



# Temple of the Ascending Goddess

## A female deity's status is enhanced in a pre-Columbian tomb

By BRUCE BOWER

In 1932, Mexican archaeologist and ethnohistorian Alfonso Caso announced a discovery that still stands as one of the richest and most famous finds in the Americas. Excavations at Monte Albán, a site in the highlands of southern Mexico's Valley of Oaxaca (pronounced "wah-ha-ka"), had yielded a two-chambered tomb containing more than 500 finely crafted artifacts. These included objects of gold, silver, copper, jade, turquoise, rock crystal, obsidian, and pearl.

Most striking was a gold pectoral, an expertly worked piece of ceremonial gear consisting of a chest plate connected to an unusual mask of a human head topped by an elaborate headdress. The lower part of the mask shows large teeth set in a skeletal jaw.

The burial, dubbed Tomb 7 by its discoverers, contained the skeletal remains of at least nine individuals. The most complete single skeleton, known as Skeleton A, lay at the tomb's western end.

Skeleton A and its associated artifacts date to about A.D. 800, a time when either of two regional cultures may have buried their dead in Tomb 7. Monte Albán was first settled around 500 B.C. From 200 B.C. to A.D. 700 it served as the capital of the Zapotec empire. Thereafter, rulers from the Zapotec and Mixtec (pronounced "meesh-tek") cultures apparently vied for control of Oaxaca and surrounding areas until the Spanish took over in 1521.

Caso and his colleagues published a monograph in 1969 identifying Skeleton A as a 55- to 60-year-old man who, along with other individuals, had been buried in a reopened tomb from the Zapotec era. Caso regarded the artifacts near Skeleton A as ritual paraphernalia of an important priest, some of which may have been worn when the holy man dressed up as a deity to perform ceremonial functions. The elegant gold pectoral represented a male god depicted in one of eight Mixtec codices, Caso held. These codices are

painted pictorial manuscripts that survived the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

Archaeologists generally accept Caso's interpretation and extol his careful excavations and documentation of what he found. There's a problem, though: Caso may have overlooked the real significance of his stunning finds. Skeleton A most likely belonged to a woman who

The McCaffertys will discuss their views of power arrangements in ancient Oaxacan cultures at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Atlanta next week.

Their reinterpretation of Tomb 7 provokes strong reactions. A critique in the October *CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY* calls their work an example of "politically correct archaeology" that distorts data to serve a feminist agenda. However, many commentators hail the McCaffertys' spin on the Monte Albán burial as a long overdue look at the possible presence of politically powerful women in ancient Mesoamerica, a region that encompassed much of Mexico and Central America. Even if Skeleton A indeed came from a man — the absence of pelvic bones precludes a definitive sex determination — the McCaffertys have drawn attention to the significance of goddesses in Mesoamerican belief systems, these researchers contend.

"Archaeologists have largely ignored the nature of sex roles and female power in Mesoamerica," Geoffrey McCafferty argues. "Much remains unknown about the social roles of all women, commoners and elites, in Mixtec society."



Artist's depictions of gold pectoral (above) and carved weaving implement (top of page) found in Monte Albán's Tomb 7.

wielded considerable power in the ritual and political spheres of her society, whose accoutrements signal her links to a pivotal Mixtec goddess, and whose bones were placed in Tomb 7 because that structure was a shrine to the goddess.

That, at least, is the view offered by Sharisse D. McCafferty, a speech pathologist in Providence, R.I., and Geoffrey G. McCafferty, an archaeologist at Brown University, also in Providence. Their analysis, published in the April *CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY*, appeared with nine scientific responses and has subsequently elicited four more.

The first line of evidence employed in Skeleton A's sex change comes from what the McCaffertys identify as spinning and weaving tools found near the bones. A priest probably used these implements to perform ritual duties, they note. The artifacts are too small for actual textile production and, unlike corresponding full-scale tools, many of them feature carvings of deities pictured in the Mixtec codices, they say.

These specimens include 34 eagle and jaguar bones carved into battens. Weavers use these long bars with tapered ends to separate vertical fibers on a loom so that thread can be shuttled through horizontally. Tomb 7's bone battens are about 8 inches long and less than half an

inch wide, miniature versions of typical wooden battens. Other bone tools found near Skeleton A consist of small combs, picks, spindle whorls (which act as fly-wheels on long wooden spindles during the spinning of raw fiber into twisted thread), spinning bowls (on which the spindle rests during spinning), and two rings — one gold, one silver — worn on the fingertips, which may have served as ritual thimbles.

Accounts by 16th century Spanish priests describe women's primary responsibility for textile production in Mixtec and Zapotec societies, the McCaffertys argue. Goddesses portrayed in the Mixtec codices often wear costumes that incorporate spinning and weaving tools, they add.

Caso pointed out that the spindle whorls in Tomb 7 look much like spindles shown in the headdress of a male deity from one of the Mixtec codices. But more depictions of spinning and weaving implements appear in the finery decorating several Mixtec goddesses, the McCaffertys assert.

The presence in Tomb 7 of tools linked to a uniquely female social function among the Mixtecs, combined with the lack of any artifacts pertaining to solely male duties, suggests that Skeleton A may indeed have been a woman, they contend.

As for the gold pectoral with its skeletal jaw, the Mixtec codices contain pictures of several goddesses bearing the same eerie feature. The McCaffertys suggest that the pectoral represented a fertility goddess, perhaps one known from the codices as Lady 9 Grass. If so, then the entire tomb may have been constructed as a shrine to her, they maintain.

Skeleton A lacks a pelvis and enough other bones to thwart a final identification of its sex. A biological anthropologist who worked with Caso classed the bones as those of a large man who suffered from Paget's disease, an inflammatory condition that distorts and thickens bones.

The McCaffertys contend that Paget's disease bloated the parts of the skull critical to distinguishing a man from a woman, thus raising questions about its original identification as male. Moreover, a lower jaw classed as female by Caso's colleague was not originally included as part of Skeleton A; however, its heavy tooth wear and original placement in Tomb 7 suggest it was indeed part of Skeleton A, the McCaffertys say.

The small proportions of a knee bone associated with Skeleton A also resemble those of females, in their opinion.

In addition, five perforated human jawbones found in Tomb 7 may have been worn as part of goddess masks or placed in goddess idols made of wood or dough, according to the McCaffertys.

Caso and his colleagues erred so greatly in deciphering the meaning of Tomb 7 and the sex of Skeleton A because they labored in a cultural mist of "gender

blindness," the Providence researchers conclude. Until the past decade, they say, most archaeologists assumed that elaborate tombs were male preserves and that men held a stranglehold on the most exalted positions of power in ancient civilizations.

Given that outlook, investigators of pre-Columbian societies have tended to explain away evidence of grand burials for women, downplay signs of female political and ritual authority, and minimize the role of goddesses in religious beliefs, the McCaffertys hold.

**A** number of archaeologists welcome the McCaffertys' reappraisal of Tomb 7, although they offer different theories of how it was used and whose bones lay in a heap on its floor.

Clemency Coggins of Boston University suspects that Skeleton A is indeed that of Lady 9 Grass. Coggins considers her to have been a historical figure portrayed as a powerful warrior and priestess, as well as a goddess, in the Mixtec codices. Paintings of Lady 9 Grass often render the lower part of her face as a skeleton, just as it appears on the Tomb 7 gold pectoral, Coggins says. Nine of the lower jaws found in Tomb 7 may symbolize Lady 9 Grass' name, in her opinion.

The chest plate of the gold pectoral records two slightly different calendar counts for the same day, Coggins argues, perhaps reflecting Lady 9 Grass' military conquest and political incorporation of a neighboring territory with its own calendar.

Lady 9 Grass was buried initially in Mitla, a city near Monte Albán, but she was hastily reburied in Tomb 7 when war or some other calamity threatened Mitla's inhabitants, the Boston archaeologist suggests.

On the other hand, Skeleton A may have been a woman of common background placed in the tomb following a natural or sacrificial death to act as an earthly stand-in for the goddess Lady 9 Grass, says Jill Leslie McKeever-Furst of the Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia. Important Mixtec officials possibly intended the woman to take ceremonial spinning and weaving tools to the goddess in the afterlife to ensure the continued fertility of her people, McKeever-Furst suggests.

Special treatment of Skeleton A, indicated by the large amount of jewelry and other valuable goods in the tomb, probably derived from the disease and deformity suffered by the woman, which the Mixtec considered an embodiment of the supernatural life force, she contends.

Or, according to Cecelia F. Klein of the University of California, Los Angeles, Skeleton A may have been a man who dressed up in the garb of a goddess or legendary woman to authorize and sanctify the decisions of local political leaders.

Such a practice existed among the Aztecs, Klein notes. An Aztec goddess associated with the creation and fertilization of the universe — essentially a counterpart of Lady 9 Grass — wore an official costume that included a skeletal face mask and a weaving batten. A high-ranking man received the title and costume of this goddess and impersonated her at important functions, such as the passing of power from one Aztec ruler to another.

"Skeleton A could have been a male," Geoffrey McCafferty acknowledges. "We hope to pursue a DNA analysis of these bones."

**T**he reassessment of Tomb 7 has also elicited heated criticism. Two archaeologists at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor charge that the McCaffertys parlayed a political concern about inequities heaped upon women in ancient and modern societies into a "massaging" of Caso's data to promote a vision of once-powerful Mixtec women.

First, argue Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, the artifacts found around a skeleton cannot pinpoint its sex. "Skeleton A was identified as a muscular male . . . and he will remain such until a competent forensic specialist restudies the skeleton and disagrees," they hold.

Second, Skeleton A may actually contain bones from more than one individual, and the association of it or any other skeleton in the tomb with specific artifacts remains unclear, according to the Michigan researchers.

Symbolic carvings on the miniature battens in Tomb 7 suggest that they were part of a bundle of objects often buried with high-ranking male priests, Flannery and Marcus contend. As conduits to the supernatural world, priests in Mixtec society used these implements to foretell the future of important individuals, read omens, name elite children according to the days of a 260-day calendar, and preserve historical and genealogical information about royal families.

The archaeological record has a long history of manipulation in the name of various social causes, such as Marxism and anticolonialism, Flannery and Marcus point out. The McCaffertys have now added to that list the correction of social injustices to women, they assert.

The main injustice that needs correction is the long-standing neglect of evidence suggesting that Tomb 7 and other Mesoamerican burials celebrated female deities and perhaps contained the bodies of women as well, the McCaffertys respond.

Laura M. Finsten of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, agrees. "That royal women not only were repositories of symbolic power but also wielded political power in their own right may have been a key to the Mixtecs' success in a dynamic political landscape," she remarks. □