulf of Mexico, west to the Pacific, and as far south as the state of Chiapas and into present-day Guatemala.

Maize served as a cornerstone in the development of the Aztec empire as well as communities throughout Mesoamerica. Archaeological discoveries in the Rio Balsas region of Mexico and elsewhere reveal that its domestication dates back more than 7000 years, long before settled towns and cities were established. Maize was, and continues to be, a staple of the traditional Mexican diet. Along with beans, squash, tomatoes, and chilies, it provides basic balanced nutrition that in ancient times would have occasionally been supplemented with animal protein from fowl, fish, reptiles, and insects—there were no large domesticated animals in the ancient Americas. In addition to its nutritional value and the technology developed for its cultivation—including **metates** (grinding stones), **manos** (grinding tools), and the process of **nixtamalization**—maize played a central role in the Mesoamerican worldview and mythology.

The sprouting and harvesting of maize was metaphorically associated with the ongoing cycle of birth, destruction, and regeneration of life. This idea is embodied in the three Aztec female deities of maize: Xilonen, Cinteotl, and Chicomecoatl. Xilonen represented the earliest maize of the summer. Cinteotl was the deity of the ripe ears of maize at the height of harvest. Chicomecoatl stood for the seed maize preserved for planting the next year's crop. Sacred performances expressing the community's gratitude for the bounty of the crop and hope for agricultural abundance in the years to come took place throughout the maize cultivation season in honor of these maize goddesses.

Ritual festivals dedicated to the worship of Xilonen and the season's first fruit took place annually during the early rainy period in August. For eight consecutive days before the maize festival, commoners and the poor were fed abundant meals of tamales and a corn-based beverage called **chienpinolli**. Every night, a procession of men and women danced in the plazas to the rhythm of drums and the trumpet-like sound of conch shells being blown. A young female slave selected to impersonate Xilonen was attired in a red dress and a red paper headdress. Much like the headgear and jewelry on the Art Institute's bust of Xilonen, she had two ears of maize placed in her headdress with the silk flowing to her shoulders. She wore golden earplugs and a necklace of realistically carved golden ears of maize tied with a blue ribbon. [Notice the two holes at each end of the statue's necklace where a real necklace would have been attached to the sculpture.] Her cheeks were colored with red paint and in her hands she held ears of maize made of fine feather work and gold. On the last night the impersonator was sacrificed in a sacred ceremony in thanks for the sustenance that was essential for the community's very survival.

The practice of human sacrifice strikes us as foreign, yet in several pre-Columbian cultures it was a vital way of expressing a deeply rooted belief in the reciprocity between humans and nature; it ensured the continuity of the seasons and the balance of the world. As Esther Paztory suggests in the introduction to her book about the culture of Teotihuacan, "Our Judeo Christian morality is based on the supremacy of man as god's creation. Mesoamerican morality is based on the idea that man was only a part of the cosmos, that voluntarily or involuntarily he would be persuaded to give up his life for the community of the cosmos." Considered through this lens, the Aztec maize goddesses, their sculptural representations, and the young women chosen to impersonate them were manifestations of a larger worldview that envisaged a direct connection between nature and society, embedding the activities of humanity in the realm of the sacred.

Glossary

Aztec (Mexico): literally, “people from Aztlan.” The Nahuatl-speaking people who dominated large parts of Mesoamerica (what is now central and southern Mexico) during the 15th and early 16th centuries were the last wave of nomadic groups that settled in the Valley of Mexico towards the 13th century; they traced their origins to Aztlan, a mythological place probably in northern Mexico.

basalt: common volcanic rock, fine-grained and dark gray in color

chienpinolli: corn-based beverage having the consistency of a thin gruel and often sweetened with honey

effigy: image or representation, especially of a person or deity

Lake Texcoco: one of several interconnected lakes in the Valley of Mexico. The Aztec founded their capital, Tenochtitlan, on an islet on the western part of the lake in 1325, engineering an aquatic cultivation and transportation infrastructure that was ultimately demolished by the Spanish; the lake was drained in the 17th century to stop repeated flooding of the increasingly urbanized area.

maize: From the Taino word for corn, later transliterated by the Spanish as *maiz*, maize was developed from earlier varieties of the plant into a staple crop by the inhabitants of the central highlands in Mexico.

mano: stone used with a metate to process or grind food by hand

Mesoamerica: Used to define the cultural and historical context of the people who have inhabited the geographical area of North and Central America extending from northern Mexico into Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and parts of el Salvador. Mesoamerica encompasses several pre-Columbian cultures including the Olmec, Teotihuacan, Maya, and Aztec.

metate: mortar or mealing stone used for crushing and grinding grain and seeds using a mano. In both ancient and contemporary traditional cultures, women typically use metates to grind calcified maize and other organic materials to prepare tortillas and other foods.

Nahuatl (“NAH-what-l”): Dialect of Nahua, an ancient language centered in the Valley of Mexico, and the language used by the Aztecs at the time of their encounter with the Spanish. Nahuatl is still spoken today in several traditional Mexican communities.

nixtamalization (“nista’mal-e-zay-shen”): From the Nahuatl words *nextli* (ashes) and *tamalli* (unformed maize dough), nixtamalization is a process used to remove the pericarp (outer wall) of the maize kernel; it consists of soaking and cooking maize in an alkaline solution of limewater, thereby increasing its nutritional value, improving its flavor and aroma, and making it less likely to contain molds.

rhomboid: parallelogram with no right angles and with adjacent sides of unequal length

Tenochtitlan (“teh-nohch-’TEA’-tlhan”): literally, “place of the prickly pear cactus.” From the Nahuatl words *tenochtli* (hard prickly pear), *ti* (next to), and *tlan* (place), this capital city of the Aztec Empire (1325–1521 A.D.) was founded on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco; present-day Mexico City is built on its ruins.

Teotihuacan (“Tayo-tee-wahkhon”): literally, “Place of the Gods.” The dominant religious, political, and commercial center in the Valley of Mexico during the Early Classic period (A.D. 250–600), its city was based on a grid plan, with its buildings and monuments aligned with celestial movements and integrated into the natural landscape; Tenochtitlan was based on Teotihuacan’s design.

turquoise: Found throughout Mexico and the southwest United States (as well as the Middle East and China) this mineral is a blue, bluish-green, or greenish-gray hydrous basic phosphate of copper and aluminum; the Aztecs associated its color with agricultural abundance, fertility, and the waters of the earth and sky.

Valley of Mexico: Rich in natural resources and located the highlands plateau in central Mexico, the Valley of Mexico was the seat of several pre-Columbian civilizations, including Teotihuacan and the Aztecs, affording strategic and economic advantages to its settlers.

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

Observing and Describing

Illinois Learning Standards: 25, 27

Invite students to observe the artwork carefully for about 30 seconds. Ask students to write a list of all the details they notice. When they have completed their lists, ask them to share their observations and note them on the board. Make an exhaustive list of the students' observations. As a group, consider if there are any other details that have not been mentioned.

After all comments have been recorded, ask your students to categorize their observations working individually or in small groups. You can give them preestablished themes or let them decide on the themes. For example, students can cluster all the words that refer to Xilonen's adornment, any terms related to her identity, or terms that describe the physical condition of the sculpture. Keep instructions general to allow students to come up with their own connections to these themes.

After a few minutes, ask students to share their categories and to explain their decision for grouping certain words together. As the students share, follow up with questions to probe their understanding.

Who do they think is represented by the sculpture?

Is she a distinguished individual? Why?

Are there any unusual elements (ie, the ears of corn, the enlarged earlobes, the indentations on the cheeks, or the orifices at the end of the necklace)?

Ask students to make inferences to explain these unusual elements and layer in contextual information as appropriate during the conversation.

Aztec (Mexico) Dieties

Illinois Learning Standards: 16, 17, 18

The Aztecs worshipped multiple deities that represented different aspects of the natural world, moral principles, the origin of the cosmos, and the movement of the heavenly bodies. Have students work in groups to research different deities of the Aztec pantheon and present their reports to the whole group.

How many maize deities did the Aztecs have?

How are they related to the other deities?

Find illustrations of those other dieties.

What does the presence of the maize deities tell us about the importance of maize in traditional Mesoamerican cultures?

Food for Thought

Illinois Learning Standards: 11, 13

Ask students to record all the foods they eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in one day. Instruct them to be as thorough as possible and to include beverages, snacks, and condiments. (You may want to create a graphic organizer for this purpose.)

When all the data is collected (it could be entered into a spreadsheet) have students work in groups to determine how many of the foods consumed in the group are prepared foods. Make a list of all the prepared foods consumed by the group (ie, soda, condiments, candy bars, cereals, prepared soups, snacks, etc.). Now have students work in teams to research the ingredients of each food and notice the occurrence of corn-based ingredients such as corn meal, cornstarch, hydrolized corn protein, and high fructose corn syrup.

Why is corn so pervasive in the American diet?

How is corn today different from the corn domesticated by Mesoamerican cultures?

What are the pros and cons of genetically modified crops?

What is the link between corn syrup and obesity and diabetes?

Use this activity to spark a debate and further research. Watch *King Corn*, a feature documentary on corn and its supremacy in the American food pyramid.

The Science of Corn

Illinois Learning Standards: 12, 13

Nixtamalization was developed by Mesoamericans to increase the digestibility, texture, and flavor of corn. Without nixtamalization, the niacin in corn cannot be absorbed by the body. Over time, a diet lacking in niacin causes pellagra (from Italian *pelle*, skin; *agra*, sour), a condition that causes severe dermatitis, digestive problems, and eventually death. Europeans did not adopt nixtamalization when they introduced corn into their cuisine. As people's diets increasingly relied on corn, pellagra became endemic in some localities reaching epidemic proportions in the American south in the early 1900s.

Have students research the process of nixtamalization and its importance. What is alkalization and how does it convert bound niacin into free niacin? How does alkalization lower the presence of mycotoxins?

It took scientists until the beginning of the 20th century to draw a connection between the incidence of pellagra and the need for nixtamalization. Have students consider how Mesoamerican people discovered and developed the process of nixtamalization thousands of years earlier without the technology available to Western culture in the 20th century.

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Websites

Mesolore

Brown University
www.mesolore.net/

This research and teaching tool on Mesoamerica includes scholarly articles, lesson plans, interactive primary documents, an atlas, glossary, and much more.

Hopi History Curriculum

Northern Arizona University
library.nau.edu/speccoll/exhibits/hopitg/

The Hopi agriculture lesson (grades K–2) aims to familiarize students with Hopi agricultural practices.

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: Aztec Art of the Americas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/hi_aztec.htm

This timeline has information on works of art, including *Maize Deity (Chicomcoatl)*, the deity of seed corn, and thematic essays on Mesoamerican art.

Agriculture in the Classroom

United States Department of Agriculture
www.agclassroom.org/index.cfm

This program seeks to improve agricultural literacy—awareness, knowledge, and appreciation—among pre-K–12 teachers and their students. The teacher center includes lesson plans, state Ag facts, AgroWorld e-zine, and a resource directory.

Sci4Kids

United States Department of Agriculture
www.ars.usda.gov/is/kids/

Through news stories and other content posted each month, Sci4Kids gives you a first-hand glimpse into the world of the Agricultural Research Service (ARS).

The Great Corn Adventure

University of Illinois Extension
urbanext.illinois.edu/corn/guide.html

This teacher's guide includes information on the history and growth cycle of corn, its many uses, and how it travels from field to consumer.

Corn Breeding: Lessons from the Past

University of Nebraska-Lincoln
plantandsoil.unl.edu/croptechology2005/gen/?what=topicsD&informationModuleId=1075412493&topicOrder=1&max=12&min=0&

These series of lessons on the science of corn breeding are excellent for teachers and high school students.

Related Resources for Students

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