

18

MESOAMERICAN INFLUENCES IN THE IMAGERY OF NORTHERN MEXICO

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This chapter examines symbolic imagery from archaeological sites in northern Mexico, primarily the state of Durango, where painted figures found on large rocks may have formed parts of sanctuaries. Images attributed to a group of hunter-gatherers known as the Zacateco appear to show Mesoamerican influences. Other imagery suggests distinct influences from the southwestern United States via Paquimé in Chihuahua. Some influences may have been brought to Durango by traders traveling between Mesoamerica and Paquimé (see also Weigand 1997).

EXAMPLES FROM DURANGO AND COAHUILA

Communication between northern Mexico and the Chalchihuites area dates from Preclassic times, with the exchange of turquoise from the southwestern United States to Tula passing through the modern states of Durango and Zacatecas (Weigand 1997:28). With deviations to the east, this route was maintained until the Late Post-classic period. A sanctuary of basalt rocks occurs in San Quintín Canyon, Durango, at the edge of a great rocky outcrop known as La Breña. Here is found a dartlike petroglyph commonly associated with the cult of Ehécatl, the Mesoamerican god of

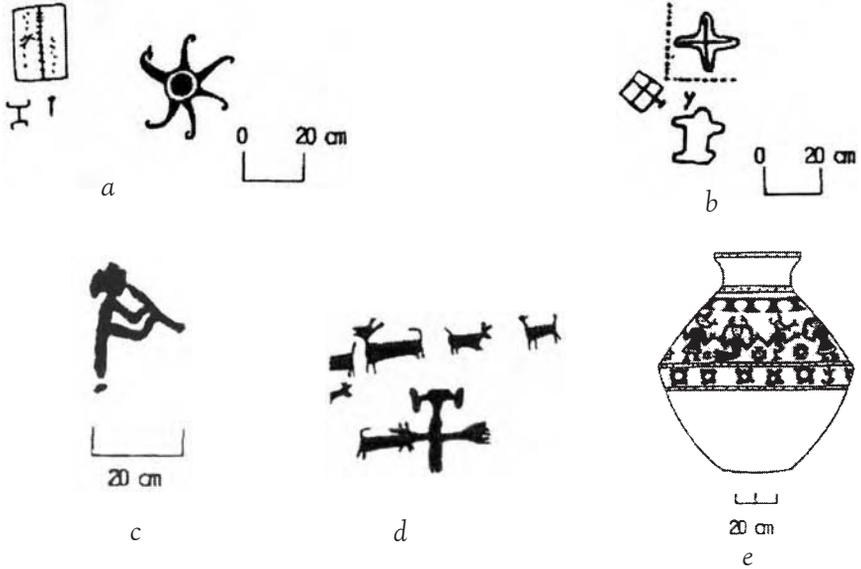


Figure 18.1. (a) Engraving associated with the Ehécatl, the wind spirit in central Mexico, from San Quintín Canyon, Durango; (b) cruciform figure from a site in the Sierra Madre of Durango; (c) figure of Kokopelli from Piedra de Amolar, adapted from Punzo Díaz (1999); (d) butterfly-style hairdo found at Tepehuanes, adapted from Lazalde Montoya (1987); (e) jar from La Ferreria, Durango, depicting a figure with only one leg, adapted from Guevara Sánchez (in press).

wind (Figure 18.1a). The Zacatecos people carefully carved the figure into the wall of the site, which at the time formed part of the territory of Nombre de Dios.

Some of the Mesoamerican travelers who left the Chalchihuites area probably headed north, which would explain the diffusion of these rock art designs. This appears to have been the case at Site 8 in the Sierra Madre, cited in the work of Jesús Fernando Lazalde Montoya (1987:144), an amateur archaeologist who has undertaken investigations in the state of Durango. Designs on some of the rock paintings resemble those found on ceramics from Paquimé. These include a design with a rectangular base divided by diagonal lines that may represent the ball game and a cruciform design associated in central Mexico with representations of precious materials, usually gold (Figure 18.1b) (León Portilla 1997:18). Other meanings may also exist for these figures, such as their association with Venus in the southwestern United States.

Another interesting case involves the image of the flute player known in the U.S. Southwest as Kokopelli (Punzo Díaz 1999:51), or Kokolipau. This figure appears at many archaeological sites in the region, including Piedra de Amolar 1 (Figure 18.1c), where it co-occurs with other figures.

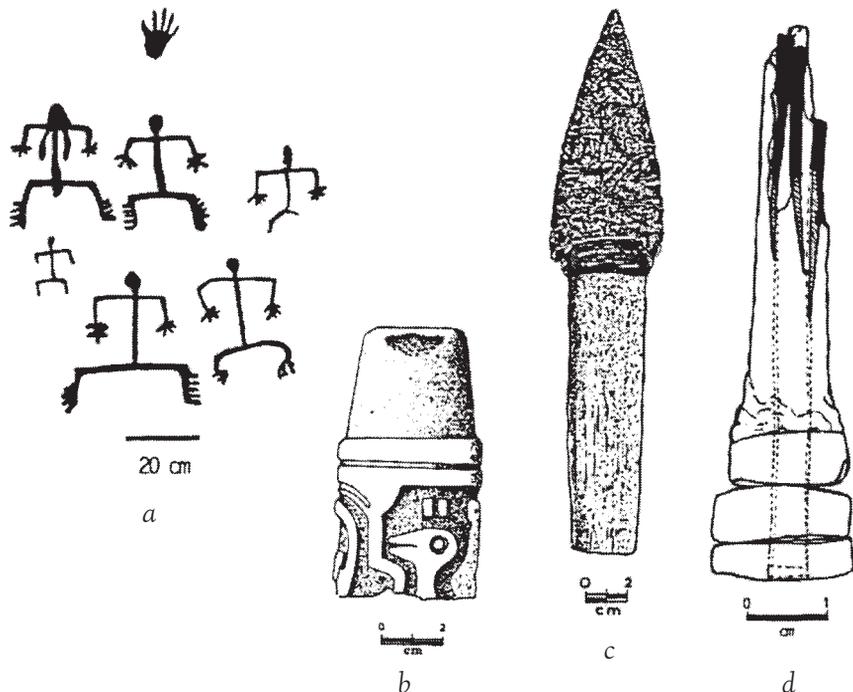


Figure 18.2. (a) Dancers with braids and leather anklets similar to those worn by some Pueblo groups in the southwestern United States, adapted from Lazalde Montoya (1987); (b) polychrome sherd from the coastal cultures, found at La Ferrería, Durango, adapted from Guevara Sánchez (in press); (c) hafted knife from Candelaria Cave, adapted from Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda, Maldonado-Koerdell, and Martínez del Río (1956:fig. 13); (d) spear guard from Candelaria Cave, adapted from Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda, Maldonado-Koerdell, and Martínez del Río (1956:fig. 43).

J. Charles Kelley (1976:30) reported the presence of a cult that worshipped Tezcatlipoca among the Chalchihuites culture. Evidence of this cult may be present at La Ferrería in Durango and at the archaeological site known at Schroeder (Guevara Sánchez in press). This may be the same deity some nomadic groups from northern Durango associated with whirlwinds that appeared on the plains. This deity is commonly depicted with only one foot and may have been venerated to avoid potential danger. Designs corresponding to such a personage appear on the ceramics of La Ferrería. In these designs, the individual appears to float on air. The single-legged figure that appears on some jars from La Ferrería (Figure 18.1e) may be related to Cachiripa, the indigenous name for the spirit associated with whirlwinds, which Pablo Martínez del Río (1954) considered to have Zacatecos roots.

Some of the rock art imagery found in the foothills may have been inspired by ceremonies practiced in the southwestern United States. For example, a painting at

the site known as SM2, documented by Lazalde Montoya (1987), depicts a group of human figures dancing. Some of these figures have long braids and appear to wear anklets or leather bands around their ankles (Figure 18.2a), a style still practiced by some Pueblo tribes.

Another site in the region of Guatimapé, Durango, is El Molino. This place must have been of considerable importance to the people of La Ferrería and was used by Kelley (1997) as the final phase name of his chronology. From approximately A.D. 1350–1400, this region saw strong influences from the Pacific Coast. A trade route from the coast connected the coastal regions of Sinaloa with central Durango, through which Mesoamerican groups traveled to La Ferrería and surrounding settlements. Copper objects produced by West Mexican techniques have been found at these sites, as well as spindle whorls and painted objects similar to those described by Gordon Ekholm (1942:89) from Guasave. Although La Ferrería has been intensively looted, pottery sherds of a type known as Amole Polychrome have recently been found (Guevara Sánchez in press) (Figure 18.2b). These could have arrived at the site by way of the route that connects the coast with El Molino and La Ferrería.

In the area surrounding El Molino in central Durango is a cave known as the Cave of Monos, which depicts a battle scene. Painted by an indigenous group, the mural shows a group of indigenous people quarreling with another group that includes a number of horsemen. This painting, which we call “The Battle Mural,” documents an attack by Europeans against an indigenous group in which the former emerged victorious. Significantly, between the figures another figure can be seen dancing in an animated manner. The individual is adorned with large feathers that hang from both arms horizontal to the body (Guevara Sánchez 2002:102). Similar figures are found in the cave paintings of Sonora. These may correspond to some indigenous dances from the southwestern United States in which dancers imitate the movements of birds.

This Battle Mural also contains the figure of a person wearing a headdress similar to those worn by some Pueblo katsinas. Both the birdlike dancer described earlier and this figure appear dressed to participate in some type of ritual designed to influence the course of events. This may be another influence brought to Durango over trade routes from the southwestern United States.

Near the highway that runs from Durango to El Zape is a small archaeological site with rock engravings located in Tepehuanes country on the banks of Potreritos Creek. Based on the designs, the site appears to have been occupied by people of the Zacatecos Culture, an influential Mesoamerican group. Between the engraved figures is the representation of a funerary bundle, approximately oval in form. Also recognizable are the straps used to wrap the body. The most interesting aspect of this image, however, is the head, which is outside the bundle, separate from the body, and adorned with a *copilli*, or feathered crown, a symbol of royalty in central Mexico. This provides further evidence of Mesoamerican influence in the designs of this region. This site on Potreritos Creek was probably occupied by an indigenous

group that had seen this symbol used as a mark of power and superior ancestry by members of another culture and placed it on the body of one of their dead leaders.

Not far from the Tepehuanes River in Durango is the small town of El Zape. Here is found a shelter with high, vertical walls where some type of solar ritual was held. Jaime Ganot Rodríguez and Alejandro Peschard Fernández (1997:237–242), physicians and dedicated avocational archaeologists, have studied this ceremonial site and identified a solar alignment on the spring equinox.

This area is also known for its many exceptional rock art depictions recorded by J. Alden Mason (1961). Engravings at one rockshelter, referred to as Las Pitarrillas by the local community, are very well preserved. They consist mostly of small rectangles with patterns at their centers, some with fringes extending from the central designs. One hypothesis, which will be tested in another study, is that the patterns represent cloaks used by a group of Zacatecos, with each design associated with an extended family or clan.

Approaching the Tepehuanes River and close to the previous site is Site RT4, following the nomenclature of Lazalde Montoya. In addition to other engravings, this site includes two important images that appear to represent funerary bundles. Above them occur antlers of a ceremonial nature that appear to represent an elaborate headdress. These headdresses would have been of great ritual importance for hunter-gatherers of the region, and their rock paintings depict figures wearing such headdresses.

Within this collection of Tepehuanes sites is one known as Site 1. Here is found a depiction of a person with a hairstyle typical of a Hopi woman (Guevara Sánchez 1999:147) (Figure 18.1d). This suggests influence from indigenous Pueblo groups in present-day Arizona and New Mexico.

Nearby, in the lake region of western Coahuila, are the important burial sites of Candelaria and Neblina caves, which contained some remarkable features. In the former were found hafted knives (Figure 18.2c) attached to the left arms of the interred in a manner reminiscent of the famous Atlantes statues of Tula (Acosta 1961:224). A sheath (Figure 18.2d) was also found that protected the spears used in ceremonies of self-sacrifice. These may be the work of members of the Zacatecos Culture, although this research is still in progress.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this preliminary study I have highlighted a number of Mesoamerican influences in northern Mexico, focusing on those found in cave rock art. Although I have limited my discussion to the Late Postclassic period, earlier periods may also show important influences.

One possible trade route, perhaps the most important in the study area, was the one that connected the coastal region with the site known as El Molino. Interactions between these areas must have been intense because they left their mark

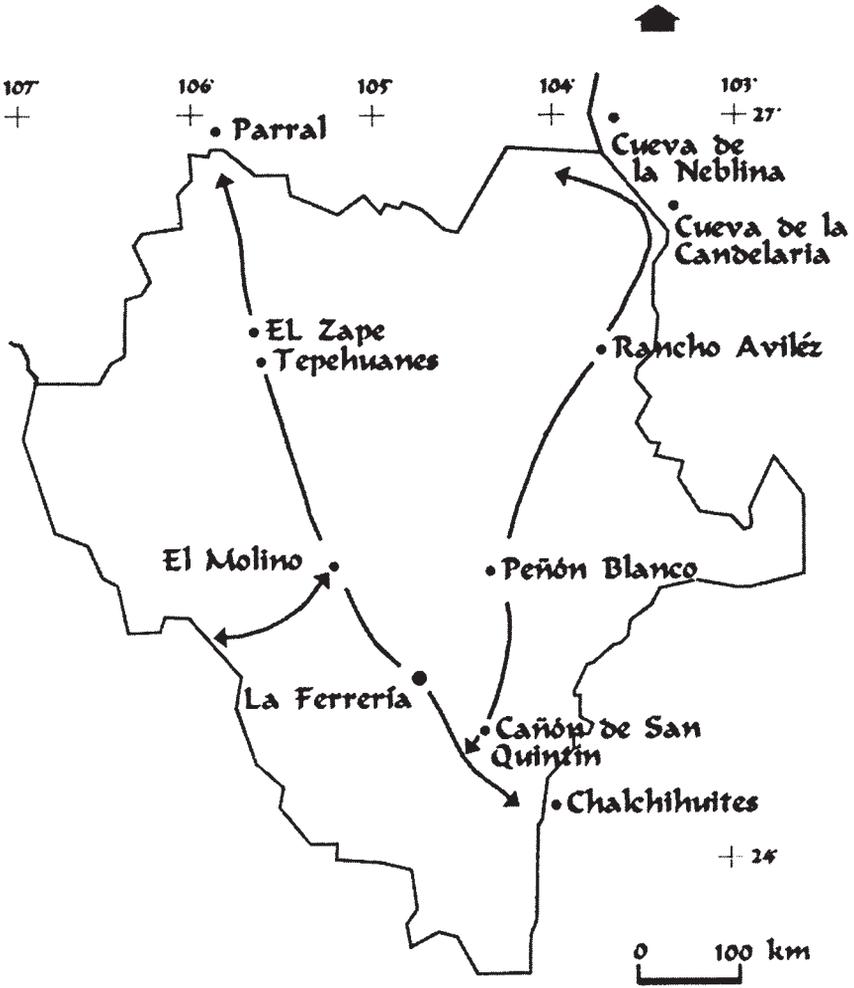


Figure 18.3. Major pre-Hispanic trade routes in the modern state of Durango, northern Mexico.

on trade and cultural patterns, as evidenced by the many influences adopted by the more receptive groups. Another trade route appears to have passed through the Chalkihuites area, extending through Durango in a diagonal direction toward the Tepehuanes region and El Zape. This route would have passed near present-day Parral in the state of Chihuahua. A third route would have entered San Quintín Canyon, continuing through Peñón Blanco, Rancho Aviléz, and Candelaria and Neblina caves, eventually heading toward the site of Paquimé (Figure 18.3).

The tracing of these routes through the state of Durango has just begun. More sites must be located to identify these routes with greater precision. For now, we

must rely on the isolated, albeit interesting, data already collected. Still to be undertaken is a review of the region between the Chalchihuites area and Paquimé, which will be of considerable interest for the cultural study of northern Mexico.

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