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THE BUSINESS OF NARRATIVE AT TULA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE VESTIBULE FRIEZE, TRADE, AND RITUAL

Cynthia Kristan-Graham

The so-called frieze of the Caciques at Tula, Hidalgo, Mexico, is an 8-m-long bench with most of its original polychromed face intact. It formed part of a larger composition that once ran around the perimeter of the Vestibule, a colonnaded hall that served as a foyer for Pyramid B. The composition of profile males is adapted to look as if they are actually marching around the room toward the pyramid. Although Hugo Moedano Koer (1947) identified the figures as caciques or local chiefs, an analysis of architectural setting, subject matter, and ethnohistory suggests instead that the figures represent merchants engaged in rituals related to trade. This new reading demonstrates that Tula had decorative programs paralleling its development as an important center of long-distance exchange during the Early Postclassic period, and that merchants from Tula may have been a plausible prototype for Aztec pochteca.

El friso de los Caciques de Tula, Hidalgo, México, es una banca tallada de ocho metros de largo con la mayoría del policromado intacto. Este formaba parte de una composición más grande que alguna vez corría a lo largo del perímetro del vestíbulo, una columnata (pasillo formado por columnas) colocada enfrente de la pirámide B. La composición de personajes masculinos colocados de perfil es adoptada para aparentar la presencia de una procesión en acción, marchando alrededor del cuarto hacia la pirámide de Tula. Sin embargo, un análisis más profundo del marco arquitectónico, la iconografía, y la etnohistoria nos sugiere que las figuras representan comerciantes en lugar de caciques. Esta nueva interpretación nos provee de una visión conceptual y paralela hacia el papel de Tula como un importante centro de intercambio comercial a través de grandes distancias durante el principio del horizonte Postclásico.

Tula, Hidalgo, Mexico, stands at a crossroads of time, geography, and history. It bridges the Classic and Postclassic eras and is on the northern boundary of Mesoamerica and on the brink of recorded history. From its vantage point north of the Valley of Mexico, Tula witnessed and participated in the cultural realignments that defined Late Classic and Early Postclassic Mesoamerica after the hegemony of Teotihuacán and the southern Maya Lowlands eroded.

This era of mesoamerican prehistory is defined by new political alliances, trade routes, and syncretic art styles that combined distinctive highland and lowland components, most notably at Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, Chichén Itzá, and Tula (Diehl and Berlo 1989; Freidel 1986; Pasztory 1978). In this scenario, new trade routes are a given, but the exact partners and routes remain a matter of speculation. However, a little-known monument from Tula—the Vestibule frieze—may actually represent a contingent of Early Postclassic merchants. The frieze is argued to illustrate economic concerns and ritual behavior of this previously “invisible” group at Tula and indicates the importance of merchants and their representation in the material and symbolic construction of the polity both at home and to the mesoamerican world at large. The Vestibule frieze therefore is more than just a diagnostic marker of a new art tradition, for the subject matter and appearance help to elucidate vital cultural processes.

THE TULA ART TRADITION

Besides being an important center of economic and political authority in Early Postclassic central Mexico (A.D. 900–1200), Tula also was the center of an important art tradition. This tradition was one of the earliest in central Mexico to highlight the image of the (male) human figure, visible on

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monumental sculpture and smaller freestanding statues and painted bas-reliefs. Since systematic archaeological and ethnohistorical studies of Tula began in the 1940s (Acosta 1940; Jiménez Moreno 1941), the imagery there has been examined primarily from four viewpoints: the role of Tula as a cultural and aesthetic bridge between Teotihuacán and the Aztecs (Baird 1981, 1985); the relation between Tula and Tollan, mythic home of the Aztec deity and culture hero Quetzalcoatl (Healan 1989; Nicholson 1957); the nature of the relation between Tula and the contemporaneous Maya site of Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, which shares with Tula traits of planning, architecture, and imagery (Kubler 1961; Ruz Lhuillier 1962)¹; and the many images of arms and armor at Tula that have been used as evidence of the militarism of the polity and art tradition (Kristan-Graham 1989).

Recent work has somewhat altered the traditional line of some of these paradigms. While excavations in the Tula region indicate a larger Late Classic occupation than previously had been thought (Mastache and Cobean 1989), excavations and ceramic analysis suggest that Chichén Itzá had an earlier, and obviously much larger, occupation (Charles Lincoln, personal communication 1990). Susan Gillespie (1989:123–207) has provided compelling textual evidence that central Mexican myths about Quetzalcoatl and Tollan may actually date to the Postcontact period. This revision of the literature thus questions the validity of much of the mythological readings that have anchored many interpretations of Postclassic culture and art.

These issues still are integral to our understanding of Tula, but have framed the parameters of research too narrowly, primarily on mythic and martial concerns, and have denied the full significance of the Tula art tradition as the conceptual and visual expression of the capital of a powerful polity. Luckily, work from the last two decades that has helped clarify the economic, political, and cultural role of Tula (Diehl 1981, 1983; Healan 1989; Matos M. 1974, 1976) may also help illuminate similar dimensions of imagery there.

Tula was one of a number of polities, along with Xochicalco and probably Cholula, that competed to fill the void left by the decline of Teotihuacán in the kaleidoscopic central Mexican cultural geography that followed the Classic period. Through consolidation of population and resources such as arable land, trade routes, and obsidian, Tula rose to prominence during the ninth and tenth centuries. Despite its location north of the Valley of Mexico, Tula became an administrative city, the center of an expansive site hierarchy, and the hub of an economic network linking central Mexico with the far reaches of Mesoamerica (Sanders and Webster 1988:539). It is within this context of emergent power that the Tula art tradition may best be understood. Most of the figural imagery there, for example, represents not mythological figures but members of social groups vital to Tula's social formation and sustained position in Early Postclassic central Mexico.

THE VESTIBULE FRIEZE

The Vestibule frieze represents ornately dressed males walking in procession in Vestibule 1 (hereafter called "the Vestibule"), a large colonnaded hall in the Tula civic-ceremonial center (Figures 1 and 2). Hugo Moedano Koer (1947), one of the principal excavators of Tula, named this the frieze of the Caciques when it was uncovered in the 1940s. Although the Arawakan word "cacique" means "local chief," Moedano Koer identified the figures in the frieze as warriors and leaders of towns subject to Tula demonstrating their allegiance to the principal gods there.

However, there is considerable evidence that the figures in the frieze represent merchants instead. Jorge Acosta (1956–1957:104), who directed nearly 20 years of excavations at Tula, thought that many merchants were carved on stone slabs there. Although he neither illustrated nor cited specific images, he may have had the frieze of the Caciques in mind, since architectural setting, composition, costumes, and color all indicate that these figures are merchants. Strong parallels between the frieze and ethnohistory, moreover, suggest that the merchants are engaged in rituals that sacralize the importance of merchants, and hence also (long-distance) exchange, to Tula.

Architectural Setting

The frieze adorns the interior walls of the Vestibule in the Tula civic-ceremonial center, where pyramids, ball courts, and colonnaded halls frame a large central plaza (Figure 3). The Vestibule is

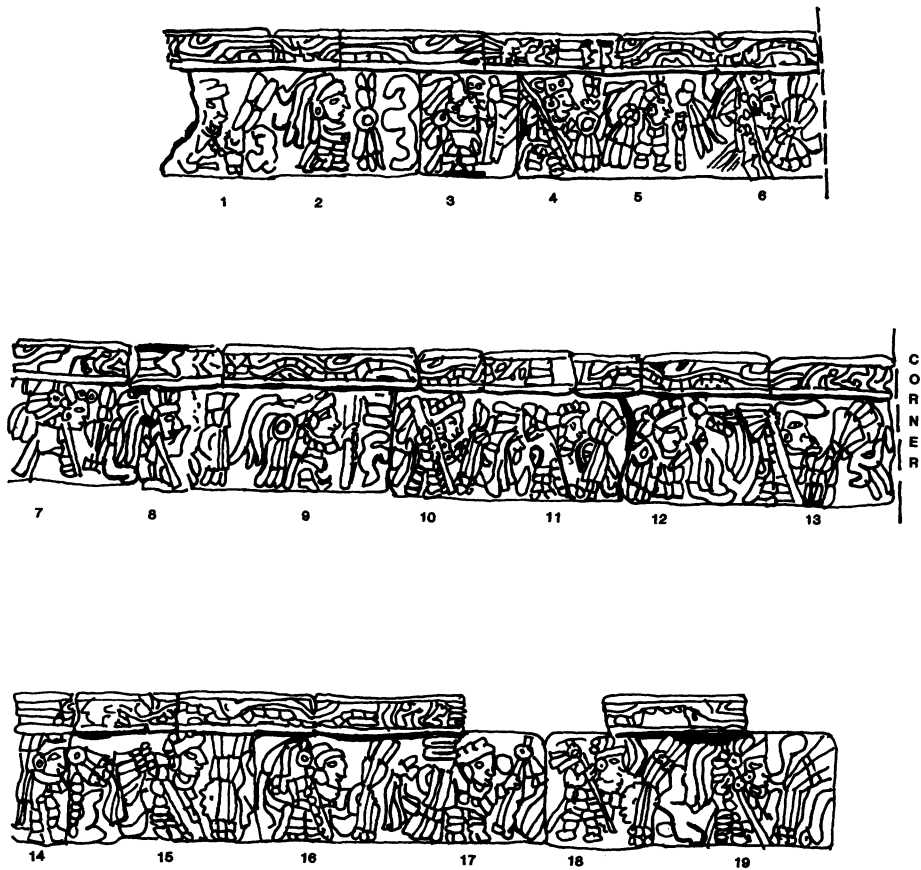


Figure 1. Vestibule frieze, Tula (after Moedano 1947:Color illustration).

an L-shaped colonnaded hall or foyer that links Pyramid B, the largest reconstructed building at Tula, with the main plaza (Figure 4). A doorway on the north side of the hall leads to the Pyramid B stairway, and the southern end of the Vestibule opens onto the plaza. Imprints on the floor indicate that 48 square pillars, probably made of wood, once supported a roof. A sunken patio and two hearths are roughly aligned along the east–west axis (Acosta 1945:43).

In situ rubble and stone-veneer benches with a battered base and cantilevered cornice line the Vestibule interior. The Vestibule frieze adorns the bench in the northwest corner near the doorway leading to Pyramid B. It was one of the few monuments at Tula found with much of its carved, stuccoed, and brightly painted bas-relief surface intact. The bench is .94 m high and 1.08 m wide, and the frieze is .5 m high and 8.2 m long; this length refers to the portion of the frieze found in good condition rather than to an original, self-contained section (Figure 5).

Composition

The composition of the frieze is adapted to create the impression of a procession actually in progress. Males in profile on the northwest corner of the bench march from left to right, or from the plaza toward the doorway leading to Pyramid B (Figures 1 and 4). The frieze was the only well-preserved section of a larger composition that probably once ran around the entire perimeter of the Vestibule. Across the doorway from the Vestibule frieze is a projecting table or altar and a bench that runs around the west and south walls. Fragmentary remains indicate that, except for a 4.7-m

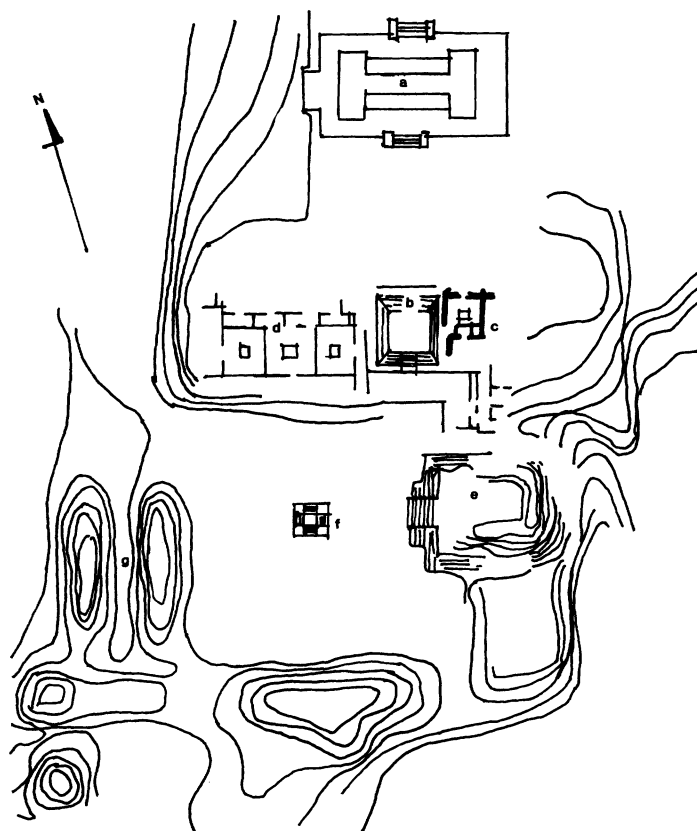


Figure 2. Plan of the Tula civic-ceremonial center: (a) Ballcourt 1; (b) Pyramid B; (c) Building 1; (d) Building 3; (e) Pyramid C; (f) Adoratorio; (g) Ballcourt 2 (after Diehl 1989:Figure 3.3).

section, the bench was decorated with a carved and painted frieze. Five fragments show the feet of three figures marching from the plaza toward the Pyramid B doorway, but written sources are vague about the exact location (Acosta 1945:38–42, 1956:74). One section of the frieze at the far south of the west wall likewise represents two figures moving from the plaza toward Pyramid B (Acosta 1956: 74, lámina 27).

Based upon these remains and other processional friezes at Tula, the standard reconstruction of the Vestibule includes bench friezes on the north, east, and west walls that represent two files of figures who enter the Vestibule from the plaza, split up into two files that march around the room, and then meet again at a doorway and an altar at the foot of the Pyramid B stairway (Diehl 1983: 64–65; Moedano Koer 1947:125). This processional theme is echoed by the carved and painted cornice above the frieze, where serpents slither in the same direction, toward the pyramid.

To fully understand the composition and subject matter of the frieze, it is necessary to discuss some nearby buildings and decorative programs related to the Vestibule frieze by location and composition. The best-preserved buildings and imagery at Tula are found north of the main plaza, where the Vestibule frieze is linked to Pyramid B and to the processional bench frieze in Hall 2 of the adjacent Building 3. Atop Pyramid B, a plausible terminus of the Vestibule procession, are three types of monumental sculpture: columns, atlantids, and pillars. Although their present arrangement on the pyramid is speculative, iconographic analysis has suggested identities for these figural sculptures. The two carved columns in the shape of inverted feathered serpents that probably once framed a temple doorway may be an overt reference to Quetzalcoatl, the “Feathered Serpent,” but George

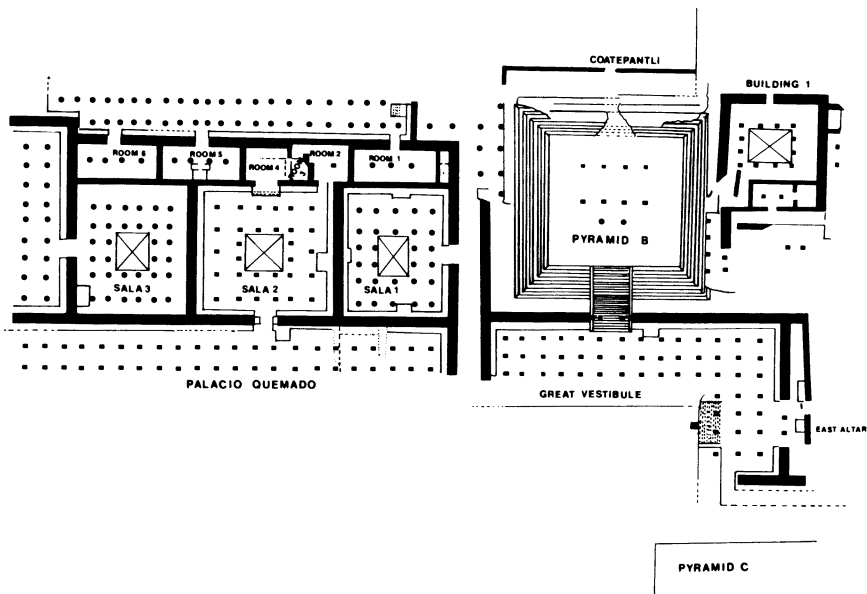


Figure 3. Plan of the northern portion of the Tula civic-ceremonial center (from Baird 1985:Figure 1). Courtesy Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.

Kubler (1982) has also suggested that such monuments may be symbols of the polity. The four identical atlantids have been variously identified as warriors, hunters, or the god Mixcoatl, Quetzalcoatl's father (Acosta 1961:221; Baird 1985:109; Graulich 1976; Kubler 1984:83; Nicholson 1971: 109), and the four square carved pillars represent figures wearing the regalia of both rulers and warriors (Kristan-Graham 1989:114–177). Their similar height of ca. 4 m indicates that they probably once supported a roof.

West of Pyramid B and the Vestibule is Building 3, with three large halls facing the plaza and several smaller rooms in the rear. Hall 2 is the largest room and the only one that opens onto the plaza. Like the Vestibule, it is colonnaded, has hearths and a central sunken patio, and is lined with a bench decorated with a carved and painted frieze that parallels the Vestibule frieze in form, scale, and composition. Two files of profile males seem to enter from a doorway in the northeast corner, march around the room, and then meet at the doorway leading to the plaza. The frieze in Hall 2 has extant carved bas-relief individuals at both doorways, and may show how the original Vestibule frieze was arranged. This frieze has never been examined in detail, but the figures have been identified as caciques, priests, or dignitaries (Diehl 1983:64). Building 3 is framed on the north, west, and south by Vestibule 2, a colonnaded hall whose plan complements the Vestibule; unlike the Vestibule, however, there is no extant decoration here.

Several other rooms at Tula are lined with benches. Room 4 of Building 3 has the remains of a bench or an altar on the south wall whose face is decorated with two standing frontal figures; one stands next to an altar or bench with the same profile as benches from Tula (de la Fuente et al. 1988: Number 84). This image may represent a bench procession from an *en face* view that may be linked by location and composition to the nearby procession in Hall 2. Hall 1 of Building 3 is lined with a plain bench and projecting altar (Acosta 1956:91, 112). East of the Vestibule is Building 4, which is almost totally destroyed. However, one wall has the fragments of a bench with decorated frieze that represents eight individuals in procession (Acosta 1956: láminas 28 and 29).

Today the site of Tula is itself an artifact of twentieth-century archaeology, as it has been surveyed, excavated, and restored by several archaeological projects. Augusto Molina Montes (1982) has challenged Acosta's 1940s–1950s reconstruction of the civic-ceremonial center on several counts.

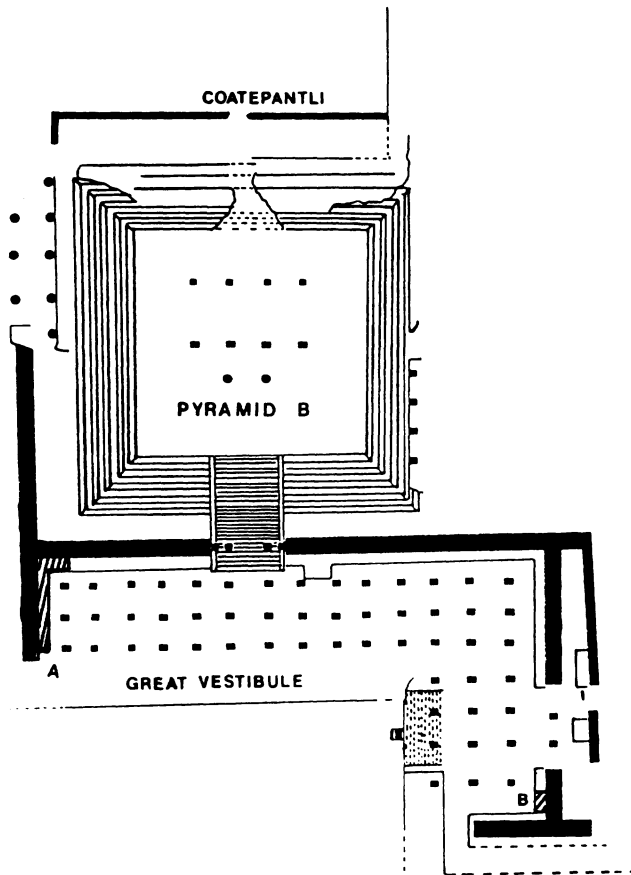


Figure 4. Plan of Vestibule, Tula: (A) Vestibule frieze; (B) partial frieze of marching individuals (from Baird 1985:Figure 1). Courtesy Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.

The facade of Pyramid B and the arrangement of the monumental sculptures on the summit may have been guided by the appearance of its counterpart at Chichén Itzá, the Temple of the Warriors, thereby constructing a closer visual parallel in light of the Tula–Chichén Itzá link. Moreover, Acosta may have, according to Molina Montes, taken liberties reconstructing the form and appearance of colonnades since he created partially restored columns on the basis of postholes alone. This controversy does not significantly affect the Vestibule or its frieze, which remain in situ.

THE IDENTITY OF THE FIGURES IN THE VESTIBULE FRIEZE

Cultural Referents of the Frieze

Moedano Koer's study is the sole monograph on the Vestibule frieze. Noting the fragmentary state of the frieze, he acknowledged that an identification of the figures in it was dependent upon similar monuments that represented "important men" (Moedano Koer 1947:33). In addition to Tula, decorated benches appear at the Maya site of Chichén Itzá and the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. At both sites the benches are found in ceremonial centers in colonnaded halls, an architectural innovation of the Postclassic period (Kubler 1984:83).² Previous studies of benches at Chichén Itzá and Tenochtitlán have emphasized the ritual content of the decoration and the constant compositions that represent, almost without exception, two files of profile figures converging on a central motif.

At Chichén Itzá, Karl Ruppert (1943:245–249) identified the two rows of profile bound figures on a bench relief in the Mercado as war captives converging on a central individual in a bird costume

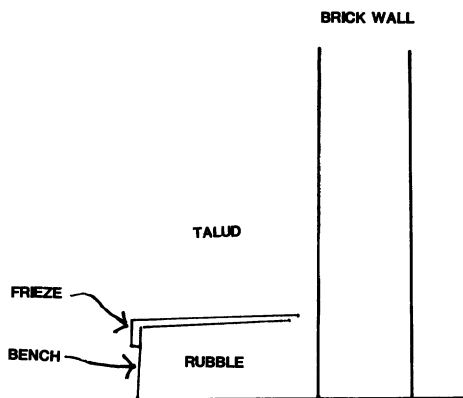


Figure 5. Profile of Vestibule bench (after Acosta 1945:Figure 21).

standing on the chest of a smaller figure in an apparent scene of conquest or sacrifice (Figure 6). The famous Aztec Bench Relief from the *Templo Mayor* in Tenochtitlán also represents two files of profile figures converging upon a central image (Figure 7). This composition has been interpreted as the emperor Itzcoatl and his retinue of lords and warriors participating in the “Lordly Dance” held every four years in the month of Izcalli (Beyer 1955:40), or as a scene of royal bloodletting to celebrate a military victory (Klein 1987:303–304). (For detailed discussions of mesoamerican bench friezes see Moedano Koer [1947], Beyer [1955], and Klein [1987].)

The rather specific temporal and spatial distribution of the processional bench frieze itself has a powerful cultural referent. The general format and processional imagery of benches from Tula, Chichén Itzá, and Tenochtitlán reference the great Classic-period center of Teotihuacán. The battered bench face with projecting cornice recalls the talud–tablero profile of stepped pyramids there; although the talud–tablero has a long history in mesoamerican architecture (Laporte 1987:265), it appears most frequently at Teotihuacán, and seems to have been nearly synonymous with that site during the Classic period. In addition, Teotihuacán is perhaps the greatest repository of mesoamerican processional imagery. There, rows of profile animals and people fill horizontal registers in lavish murals in apartment compounds and in palaces lining the main thoroughfare, the so-called Street of the Dead.

The combination of two hallmark features of the Teotihuacán art tradition forms a unique type of Postclassic monument, the processional-bench composition, which is housed in colonnaded halls, another trait of Postclassic architecture. That Teotihuacán traits were retained, transformed, and



Figure 6. Central portion of Mercado frieze, Chichén Itzá (after Ruppert 1943:Figure 23).

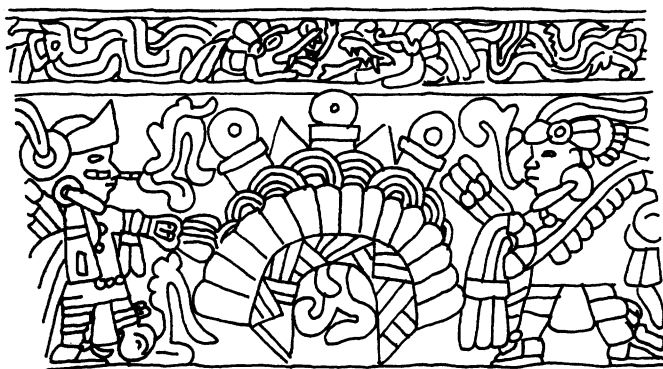


Figure 7. Central portion of Aztec Bench Relief, Tenochtitlán (after Beyer 1955:Figure E).

encoded into the art and architecture of sites and polities that held similar positions of authority in the Postclassic period was a powerful visual and conceptual statement of the continuity between Teotihuacán and its successors in Mesoamerica.

Recently published murals from the Techinantitla district of Teotihuacán provide more parallels to the Vestibule frieze. A reconstruction of the Anteroom of the Gods murals shows two registers of profile Storm gods marching toward an inner room with murals of the so-called Great Goddess, so that directional orientation and architectural setting unite two rooms into one unified composition (Millon 1988:Figure IV.21a–b). At both Teotihuacán and Tula, then, representations of processions are keyed to corners and doorways, and decorate the entire lengths of walls rather than just portions of walls or isolated projecting benches like those at Chichén Itzá and Tenochtitlán. However, at Teotihuacán, Chichén Itzá, and Tenochtitlán, the focus is a central image, while at Tula the focus is an open doorway. This sets the Vestibule frieze apart from other mesoamerican processional compositions and is an important clue to understanding its iconographic and ritual associations.

Previous Studies

Moedano Koer's basic interpretation of the ritual nature of the Vestibule frieze has influenced later readings, but his identification of the figures has been challenged. For example, Kubler (1984: 88) called the scene a "convocation of tribal leaders allied under the unifying cult of the Morning Star deity," an allusion to the deity Quetzalcoatl in his manifestation as the planet Venus. Kubler thought, however, that the figures might converge on a central image of a symbol of blood sacrifice or a god. Acosta (1945:40) identified the figures either as caciques or priests, and Richard A. Diehl (1983:64–65), director of the University of Missouri's Tula Project in the 1970s, thought that the figures were priests or dignitaries about to ascend Pyramid B as part of a ceremony.

Color, Costume, and Regalia

Since there is no coeval writing associated with the frieze, the primary job of identifying the figures relies on costumes, regalia, and color symbolism. A color reproduction made soon after the discovery of the frieze and published by Moedano Koer (1947) remains the standard visual source on the Vestibule. The reproduction records the frieze in the condition in which it was found; in a few sections the detailed polychromed stucco facing had eroded to expose the rough-stone matrix beneath. However, enough of the frieze facing remained to recognize color, costume, and regalia, and hence to help identify the figures. The polychrome facing allows most of the frieze to be read clearly, with blue, red, white, and yellow elements outlined in black set against a red background.

Most of the 19 figures in the frieze wear items of costume and regalia from a common repertoire that are combined in individualized yet similar costumes. Moedano Koer (1947:116) thought that the distinct costumes indicated that each individual was a portrait, but he did not pursue this. Most

wear blue and yellow headdresses with blue feather panaches, blue ear spools and pectorals, and white loincloths and knee and ankle bands; a few also wear blue feather capes. The most common handheld objects include yellow shields with multicolored arrows and feather ornaments, red staves with blue and yellow ornaments, and white or yellow canes or curved sticks; one individual holds a blue feather fan. The rather consistent use of color for similar objects probably denotes the actual materials from which real costume items represented at Tula were made, such that blue represents quetzal feathers or turquoise, white represents cotton, yellow represents wood or gold, and red represents a variety of material from skin to feathers (Acosta 1961; Baird 1985).

This inventory of costumes and regalia is decidedly *not* characteristic of caciques, warriors, or priests, the identities postulated by Moedano Koer, Acosta, Kubler, and others. Moreover, the figures have none of the common attributes of priests, such as incense bags, nor are they overtly engaged in any priestly activity such as performing a sacrifice or augury rite, or drilling fire.

Moedano Koer noted that the so-called caciques carry attributes of warriors, but he neither specified them nor attempted to reconcile them with his cacique identification. Obvious martial attributes in the frieze include the shields and arrows held by most of the figures.

In addition, five individuals in the frieze (1, 6, 11, 15, and 16) also hold yellow or white canes the general size and shape of which recall objects held by the monumental atlantids and the figures carved on the pillars atop Pyramid B. At Tula, these and other armed figures are represented with near-canonical regularity. A rollout drawing from one of the pillars shows the right arm holding a spear thrower and the armored left arm grasping a curved stick probably used to deflect projectiles (Kristan-Graham 1989: 165–166) (Figure 8). Analogous armed figures at Chichén Itzá, such as those carved on stone pillars at the Temple of the Warriors, have the same offensive–defensive gear, with the curved sticks nearly always painted yellow to denote wood. Actual curved objects like these were present at Chichén Itzá. Pieces of a curved wooden club of the approximate size represented at both Chichén Itzá and at Tula have been recovered from the Sacred Cenote at Chichén Itzá (Coggins 1984:Figure 24). However, the martial gear represented in the Tula Vestibule is not complete according to the Tula–Chichén Itzá martial canon; figures neither carry spear throwers nor wear the thick cotton armor that were the mainstays of central Mexican martial costumes, and they are ill-equipped for battle compared to other armed figures at Tula.

Similarly, there is little in the frieze to identify the figures as rulers. Only one individual in the frieze, Individual 19, is plausibly a ruler; he wears a blue headdress with pointed top similar to the turquoise *xiuhuitzollí* diadem worn by Aztec lords (Figures 7 and 9). Male figures also wear this type of headdress in imagery from Chichén Itzá (Kristan-Graham 1989:129–131). Perhaps the earliest representation of this type of headdress is on Stela 9 from Tikal, dated to 9.2.0.0.0 or A.D. 475 (Jones and Satherwaite 1982:23, Figure 13). Figure 19 from the Tula Vestibule also has speech or sound scrolls at his mouth, and so Moedano Koer (1947:124) identified him as the Tula *huey tlatoani* or “great speaker” after the Nahuatl title for Aztec rulers.

However, the identity of the frieze participants as merchants is suggested by a few key items of costume and regalia: (1) 16 of the 19 people carry a staff (all except Individuals 1, 2, and 12); (2) Individual 4 appears to wear a backpack; and (3) Individual 13 carries a fan. As aids for travel and transport, the staff, backpack, and fan are attributes of merchants from central Mexico to the Maya area. The fan in particular is considered to have been such a ubiquitous symbol of the merchant and his high status that Moedano Koer (1947:124) identified Individual 13 in the frieze as a merchant or an ambassador. A brief examination of the ethnohistoric and visual occurrences of these three items throughout Mesoamerica helps confirm and expand the merchant identity of the Vestibule figures.

Comparative Ethnohistoric and Visual Data: Lowland Maya

Contact-period sources make abundant references to Aztec, southern Gulf Coast, and Yucatec Maya merchants. In general, data on the Lowland Maya in sources such as the *Relaciones geográficas* (de la Garza 1980) and Diego de Landa’s (1941) *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* concentrate on trade routes, commodities, trading partners, and merchant rituals. The few references to merchant

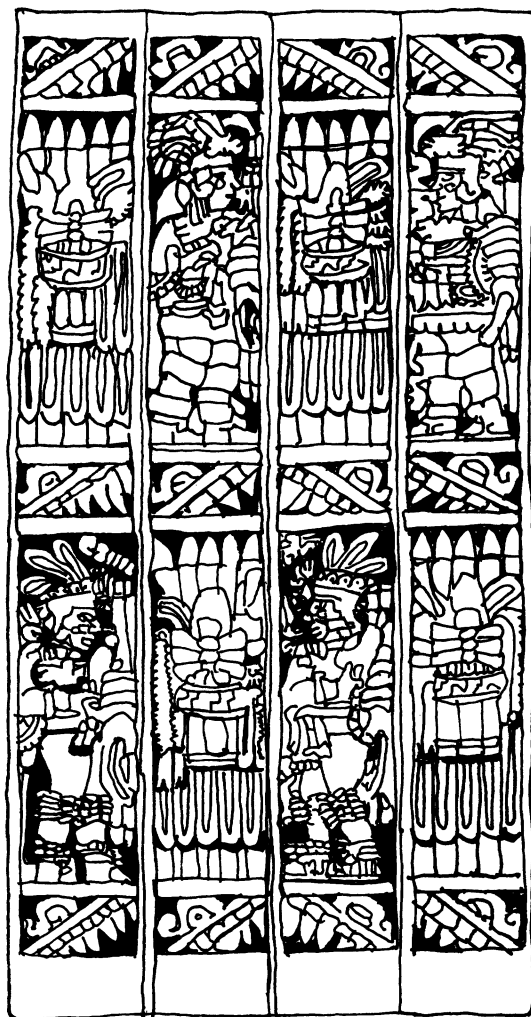


Figure 8. Rollout drawing of a carved pillar, Pyramid B, Tula (after Diehl 1983:Figure 13).

paraphernalia, however, mention the fan, staff, and backpack as standard merchant gear (Blom 1933–1934:435; de Landa 1941:96; Thompson 1971:76).

Figures in narrative contexts with some or all of these features likewise have been identified as merchants. At Chichén Itzá, a mural in the Temple of the Warriors shows a coastal village with three figures wearing white loincloths and carrying brown staves and packs with tumplines. Small symbols, such as shells, painted on the outside of the packs may identify the merchandise inside (Morris 1931:II:Plate 138). Another mural in the same building represents a village with similar figures. At least two figures carrying backpacks with tumplines walk on a road that intersects scenes of battle and capture. The figures with backpacks have striped body paint identical to that of captives in the same scene (Morris 1931:II:Plate 139). This scene recalls well-known accounts of Contact-period Yucatec families, such as the Cocom and the Xiu, who maintained trade relations during periods of conflict and raiding, even when such aggression was directed at each other.

Images of Maya merchants also decorate painted ceramics. The famous Classic-period Ratinlixul vase from Guatemala depicts Maya merchants on a journey; the principal merchant sits in a litter



Figure 9. Detail of Individual 19, Vestibule frieze, Tula (after Moedano 1947:Color illustration).

and holds a basketry fan, and members of the entourage carry backpacks and staves (Thompson 1964:23–24). Likewise, the painted scene on the Chama vase has been interpreted as a meeting of traveling merchants (Morley et al. 1983:434) (Figure 10). The characters hold basketry fans and a figure with black body paint has been identified as God M or Ek Chuah, the Mayan patron deity of merchants. God M is also represented at least three times in the *Dresden Codex*, with a tumpline, pack or net bag, and staff (Thompson 1971:76).

The staff and fan may also have ceremonial referents. Karl Taube (1989:354–367) has noted that both items appear in Maya scenes of ritual performances. In the New Year pages of the *Dresden Codex*, opossum *mams* carry a fan and elaborate staff. Staffs were important props in Maya spoofs and dances. Likewise, in Classic Maya vessel scenes, dancers and animal impersonators often hold fans, which seem to be basic accessories of dancers and actors. Ciudad Real (in Taube 1989:355) noted that in a dance held in 1588 at Kantunil, as well as in later festivals, one performer held rattles and a feather fan. Kornelia Kurbjuhn's (1977) study of fans in Maya scenes of transfer of power or of death apply to round fans only, not to wedge-shaped ones such as that at Tula.

*Comparative Ethnohistoric and Visual Data:
Northern Mesoamerica*

Images from northern Mesoamerica also match general descriptions of Maya merchants. At Tula, a relief fragment of a figure with a backpack secured by a tumpline and upbent arms found on the

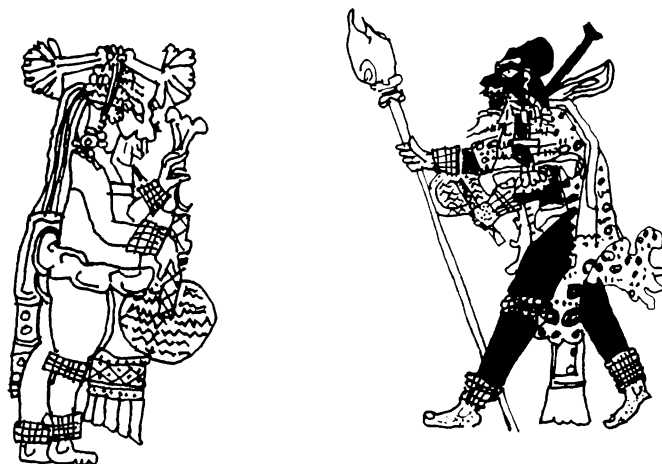


Figure 10. Two individuals from Chama vase, Guatemala (after Morley et al. 1983:Figure 13.39).



Figure 11. Two Aztec *pochteca* represented in the *Florentine Codex* (after de Sahagún 1959:Figures 13 and 18).

east side of Pyramid B probably was part of an early decorative program (de la Fuente et al. 1988: Number 118). A recently discovered mural from Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala, presumably represents a merchant. A male figure stands next to a basketry backpack adorned with symbols that may be an inventory list of the contents (John Carlson, personal communication 1989). West Mexican modeled ceramics of males with bags, packs, and tumplines probably also represent merchants or porters. One well-known piece from Colima represents a male carrying five ceramic pots on his back (Kan et al. 1989: Number 89).

However, the most consistent and striking parallels for the Vestibule frieze are found among the Aztecs, especially in the *Florentine Codex*. This codex is a standard source on Aztec ethnography, and also a standard source for Tula studies as well given the close temporal and cultural ties between Tula and the Aztecs. Bernardino de Sahagún, the compiler of the *Florentine Codex*, devoted one of 12 volumes to merchants, or *pochteca* in Nahuatl. Since only two other volumes concern specific social groups—rulers and gods—Book 9, *The Merchants*, attests to the importance of *pochteca* in Aztec society. The parallels being drawn here are with merchants in general, not with specialized merchants such as Aztec slave washers or slave sellers.

The *pochteca* were pivotal players in the Aztec consolidation of economic and political power in Late Postclassic central Mexico. Besides carrying on the business of the Aztec state, they formed an army of spies in the guise of merchants, gathering intelligence data that might aid in the conquest of a new region whose tribute would then help fuel the expanding Aztec empire (Acosta Saignes 1945; see also Bittman and Sullivan 1978; German 1974). This also explains why merchants sometimes required the use of arms.

Descriptions and illustrations of the *pochteca* provide close parallels with the figures in the Vestibule frieze. Like Maya merchants, the Aztec *pochteca* carried fans and staves and wore tumplines and backpacks (Figure 11). De Sahagún (1959:28) mentions a *pochteca's* description of his own appearance: "I have gone to perform the carrying of burdens on the back; I have gone using the staff, the carrying frame."

Book 9 of the *Florentine Codex* also provides parallels with other items represented in the Vestibule frieze. The fan held by Figure 13 in the frieze is covered with feathers, just as *pochteca* fans are described, and the inclusion of shields and spears concurs with the description of the *pochteca* being "girt for war" (de Sahagún 1959:17–18). In addition, 18 of 19 staves in the frieze are painted red, matching de Sahagún's (1959:9) description of the *pochteca* having staves "bathed in red." In perhaps the most striking parallel, 12 individuals of the Vestibule frieze hold a shield in the left hand and a staff in the right, matching de Sahagún's (1959:Plates 7–8, 13, 18, 23, 38) illustrations of the *pochteca*.

Like other elite members of Aztec society, the *pochteca* received insignia and emblems of high rank after successful commercial and military missions (German 1974:48). Such regalia was worn on specific feast days. Normally, the *pochteca* wore plain, humble clothing so as not to draw undue attention in public, since other wealthy social ranks envied their wealth.

Nevertheless, the staff is a pivotal sign in this identification. Staves are rarely represented elsewhere at Tula, but are the most frequent item in the frieze. Likewise, in the *Florentine Codex* it is only in

pochteca ceremonies that staves are mentioned as prominent instruments. For their patron deity Yacatecuhtli, the *pochteca* wrapped paper around their staves before making offerings in rituals preceding trading expeditions. They carried these same staves on the road, tying them together to be worshipped as a representation of Yacatecuhtli: "They wrapped completely the stout traveling cane. This same (staff) the merchants worshipped. The vanguard merchants, wherever they went, wherever they penetrated to engage in trade, went carrying their staves" (de Sahagún 1959:10). This was a departure from their offerings to other deities, for whom the *pochteca* burned cut paper decorated with liquid rubber (de Sahagún 1959:9–10).

THE NARRATIVE OF THE VESTIBULE FRIEZE

Ritual Activity

Although the *Florentine Codex* postdates Tula by several centuries, some descriptions of *pochteca* ceremonies can be read as very general scripts for the location, composition, content, and framing of the Vestibule frieze. The life of the *pochteca*, like other sectors of Aztec society, was strictly ordered by guidelines dictating such areas as proper dress and religious and social obligations. The same ritual template that orders *pochteca* rituals seems to apply as well to the Vestibule frieze at Tula.

The *pochteca* participated in a perpetual cycle of rituals, both at home and on the road. These rituals marked the preparation for travel and the successful return from a trading expedition, and were intended to pay debts to deities for ensuring safety and good fortune, and to ritually sanction the economic relation between the emperor and the *pochteca*. Wealthy merchants also hosted periodic banquets to help elevate their status. Parts of these types of rituals have parallels in the Vestibule location, plan, and decoration.

On the eve of their departure from Tenochtitlán on a trading expedition, the *pochteca* began an elaborate cycle of rituals. After wrapping paper around their staves to honor Yacatecuhtli and making paper offerings to other deities, they sacrificed quail, let blood onto paper, burned the blood-spattered paper and copal incense in the center of a courtyard, laid out paper offerings, and displayed some of the merchandise to be traded on the ensuing expedition (de Sahagún 1959:16). The ceremonies ended when the *pochteca* host summoned other merchants to a banquet, where all were seated in order by rank against the walls to listen to speeches about proper *pochteca* behavior. The ceremonies for returning *pochteca* were similar, with the merchants also distributing gifts from their journey.

At elaborate banquets to raise their social status, wealthy *pochteca* hosts performed ritual acts similar to those cited above, distributed chocolate and tobacco for consumption, and then displayed their possessions: "he spread out his possessions, his goods, in order to display all which was to be used when needed . . . and when indeed all [and] everything was at hand which would be needed" (de Sahagún 1959:33). Other ritual acts included placing offerings of flowers and tobacco on the landing of the Pyramid of Huitzilopochtli and at other unidentified pyramids and altars, concluding with offerings at the home of the *pochteca* host. There, the host burned copal, sacrificed a quail, distributed gifts, and buried flowers, tobacco tubes, and copal ashes in the courtyard. Then the banquet ended with a procession (de Sahagún 1959:33–42).

Some of these details—processions, bloodletting, burning copal, and sacrificing quail—are common to many Aztec rituals (Nicholson 1971:431–432). However, other details associated with the Vestibule and its frieze are more specifically confined to merchants. As a foyer to Pyramid B, the Vestibule may be considered a courtyard in both form and location, and the two hearths could have been used to burn offerings. The bench that encircled the room could have served as a seat for merchants and their guests; and it and the altar projecting from the north wall would have provided a surface on which to display offerings, merchandise, possessions, and gifts. Fragments of bas-relief stone carvings that once decorated the walls above the bench represent either balls of copal (Acosta 1957:127) or the grass balls used to hold the perforators used in bloodletting rites (Klein 1987: Number 14), both of which were also used in Aztec *pochteca* rituals. Some of these rituals also included processions and the placing of offerings at the foot of a pyramid and on altars, precisely the point where the two processions in the Vestibule meet.

The feathered serpents carved on the cornice above the bench frieze may also allude to merchants. The feathered serpent is a multivalent sign in Mesoamerica, and its obvious association with Quetzalcoatl was implicit in Moedano Koer's argument linking the frieze with rites of rulership. However, feathered serpents have other referents. In Postclassic Cholula, for example, Quetzalcoatl was the patron deity of merchants and was credited with inventing merchandise and marketing (Durán 1971:263; Scholes and Roys 1968:57).

Narrative Composition

The Vestibule at Tula is a smooth, seamless merging of subject matter and composition adapted to fit a specific architectural setting. This is also true of other processional bench friezes at Tula. The Vestibule procession is choreographed to complement the procession in Hall 2 of Building 3, so that the former procession leaves the main plaza to ascend Pyramid B at the same time that the latter one marches out to the plaza. A more precise reading of this processional interaction may be possible when the figures represented in the Hall 2 procession are identified.

The coordination of the composition to corners, doorways, the plaza, and other buildings transforms the frieze from a simple depiction into a narrative that unfolds in space and time and tells (or shows) a story. One value of narrativity is that events are projected as "real" whether or not they actually occurred. The relation between narrative and lived behavior is not always straightforward; a narrative may be documentary, fictive, mythic, or a combination. An examination of the framing may clarify the narrative nature of the Vestibule frieze.

The composition of the frieze implies entry from the plaza and action at the base of the Pyramid B stairway and an adjacent altar, even though these actions are not represented. Unlike processional compositions at Teotihuacán, Chichén Itzá, and Tenochtitlán that represent a climax, with two rows of profile figures converging at a central motif, the Vestibule procession terminates abruptly at the pyramid rather than concluding with a clear resolution. This creates a very different picture at Tula, one that is both more flexible and more ambiguous. Such a lack of narrative closure usually implies that a story has no ending (White 1981:20), but the abrupt, vague "endings" of the Vestibule narrative may embody "planned ambiguity" for flexibility in performing rituals since the axial and iconographic foci of the Vestibule processions are keyed to an open doorway where human actors could have performed the finale in a variety of ways.

Following Diehl's (1983:65) suggestion that bench friezes at Tula might actually represent events that occurred in the rooms they decorate, we can speculate that the bench frieze not only represents a procession, but actually could have been involved in this ritual, since the friezes in the Vestibule and Hall 2 of Building 3 require human actors to complete the action. This intersection of architecture, imagery, and ritual behavior would have afforded flexibility, with ritual participants acting out different conclusions for specific rituals, and the decorated benches framing the action and serving alternately as backdrop, stage, or altar. One focal point of the procession may be suggested by the *Florentine Codex*, where de Sahagún relates that offerings were laid at altars and at the bases of pyramids during Aztec banquets hosted by wealthy *pochteca*.

Visually and conceptually the Vestibule and its decorated frieze attest to the interactive nature of art and ritual at Tula, and signal a shift in the discourse of mesoamerican ritual. The Vestibule frieze thus may have been more powerful than a mute, unreflexive backdrop; the actor(s) required to conclude the bench imagery would literally act out the importance of merchants to the ritual and to the polity, sacralizing the importance of merchants and trade to the polity. Even when the room was not functioning as a ritual stage, figures were perpetually marching through the Vestibule and poised to climb or place offerings at Pyramid B.

Merchants and Ritual at Tula

The merchant and ritual referents of the Vestibule frieze may best be understood within the context of the economic and political position of Tula in Early Postclassic Mexico. Located at a confluence of land and riverine routes linking it with the Valley of Mexico, and lands to the west,

north, and east, Tula was an important seat of economic and political authority for the Basin between ca. A.D. 900 and 1150. Archaeological evidence indicates that Tula's Epiclassic-period population was composed of peoples from the Bajío area of Querétaro and Guanajuato and from the Valley of Mexico in addition to local peoples (Cobean et al. 1981; Diehl 1983:34; Mastache and Cobean 1985:280, 1989). Immigrants from the Valley of Mexico moved north during and after the period when Teotihuacán's hegemony began to erode, bringing a strong memory of Teotihuacán that is evident in construction technology, talud-tablero building profiles, iconography, and figural compositions (Cobean et al. 1981:188–192; Mastache and Cobean 1985:276–280). Considering Tula's location on the northern fringe of Mesoamerica, the visual replication of some Teotihuacán traits and the representation of merchants could have helped to construct the identity of Tula in the tradition of a great mesoamerican capital.

Moreover, the merchants represented in the Vestibule and the implicit reference to trade might be a visual manifestation of Tula's participation in a broad long-distance exchange network. It has been suggested that a group ancestral to the Aztec *pochteca* helped consolidate and expand the economic and political base of Tula in the centuries after the Classic period (Hassig 1985:113). Recent studies have focused on Tula's control of the lucrative obsidian industry at Pachuca (Santley et al. 1986) and on the foreign goods at Tula from Veracruz, Oaxaca, the Maya area, and lower Central America (Cobean et al. 1981:198; Mastache and Cobean 1985:291–294; Sanders et al. 1979:143–144). In the early Contact period, Tula was one of the few central Mexican sites with a market fair (Ixtilxochitl cited in Bittman and Sullivan [1978:211]). This could indicate that Tula's importance in trade and commerce continued into, or was reasserted, in the Colonial period.

While the Vestibule imagery intersects with archaeological evidence regarding the “business” interests of Tula, it is not “hard” data that can prove the existence or appearance of merchants. Instead, the Vestibule and its decorative program are a tangible record of the polity's concern with merchants and the manner in which this social group was represented. In other words, the Vestibule frieze represents the socially and culturally constructed vision of merchants, and also of trade, presented to the polity and the mesoamerican world at large. The representation of merchants and their rituals at Tula show how symbolic and material interests mesh in a setting that unites architecture, imagery, and actors to form a panorama about merchants, trade, and ritual in the heart of the Tula civic-ceremonial center. In a world constructed and perceived through signs, symbols, and relationships, imagery and ritual activity that can reify social relations, and that can also display and renew the polity are resources as valuable as any normative economic or political endeavor with material gains.

Likewise, while the Vestibule imagery cannot testify to the actual items acquired and used by merchants, parallels with Aztec data suggest at least symbolic continuity between merchants at Tula and Tenochtitlán. Specifically, imagery from the Vestibule suggests that merchants at Tula may have preceded even the Aztec *pochteca* in one crucial area: acquiring exotica for the nobility. Ritual and costume items such as quetzal feathers, jade, shells, jaguar pelts, and copal, the use of which was so strictly ordered in Aztec society, are also represented in monumental sculpture and bas-relief figural compositions and decorative panels at Tula. Throughout Mesoamerica, such items were usually restricted to the nobility as material and symbolic signs of their high status. If these goods were actually used and worn at Tula, then the social and ceremonial demands of the nobility would have required merchants and an effective long-distance exchange system in order to help maintain and symbolize their status. In this scenario, the role of the merchant would be guaranteed by the exotica craved by the status-conscious mesoamerican elites.

Likewise, ritual requisites of the Aztec *pochteca* were directly related to their profession. Many ingredients for *pochteca* rituals, including cacao, tobacco, copal, and rubber, came only from the moist tropical lowlands of the Gulf Coast and Maya area, the very regions with which the Aztec *pochteca* heavily traded and exacted tribute (Gasco and Voorhies 1989:62–78; Hassig 1985:114–116). *Pochteca* rituals therefore seem to have sacralized and institutionalized interregional exchange, and were the symbolic dimensions to a pan-mesoamerican exchange network that bound together the highlands and lowlands (Freidel 1986:419–420). In this sense, the symbolic and ceremonial needs of the *pochteca* might have helped ensure their existence as an elite social group.

In addition, the timing of *pochteca* rituals at critical junctures before and after trading expeditions, when their talents were tested and rewarded, and their elite status reaffirmed and perhaps even elevated, also seems to have strengthened their position in Aztec society. Variants of these same general episodes may have been acted out in the Tula Vestibule, where social relations could have been enacted, dramatized, and reproduced. The presence of one figure wearing the diadem of Aztec emperors even anticipates de Sahagún's (1959:3–8) description of the emperors Ahuitzotl and Moctezuma I participating in *pochteca* ceremonies to codify a close relationship between merchant and emperor, wherein the *pochteca* personify royal economic interests and the emperor rewarded successful merchants. While the Vestibule frieze departs from the martial, royal, and autosacrificial content of other Postclassic bench compositions, the mercantile theme is no less important in formulating and mediating social relations, since the economic and political health of the polity and the high status of the nobility were directly tied to merchants and their success in trade.

SUMMARY

Many questions about the precise ethnicity, religion, and social organization of Tula's inhabitants probably will never be answered. However, a detailed analysis of an important in situ monument, the Vestibule frieze, helps clarify the ritual and symbolic concerns, and perhaps even some economic details, of trade in the Tula polity.

An examination of the architectural setting, subject matter, composition, and color of the Vestibule frieze indicates that the monument represents merchants, not caciques or local chiefs. A comparison between the frieze and mesoamerican ethnohistory, particularly the *Florentine Codex*, suggests that the merchants are engaged in rituals inaugurating or concluding trading expeditions, or in rites elevating the status of individual merchants.

This new reading of the Vestibule frieze has a spectrum of referents for Early Postclassic Tula. The mercantile theme, of course, visually and conceptually reifies Tula's concern with and participation in a far-reaching exchange network. The intersection of imagery and ritual space may signal a new discourse of ritual wherein ritual actors and imagery must be united to comprise a complete composition. Finally, the Vestibule frieze might be considered a socially and culturally constructed resource that not only expresses Tula's concern with exchanging natural and cultural resources, but also its newfound status as a regional capital and player in the new mesoamerican order after the Classic period.

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NOTES

¹ The precise nature of the relationship between these two sites remains unresolved. Many inquiries have focused on temporal primacy and on which site may have influenced the other, but these questions are insufficient to fully understand the dynamics of a very complex problem. Rather than addressing the Tula–Chichén Itzá debate here, contemporaneous and culturally related data from Chichén Itzá are used only for comparative purposes.

² Perhaps the earliest example of a bench-lined room is Str. 6 at San José Mogote, Oaxaca, dated to the Tierras Largas phase, 1400–1150 B.C. Str. 6 is a small, one-room building; the lower 40 cm of the interior walls seem to have been expanded into a low, plain bench with a projecting altar-like platform (Marcus 1989:158–159, Figures 8.4 and 8.5).

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