THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE
TEOTIHUACAN TLALOC

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The Iconography of the Teotihuacan Tlaloc

Ever since 1882, when Hamy identified an enigmatic Teotihuacan sculpture (Fig. 1) as the representation of the lip and fangs of the Aztec rain god Tlaloc, almost every grotesque supernatural image at Teotihuacan has been indiscriminately labeled Tlaloc. An analysis of Teotihuacan iconography shows that several image clusters representing a number of different deities are identified with Tlaloc in the present-day literature. A reassessment of Tlaloc imagery is, therefore, the essential first step in a study of Teotihuacan iconography.

Tlaloc is the Nahuatl name of the Aztec rain god, who is represented in art by eyes surrounded by rings and by a mustachelike upper lip with long fangs. This conventionalized image is found with little variation in the many Post-Classic codices (Fig. 2) and on stone sculptures. Considering the frequency of Post-Classic Tlaloc images, it is not surprising that Hamy, when confronted with the Teotihuacan sculpture brought to the Musée de l’Homme by Charnay, should have recognized the similarity between its features and those of Tlaloc represented on vessels left as offerings by the Aztec on the volcano Popocatepetl (1882: 420). Among the thousands of figurines found at Teotihuacan in the excavations at the close of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, a large number represented the same goggle-eyed personage. From the evidence of the figurines and effigy vessels, Seler (1912) and Beyer (1922: 278) both concluded that the Aztec deity Tlaloc was worshipped at Teotihuacan.

Thus, as a result of the apparent predominance of Tlaloc in the Teotihuacan pantheon, when the Tepantitla and Tetitla frescoes representing frontal figures pouring streams of water were found in 1942 and 1944, they were identified by Caso (1942) and Armillas (1945) as representations of Tlaloc (Figs. 11, 12). Since both of these figures are represented pouring water and both wear nose ornaments reminiscent of

Fig. 1 Cross of Tlaloc (after Oropeza 1968: 11).

1 Charnay found two such stone carvings in 1880: one of them is in the Musée de l’Homme, the other in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City.
Fig. 2 Tlalocs of the five regions of the world. Codex Borgia, p. 27 (after Seler 1963).

fangs, their association with Tlaloc is understandable. Another mural found at Tepantitla and painted in shades of red became known as the mural of the Red Tlalocs (Fig. 13), even though there was only a very general resemblance between these figures and the other presumed Tlaloc images.

The first exhaustive analysis of the iconography of Tlaloc at Teotihuacan was published by Armillas (1945). Armillas’ list of elements associated with Tlaloc includes a large proportion of Teotihuacan iconography, including the jaguar, serpent, owl, quetzal, butterfly, bifurcated tongue, water lily, triple-shell symbol, spider, eye-of-the-reptile symbol, cross (which Armillas considers to be a Venus symbol), and the year sign. Considering the relatively few works of art known from Teotihuacan in the 1940’s
and the apparent ubiquity of water symbolism, Armillas cannot be blamed for relating most images to the rain god Tlaloc.

Since 1945, however, literally hundreds of Teotihuacan murals, pottery vessels, and sculptures have been found, making more precise identification possible. Despite the availability of all the new material, however, Caso continued in 1966 to follow his earlier (1943) and Armillas' approach, and attributed a large number of symbols to Tlaloc. In his opinion, the basic
type for Tlaloc may be found in the Tetitla Jade Tlalocs and the Tepantitla Tlalocan upper-wall deities. The serpent and the jaguar were assigned by Caso to this type of Tlaloc as its alter egos (Caso 1966: 249–254).

Unlike the Mexican scholars who feel that the culture of Teotihuacan is closely related to the later Toltec and Aztec cultures, and who therefore identify figures in Teotihuacan art by Aztec names, Kubler believes that none of the Post-Classic deities can be found at Teotihuacan. Instead of labeling the figures with Aztec names, Kubler groups them into thematic clusters. His “raingod cluster” (1967: 9) represents a large group of images which are essentially the same as Caso’s Tlaloc. The studies of Caso and Kubler indicate that a large group of Teotihuacan images deal with water symbolism, but the categories established by both of them are cumbersome in their breadth. It is not necessary, however, to conclude with Caso and Armillas that all figures in watery contexts represent Tlaloc or to agree with Kubler that none can possibly do so.

It is the purpose of this essay to differentiate those figures that may represent the equivalent of the Post-Classic Tlaloc from the other supernaturals in Teotihuacan iconography. Taking the Codex Borgia representation of Tlaloc as a typical Post-Classic example, an attempt will be made to find the closest

Fig. 5 Teotihuacan Mural. Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Josué Sáenz, Mexico City. Photo by the author.
The Codex Borgia Tlaloc images represent anthropomorphic figures with goggled eyes and curving upper lips with fangs, who from one hand pour water from effigy vessels representing themselves and in the other hold an adje and a serpent representing lightning (Fig. 2). Five such figures are depicted on page 27 of the Codex, representing the Tlaloecs of the five directions of the world. If, besides the facial features, the effigy vessels containing water and the lightning symbols of adje and serpent are also considered to be essential features of Tlaloc, then only a small group of Teotihuacan representations qualify for such identification.

There can be little doubt that a mural fragment found by Séjourné at Tetitla represents the Codex Borgia type of Tlaloc (Fig. 3). Besides the typical facial features, the figure carries an effigy vessel in one hand, painted blue, indicating that it contains water, and in the other a wavy, spearlike object. Because of the similarity of the undulating spear to later lightning serpents, Séjourné named the deity a “Lightning Tlaloc” (1966b: 278). A figure similar to the Tetitla Lightning Tlaloc is represented in the talud border at Tepantitla, but instead of a staff he carries two vessels in his hands (Fig. 4). That these vessels contain water is made eminently clear by the emblems placed on top of them, which Caso (1967: 170) has identified as rain glyphs. The Tetitla and Tepantitla figures are frontal half-figure representations, but there are also examples of full-figure anthropomorphic Tlaloecs similar to the Codex Borgia representations. A mural fragment in the Sáenz collection in Mexico represents Tlaloc pouring water from an effigy vessel and carrying a lightning serpent surrounded by sparks and flames (Fig. 5).

If these figures carrying staffs and vessels are taken to be typical Tlaloc representations, what other features do they have in common? All have concentric rings representing eyes, an upper lip turned up at the corners with two long fangs in the corners and three short ones in the middle, a headdress tied in five knots at the forehead, and two out of three have a water lily emerging from the mouth. The Tlaloecs represented on the effigy vessels usually have a stylized year sign in their headdress (Caso 1967: Cap. 4, Figs. 4, 5); this consists of a rectangular panel topped by a triangle between two volutes. A cluster of these characteristics, but with some elements missing, reappears in two other Tetitla murals (Séjourné 1966b: Figs. 136, 142) and in two Zacualpa murals (Séjourné 1959: Figs. 2, 12), and must also be identified with Tlaloc. This personage is also found represented on vessels (Fig. 6) and ceramic figurines (Fig. 7). Many of the representations of Tlaloc on figurines have the year sign in their headdress. Among the figurines, the iconography of Tlaloc is essentially the same as on the murals, with one exception: the eye form in the figurines is not always the concentric circle but sometimes includes a human eye under the ring. The inconsistency of use found in the figurines does not exist in the more important medium of mural painting. As will be seen later, the difference in the eye forms is significant.

It is noteworthy that none of the Tlaloc images
Fig. 7 (left) Tlaloc figurines from Zacuala (after Séjourné 1959: Fig. 76).

Fig. 8 (below) Teotihuacan. Palace of the Jaguars mural. Photo by the author.

Fig. 9 (right) Aztec. Border of east porch. Photo by the author.

Fig. 10 (right, below) Vessels with plano-relief designs (after Séjourné 1966a: Fig. 41).
discussed so far has the bifurcated tongue thought to be associated with Tlaloc by both Caso and Armillas. There is, however, another group of goggle-eyed figures distinguished by a long bifurcated tongue, as, for example, on the border medallion of the Palace of the Jaguars (Fig. 8), on the border of the east porch of Ateteleo (Fig. 9), and on some ceramic vessels (Fig. 10). These figures share the concentric circles for eyes and, in some cases, have the typical Tlaloc mouth. On the other hand, they often have a distinctive mouth treatment: the corner of the upper lip, instead of turning under the fangs, curls up at the two corners in volutes; instead of the five fangs, these figures have three or four fangs of the same size; and, of course, they all have a bifurcated tongue. Figure 1 is a representation of this kind of a mouth. None of
the answer has to be no—they have almost nothing in common. The most famous of these so-called Tlalocs in Teotihuacan mural painting, the upper-wall deity of the Tlalocan patio at Tepantitla (Fig. 11) and the Jade Tlalocs of Tetitla (Fig. 12), obviously represent the same deity. This deity is not as frequently found in Teotihuacan art as the Tlalocs previously discussed, but another example occurs on a vessel in the Brooklyn Museum (Anton 1961: 28). In all three instances, the deity wears a wide-frame headdress with a bird head in the center and a nose bar with several pendant elements similar to fangs. In each case, a half-figure bust emerges from a similarly shaped platform, and two out of three are pouring water from their hands. These figures lack the characteristic Tlaloc facial features, such as the concentric eyes and mustachelike upper lip with fangs, and their bodies, instead of being painted blue, green, or black, as Tlaloc typically is, are painted yellow.² The upper half of the face of the Jade Tlalocs is green, but since the lower half is yellow with red spots and the hands are yellow, the green color probably represents facial paint or a mask. This supposition is supported by a parallel in the Tepantitla image, where the body is also yellow but the deity wears a green mask over the eyes. Thus, the only common element between the Tlaloc images and the Tepantitla and Tetitla deities is the water-fertility association, which is too general in Teotihuacan iconography to be considered a diagnostic trait of any particular deity. These yellow deities are, therefore, fertility deities but not Tlalocs.³

² There are two yellow Tlalocs to my knowledge. One at Zacuala (Séjourné 1959: Fig. 12), carrying corn cobs on its back and a corn stalk in its hands, is a Tlaloc as a vegetation deity, hence the yellow color. The other, on the Tepantitla Tlalocan patio doorway border, is identical with the green Tlalocs in the talud borders. The yellow color of the doorway Tlalocs can be explained as an attempt to relate Tlaloc to the yellow vegetation deity seen in the upper wall. Such internal cross references are characteristic of the murals of Tepantitla.

³ It is argued in a recent study that the yellow deity is an earth, maize, and vegetation goddess or bisexual god (Pastory n.d.).
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Fig. 12 Tetitla. "Jade Tlaloc" (after Séjourné 1956: Fig. 80).

The case against the theory that the Red Tlaloc mural at Tepantitla represents Tlaloc is even more evident (Fig. 13). To begin with, there is no water or fertility connotation at all in this mural, as both the frontal figures on the lower wall and the figures in the net design on the upper wall (Fig. 14) are shown holding weapons. Secondly, none of the typical Tlaloc facial features or headdress elements described earlier occurs. The frontal deity is clearly an anthropomorphic feline with long claws who is associated with war. Although there are few iconographic parallels to this image in Teotihuacan art, the frontal feline represented on a vessel fragment may refer to the same deity (von Winning 1968: Fig. 9). The human figure in the Tepantitla net design with rings over his eyes and carrying a spearthrower is a frequent iconographic type at Teotihuacan. Several figures of this type occur at Atetelco, again carrying weapons or sacrificial knives and hearts (Fig. 15). While the rings over the eyes provide a superficial resemblance to Tlaloc, a very clear distinction is made between Tlaloc and the other goggled figures at Atetelco: Tlaloc, represented on the east porch (Fig. 9), has the concentric-circle eye form, which appears to be a

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3 It is argued in a recent study that the yellow deity is an earth, maize, and vegetation goddess or bisexual god (Paz-tory n.d.).
Fig. 13 Teotitlán. Red Tlalocs mural (after Séjourné 1956: Fig. 34).

Fig. 14 Teotitlán. Red Tlalocs mural, figure in net design (after Séjourné 1956: Fig. 23).

Fig. 15 Atetelco. Figure on north porch (after Séjourné 1956: Fig. 53).

monstrous but organic part of the creature’s face, whereas the human figures on the north porch (Fig. 15) wear the rings as masks covering their own eyes. Therefore, neither the Red Tlaloc deity nor the human figures with goggles, represented at Atetelco and Teotitlán, can be identified as Tlaloc.⁴

Besides the many representations at Teotihuacan, images from outside the city have also been supposed to represent the Teotihuacan Tlaloc. Two clearly Teotihuacan-style images are represented on Stelae 31.

⁴ The Teotitlán Red Tlaloc deity may be the equivalent of the deity represented on the Palenque Temple of the Sun shield and the Maya god of the number 7. The goggled warrior figures cannot be conclusively identified but may be antecedents of disappearing planetary deities similar to Tlaloc-Tlalocatl and Tlalchitoniuh (Pasztory n.d.).
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Besides the many representations at Teotihuacan, images from outside the city have also been supposed to represent the Teotihuacan Tlaloc. Two clearly Teotihuacan-style images are represented on Stelae 31 and 32, recently found at Tikal, but their identification as Tlaloc rests on the mistaken assumption that all figures wearing rings over their eyes are Tlalocs. The figure on Stela 31 (Fig. 16) is carved on a shield carried by a figure dressed in Teotihuacan costume and holding a spearthrower in his other hand. Both the shield figure on Stela 31 and the frontal figure on Stela 32 (Fig. 17) have rings over human eyes, a simple rectangular nose bar, and a headdress consisting of several tiers. The lower tier consists of a row of thornlike points, followed by a row of squares with circles in their center and three or four pendant forms tied with a knot. This latter element is one that the figure shares with Tlaloc B. If there were no other representations of the Tikal shield deity at Teotihuacan, one might conclude that it is a variant of

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Tlaloc B. The very same iconography, however, is found on a vessel in the Diego Rivera collection (Fig. 18). On that vessel, the human face wears the identical nose bar, eye rings, and headdress with three tiers. Most significantly, however, the figure on the vessel carries a shield inscribed with a hand and two crossed spears, and is shown on top of a temple platform. The elements of the shield, crossed spears, and temple, as well as the figure, occur on several other Teotihuacan representations, and in all cases the associations appear to be with weapons and war rather than with water and fertility.5

The fully armed Teotihuacan “ambassador” on Tikal Stela 31, therefore, displays on his shield not the peaceful rain god Tlaloc but the emblem of a war deity. Because no massive Teotihuacan-style architecture is known at Tikal, and Teotihuacan influences are limited to a small platform and burial goods, most students of Teotihuacan-Tikal relations agree that these influences are a result of trade and not of actual colonization (Parsons and Price 1971: 185). And yet, the display of a Teotihuacan war deity on Stela 31, even if not a threat of imminent conquest, must have been eloquent testimony of the military might of Teotihuacan.6

5 The “Tlaloc” on Yaxha Stela 11, carrying a shield and spear, appears to be a combination of the Tikal shield deity and Tlaloc B.
6 Von Winning (1948) and Kubler (1967) have both shown the existence of a cluster of iconographic symbols at Teotihuacan that deal with war, and both consider the shield and crossed spears to be among its basic motifs.

The frequency of goggle-eyed figures and water symbolism in Teotihuacan art has misled investigators into assuming that all figures with these associations represent Tlaloc. Apparently, rings over the eyes are used in Teotihuacan art in a variety of contexts: concentric rings occur on butterfly as well as Tlaloc images, while rings over human eyes characterize several deities and human figures associated with war and sacrifice. The explanation for the significance of the rings over the eyes has to be general enough to account for such a wide variety of contexts. In the Post-Classic period, Tlaloc rings placed over the eyes of the sun god Tonatiuh transformed that deity into Tlalchitonitl, or the setting sun about to disappear into the earth (Tozzer 1937: 116, Fig. 354). The rings in this case signify either the earth and darkness or possibly diminished light. Such an interpretation is supported in Post-Classic iconography by the representation of stars in the night sky as human eyes surrounded by rings. The use of eye rings in the Post-Classic period to represent darkness and earth raises the possibility that it may have had a
Fig. 18 Design from vessel. Diego Rivera Collection, Mexico City (after Séjourné 1966a: Fig. 87).

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With the elimination of a fertility deity, a feline and a shield war deity from the category of rain gods, only the two types of rain-god figures, Tlalocs A and B, remain in Teotihuacan iconography. Covarrubias traced all the Mesoamerican rain-god figures back to the Olmec were-jaguar in a celebrated chart (Fig. 19). His illustrations of the Teotihuacan Tlaloc represent Tlaloc B, with a long tongue. Since he was trying to suggest a jaguar association for Tlaloc, the design chosen to illustrate Teotihuacan (K) shows a Tlaloc flanked by jaguar paws with bared claws. Indeed, a jaguar association seems to accompany many of the Tlaloc B images. At both Teotihuacan and the Palace of the Jaguars, the Tlaloc figures are on the borders of murals in which jaguars are the major subject (Figs. 8, 9). Moreover, the long bifurcated tongue represented on Tlaloc B, thought to be derived from a serpent, is identical with the long tongues of feline figures represented in Teotihuacan art.

In view of these jaguar associations for Tlaloc B, the term Jaguar-Tlaloc is suggested to describe this deity. The headdress of the Jaguar-Tlaloc is similar, though not identical, to the headdress of the Tikal shield deity, which suggests that a relationship was recognized between that water deity and this war deity. Covarrubias may have been correct in tracing the Jaguar-Tlaloc image back to Olmec art. A parallel closer in time to Classic Teotihuacan is the image of the rain god Cocio on Monte Albán (also derived from an Olmec prototype), which has a conspicuously long tongue emerging from a jaguar maw (Fig. 20). Covarrubias saw this Monte Albán–Teotihuacan relationship and traced the famous Tlaloc represented on the Plancarte vessel (Fig. 19R) directly back to a Monte Albán vessel. The characteristics of
Cocijo were developed at Monte Albán prior to the development of the Tlaloc image at Teotihuacan and may have been the source of the Jaguar-Tlaloc image. This hypothesis is supported by finds at Teotihuacan of Monte Albán urns dating to the Transition between Monte Albán II and IIIA, or A.D. 300–350 (Millon 1967: 42).

Tlaloc A, however, cannot be fitted into Covarrubias’ chart, does not appear to represent the jaguar, and cannot be related to the Tikal shield deity. The lip curved up at the corner of Tlaloc A is unlike the jaguar maws represented in Teotihuacan art, which are consistently turned down, and the deity lacks the long tongue. The only clue to the animal nature of Tlaloc A is provided by a single profile representation in the talud border of the Tlalocan patio at Tepantitla (Fig. 21). Here a typical Tlaloc A face is attached to a swimming body that consists of segments and ends in a bifurcated tail. The similarity of this combination to figure DE on Chiapa de Corzo bone 3 is striking (Fig. 22). Both are represented swimming in water, with pug noses, upcurved lips framing a row of fangs, outlined eyes, and streaming hair. The body of the Chiapa de Corzo figure consists of overlapping disks and ends in a bifurcated tail, which, in a visual pun, corresponds to the headdress of a rump mask. Figure DE is accompanied by a swimming creature whose body also consists of similar circle segments and whose large head, seen from above, and dentition identify it as an alligator (Agrinier 1960: 17–19). While the date of the Chiapa de Corzo bone carving is not precisely known, it is definitely post-Olmec and has some Izapan characteristics. Agrinier found that the best parallels to the figure—the upper right-
Fig. 20 (left) Monte Albán. Cocijo urn (after Caso and Bernal 1952: Fig. 15).

Fig. 21 (below) Tepantitla. Tlalocan patio, profile Tlaloc in talud border. Drawing by Carol Badner.
hand figure on Altar 10 at Kaminaljuyú, the carved boulder at Tonalá, and the Piedra Labrada stela—are all Pre-Classic or Proto-Classic in date. Miles dated the Chiapa de Corzo bone carvings to Division 3, 300 B.C. – A.D. 100 (1965: 257). A similar fanged personage may also be represented on a Mirafloros phase stone vessel from Kaminaljuyú (Coe 1967: Pl. 10). While these Izapan images appear to represent the same or related deities, their significance has not yet been determined. In general, they are thought to refer to the earth and water. Agrinier concluded that Figure DE on the Chiapa de Corzo bone represented a water deity in a skeletal death aspect (1960: 18).

The similarity of the Tepantitla border Tlaloc to the Chiapa de Corzo anthropomorphic alligator suggests that Tlaloc A may be derived from the image of an alligator originating in post-Olmec or Izapan art. The body of the profile Tlaloc of Tepantitla is reminiscent of the tail of the rattlesnake, but none of the Tlaloc A images has a serpent tongue, which would be expected if an ophidian form were their only source. The lack of a tongue is, however, entirely consistent with an alligator identification. One of the major iconographic changes between Olmec and Izapan art is the abandonment of the jaguar as the major animal representative of the supernatural and the introduction of reptilian and ophidian imagery. Tlaloc A may therefore be called the Crocodile-Tlaloc.

The crocodile origin of the Crocodile-Tlaloc at Teotihuacan not only accounts for its smiling lips, dentition, and lack of long tongue, but also makes sense in terms of its significance. In Mesoamerican mythology, the crocodile is the symbol of the earth, *par excellence*; the world is visualized as a large crocodile floating in a lake covered with water lilies (Thompson 1950: 72). In keeping with this belief, the earth is represented in Post-Classic Central Mexican art by a crocodilian Earth Monster. In Aztec art, the Earth Monster and Tlaloc share a number of characteristics, the most telling of which is that both may be represented on the bottom of sculptures or vessels as symbols of the earth. The Earth Monster figure on the bottom of the famous statue of Coatlicue has many features characteristic of Tlaloc. At Teotihuacan, no Earth Monster image is known, because the Crocodile-Tlaloc, with the water lily in its mouth, was the water and earth god at the same time. Not only do trees occasionally grow out of the body of the Crocodile-Tlaloc, indicating that he represents the earth (Fig. 6), but, in a striking parallel with the Aztec custom of representing the earth at the bottom of vessels, the image at the bottom of the famous Las Colinas bowl is a Crocodile-Tlaloc with the knotted headdress and water lily in the mouth (Fig. 23).

Since the rain god Tlaloc is such an important deity in the agriculturally oriented Mesoamerican religion, the presence of two separate rain gods at Teotihuacan needs explanation. The Jaguar-Tlaloc image is related to a group of net-jaguars associated both with weapons and war and with water and fertility (von Winning 1968). While scholars have tended to emphasize either one or the other aspect, the net-jaguar is clearly equally related to both. In a

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7 Badner (1972) demonstrates the dramatic parallels between Chavin and Izapan art, and suggests that the new iconographic elements in Mesoamerica may have a South American source.

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8 Séjourné suggests that an incised figure on a pottery fragment represents the Earth Monster (1956: Fig. 48). So far as I know, no other representations of this figure are known, and its identification is questionable.

9 The Jaguar-Tlaloc and net-jaguar are not the only images related to war at Teotihuacan. There appears to be another cluster of war imagery which includes a raptorial bird, dog, Xolotl figures with ringed eyes carrying weapons and sacrificial knives, and the Tikal shield deity (Pasztory n.d.).

10 Badger’s study (1972) indicates that the crocodilian fertility deity with the grinning mouth found at Izapa has a parallel (or possible source) in Chavín art. An unusual iconographic motif shared by Teotihuacan and Chavín art, without an Izapan intermediary, is the stream of water containing disembodied eyes which emerges from the mouths of some Tlalocs at Teotihuacan and from the mouths of grotesque crocodile figures at Chavín. Considering another set of parallels between Mesoamerica and South America during the late Pre-Classic period—the shaft-tomb burial complex of Western Mexico, Colombia, and Ecuador—one begins to see that this was a period of flux in Mesoamerica with an apparent receptivity to new ideas. Such a period of cross-fertilization may account for the later consolidation and flowering of the Classic cultures in Mexico and the Mochica in Peru.
Crocodile-Tlalocs refer to the way in which the rain gods are supposed to produce rain by pouring water from vessels and lightning by hitting these vessels with their staffs (Rands 1955: 344-6). The implication of the Net-Jaguar-Tlaloc group suggests a direct association with water and warfare and a possible relationship with a sacrificial warrior cult.

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