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An Extraordinary Teotihuacán Mural

A TEOTIHUACÁN MURAL with an indisputable notation of glyphs arranged in columnar form is a rarity. Such a mural is in the collections of the University of Missouri.¹ We believe that it has considerable potential importance for the study of the Teotihuacán writing system.

The mural is a relatively small fragment, painted in tones of red, which comes from the site of Teotihuacán, an enormous ancient metropolis

in Central Mexico noted for its two great pyramids, located about twenty-five miles northeast of modern Mexico City. Considered the most highly urbanized center of its time in the New World (its life span extended from about the time of Christ to A.D. 750), the city at its peak (ca. A.D. 500-600) extended over an area of about eight square miles, had a probable population of about 125,000 people, and was the preeminent power in



Mural fragment from Teotihuacán, Mexico (ca. A.D. 500). Left: detail of the mural, showing two glyphs.



Aerial view of Teotihuacán. In the foreground is the Pyramid of the Moon, at the north end of the central ceremonial avenue, the "Street of the Dead." On the east side of the great avenue is the much larger Pyramid of the Sun. Beyond it is the precinct known as the Ciudadela (citadel). Across the avenue from it are remains of a huge precinct known as the "Great Compound" (mostly unexcavated); here the city's largest market place was probably located. The structures lining the Street of the Dead are both religious and residential. The surrounding area was densely crowded with dwellings, many in the form of walled apartment compounds. Photo courtesy of R. Millon.

much of Middle America.²

Mural painting was the major art form of the Teotihuacanos, who decorated both their residences and their sacred structures with wall paintings. Unfortunately, there is no way to determine from what type of building this fragment comes. But the position of the little figure within the diamond-shaped border shows that it came from the upper part of a wall which must have been painted with a series of interlocking, diamond-shaped designs, each enclosing an identical figure. This manner of decorating upper walls, which became popular sometime during the Xolalpan phase (ca. 450-650), produces a kind of wallpaper effect.³

Paintings executed in tones of red sometimes are the only paintings in a structure, or they may occur side by side with polychrome paintings. In style and technique the fragment is an excellent example of "typical" Teotihuacán mural paint-

ing. In subject matter, however, it is strikingly different, even though the figure represented is like many figures in other murals, usually described as priests clad in ceremonial attire.⁴

This priestly figure wears round ear ornaments, a feathered headdress which seems to extend partway down his back, a necklace in two parts (one of which may have been obsidian or shell rings), an elaborately tied loin cloth, a short cloak, a dotted undergarment, and sandals. His eyes are surrounded by the "goggles" characteristically associated with the Teotihuacán deity known as the "Rain God," and a painted line decorates his cheek. Emerging from his mouth is an object known as a "speech scroll." In his left hand the figure holds an incense container, the bag designed in the form of a rattlesnake tail. From his right hand falls a panel-like object which, like the "speech scroll," is decorated with dots. Frequently such "panels" also contain representa-

tions of seeds, shells, discs of jade and, occasionally, figurine heads and ceramic vessels.⁵ Most standing figures seem intended to be visualized as walking, and the presumption is that whatever is being represented in the "falling panel" is being cast on the ground in the course of a ritual. This may take the literal form of a libation, which appears to be the case here, or may allude to objects related in some way to the ritual being enacted. The diamond-shaped border surrounding the figure is decorated with footprints (visible in the upper left corner), one of the most common symbols in Teotihuacán art.

The unusual, indeed extraordinary, element in this painting is the fact that its two glyphs are painted one above the other in front of the figure.⁶ The columnar form used by the artist, brief as it is, resembles inscriptions of the Maya and Zapotec peoples contemporary with the Teotihuacanos, and also inscriptions common at a much later date, such as those found in Mixtec codices. In these inscriptions the columnar form indicates that the symbols are ordered to produce a text of some sort.⁷ Teotihuacán glyphs were not arranged in this manner. Glyphic representations range widely from what looks like a random scatter of symbols over a surface to a patterned repetition within the border of a painting.⁸ But they are not found painted one above the other, as they are in the Missouri example.

The upper glyph is a cone-shaped object, probably representing a tassel adhering to a bar. It resembles what Caso⁹ called a "tied object" associated with the headdress of the "Rain God" (a deity often called by the same name as his later Aztec counterpart, Tlaloc). The lower glyph is the head of a canine, probably a coyote, seen in profile, its tongue hanging out. The furry pelt is represented by thin lines. Animals believed to be coyotes are found in a number of Teotihuacán murals and also on decorated ceramic vessels. The coyote is represented at Tula, the later Toltec center (ca. A.D. 1000); and even later, in the Aztec period, at the time of the Spanish Conquest in 1521, it was still regarded as a sacred animal, the deity of craftsmen who did elaborate work with feathers.

The glyphs undoubtedly refer to the figure which they accompany. One possibility is that

they represent a name, whether of place, person or group. But other interpretations cannot be precluded. The meaning of the two glyphs is, for the present, an intriguing puzzle.

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¹Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia, Acc. No. 68.474. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Merrin. Preserved height 43.5 cm., width 54 cm. Lime-plaster surface irregularly chipped along edges. Some surface deterioration, but major outlines clearly visible.

²R. Millon, "Teotihuacán: Completion of Map of Giant Ancient City in the Valley of Mexico," *Science* 170 (1970) 1077-1082, "Teotihuacán," *Scientific American* 216 (1967) no. 6, 38-48.

³C. Millon, "The History of Mural Art at Teotihuacán," *Teotihuacán, XI Mesa Redonda, Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología* (Mexico 1972) 1-16; C. Hall (Millon), *A Chronological Study of the Mural Art of Teotihuacán*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley (1962).

⁴For a well known example of such figures see E. Edwards, *Painted Walls of Mexico* (Austin 1966) 17, pl. 2; M. Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (New York 1957) pl. 31, above.

⁵See, e.g., E. Edwards, *op. cit.*, pl. 6, above, opposite 20, and pls. 12, 25, for "falling panels" with such representations. See also Covarrubias, *op. cit.*, color plate opposite 132.

⁶One other column of glyphs, much longer, is known at present, very badly fragmented and unrestored. Among the symbols represented are a number which appear to be foreign. The pictorial context in which the glyphs occur also contains foreign representations. See A. Villagra, "Trabajos Realizados en Teotihuacán: 1952," *Anales del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia: 1952* (Mexico 1955) VI, part 1, no. 34, 69-78; C. Millon, *op. cit.*; C. Hall, *op. cit.*

⁷See Covarrubias, *op. cit.*, 210-212 for a brief discussion of ancient Middle American writing systems. Covarrubias also illustrates Zapotec glyphic texts from Oaxaca (150, fig. 62); texts from the Maya of Southern Mexico and Guatemala (212, fig. 92; color plate opposite 228); and examples of Mixtec writing (301, fig. 129; 302, fig. 130). Mixtec-speaking peoples lived in what are now the states of Puebla and Oaxaca, where the Spanish conquerors found them.

⁸See, e.g., E. Edwards, *op. cit.*, 19, pl. 3; 30, pl. 16; Covarrubias, *op. cit.*, 128, fig. 53, second row from bottom, left; bottom row, right.

⁹A. Caso, "Dioses y Signos Teotihuacanos," *Teotihuacán 1*, 253, figs. 6a, b, c, 7. Onceava Mesa Redonda, Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología (Mexico 1967).