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Figuring out the Aztecs

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Abstract

This project looks at various Mesoamerican artwork with a strong focus on Aztec figurines and sculptures. I take a closer look at the meaning behind the figurines and their importance to Aztec cultures. With religion being an important aspect in Mesoamerican culture, I explore a few Aztec gods and goddesses while explaining who they are and how they are worshiped in their everyday life. There is also a section of this project dedicated to modern figurines and sculptures with the intention to show the relation between the past and modern cultures.

Introduction

The Aztec Empire formed around the mid 1400s and was the last big society before the Spanish invaded Mexico in the mid 1500s (Gormley 2002). They were also known as the “Triple Alliance,” which consists of the Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan, all being Nahuatl speaking cities (Hodge 1998). This empire is located in Mesoamerica, a region that once spanned from modern day central Mexico to Central America, and a small bit of the northern countries of South America (see Figure 1).

Sources state that the outreach of the empire is difficult to identify since there are limited key structures such as walls or roads (Hodges 1998). This indicates that the empire most likely focused on securing significant locations, most likely for valuable resources, rather than a large defined area that denotes land capital (Hodge 1998). Hodge also wrote about there being a few locations that had higher concentrations of material object and researchers were able to identify a high level of craftsmanship (1998). Through surveys and excavation, archaeologists were able to identify the empire having various crafting specializations. One of those specializations being making and sculpting ceramics and figurines (see Figure 5) based off the numerous large workshops excavated (Hodge 1998).

The slow decline of the Aztec civilization started around 1512 with the invasion of Spain in the New World (Gormley 2002). The Aztecs were conquered and were slowly forced into integrating with the Spanish into a more European lifestyle (Nichols and Evans 2009).

Purpose

Figurines and sculptures had important roles in the everyday lives of the Aztecs. This includes not only the small sculptures, but the large structural ones as well. Hodge stated that a distinct characteristic of the Aztec period had to do with its monumental art style, and that includes the carvings in the boulder structures (1998). Figurines were used for a variety of reasons and on a wide variety of occasions that include toys, commemorative purposes, religious rituals, and much more (Hodge 1998). At one point figurines were used to try and differentiate between different social status, but this did not last and was soon forgotten (Overholtzer 2017).

Overholtzer found that there were high levels of figurine fragments around certain places, one of them being around the sweatbaths (2017). This was most commonly due to midwives and healers conducting curative rituals in the sweatbaths. Smaller figurines or sculptures would be used as adornments, usually with the intention to call for the blessing of a deity for good luck, protection, or another specific outcome (Overholtzer 2017).

There is a developing association between bird figurines (see Figure 4) and children. Bird figurines have been found around and under the cranium of child skulls which leads researchers to believe there is a correlation between the two (Overholtzer 2017). There are some bird figurines with perforations on them that alludes to them being used as pendants. These figurines tend to be around children or in areas where they are more likely to be in. This is most likely due to the ritual deposition of where children play and leave their toys (Overholtzer 2017).

Figures



Figure 1: Map of the Aztec Empire

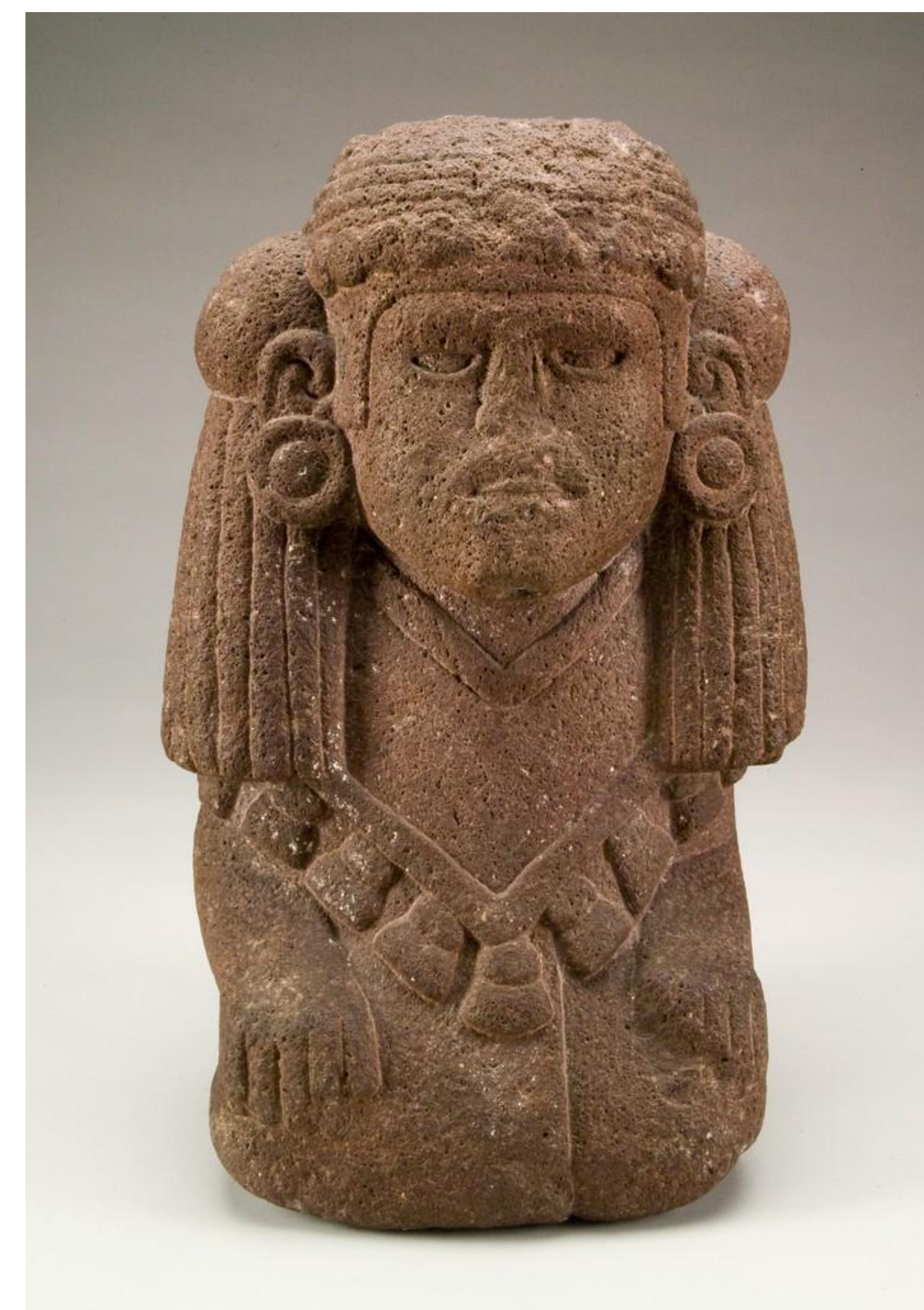


Figure 2: Chalchiuhtlicue, the female goddess for water (Baltimore Museum of Art)

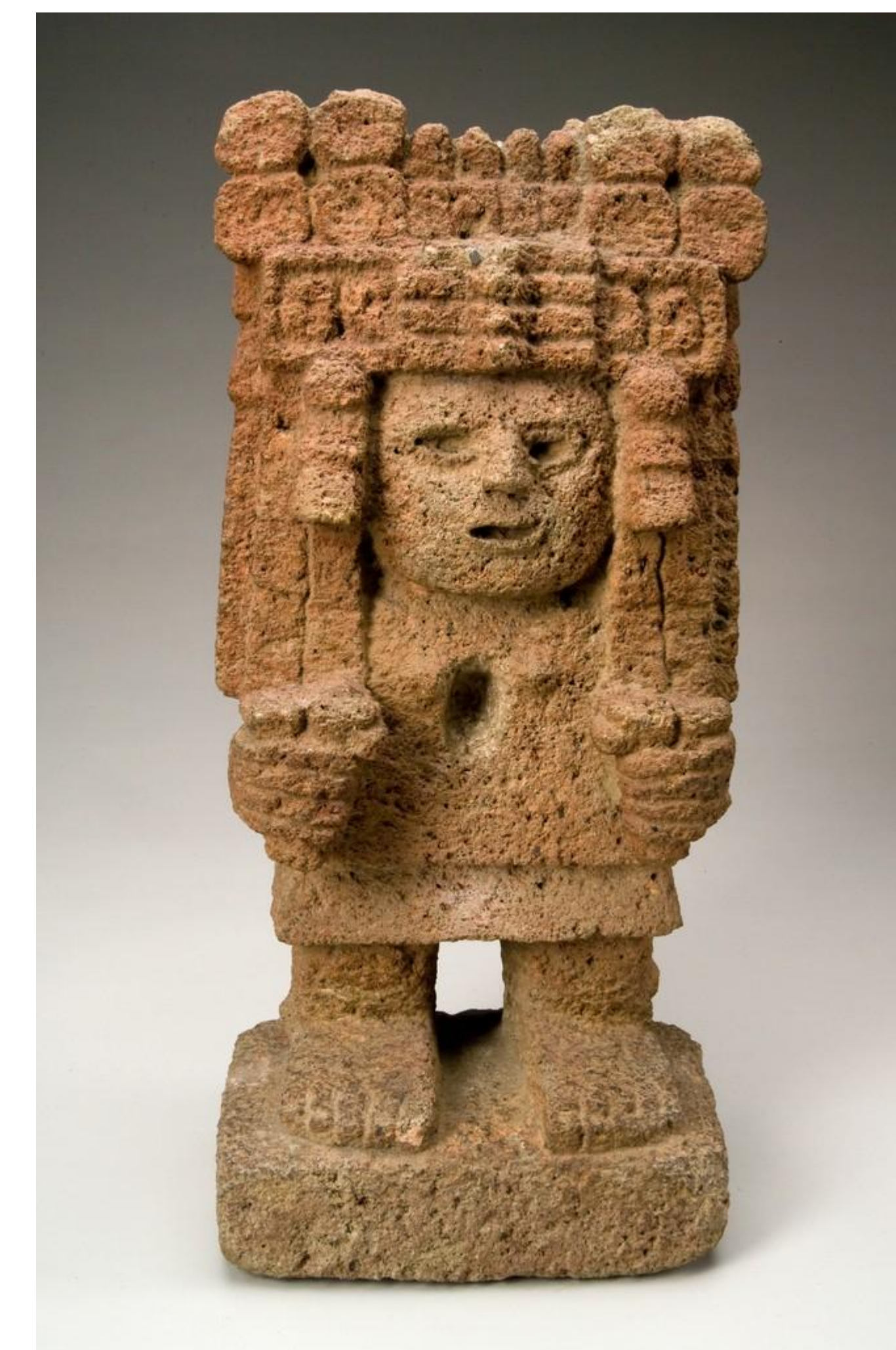


Figure 3: Chicomecoatl, the female maize and sustenance spirit

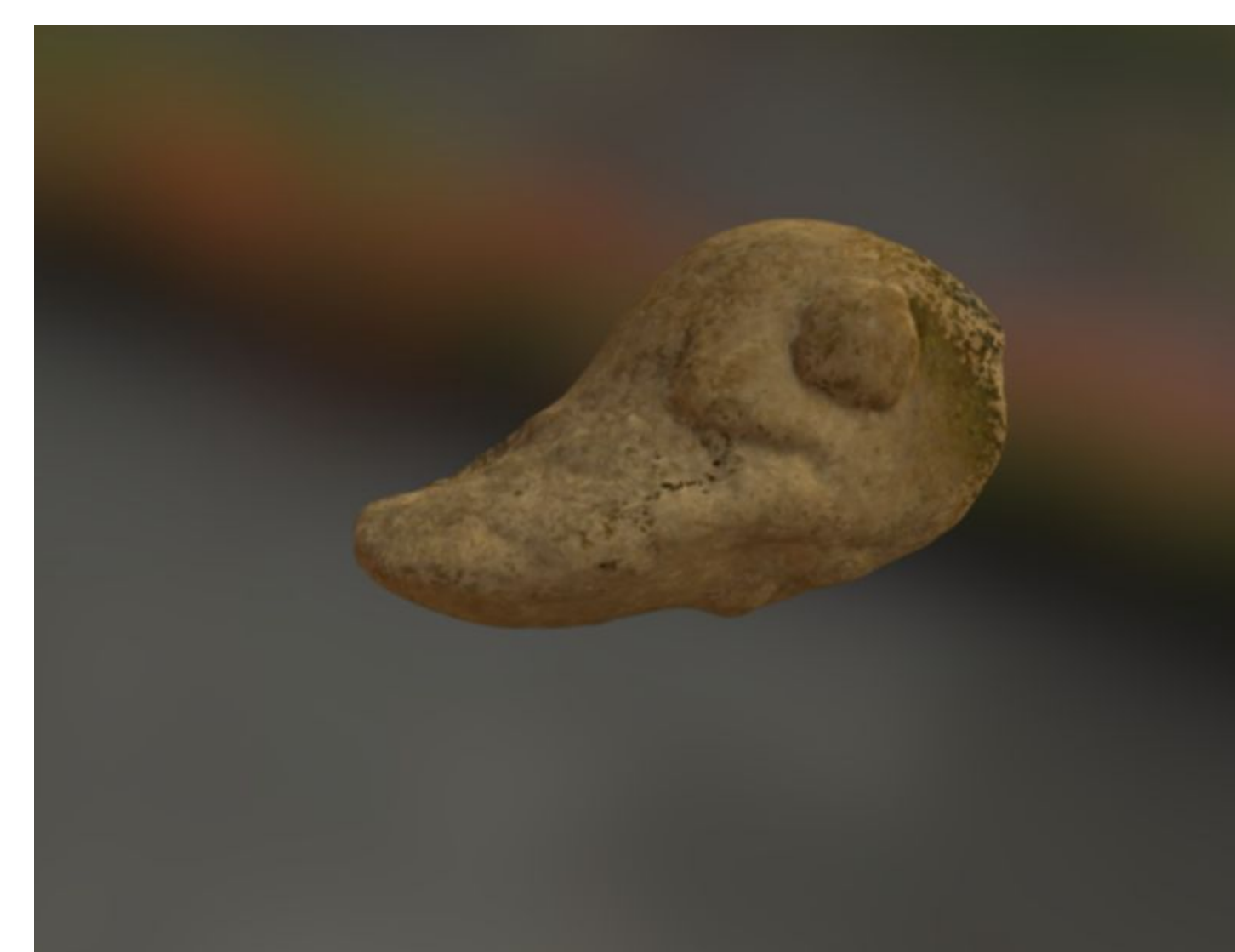


Figure 4: Aztec bird figurine



Figure 5: Aztec figurine

Deities

Religion is an important aspect of the Aztec Empire, they relied on and worshiped numerous deities for everything in their lives. They believed in a balance between their world and the world of the deities and felt that they should have offerings and pay tribute in order to thank the deities for their generosity (Dehouve 2018). When looking at figurines, there can be multiple versions of the same deity, but Overholtzer states that the various figurines and sculptures were most likely modeled after people who were paying tribute to those deities by dressing up like them (2017). Since there are a multitude of deities in Aztec culture, they are categorized by their general abilities and identified by what they are adorned with. Their adornments and features are correlated with their concept or power (Dehouve 2018).

Chalchiuhtlicue is the Aztec goddess for all things water related. She is seen to be part of all Aztec life from birth to death (Dehouve 2018). There are water rituals when babies are born and cleansing rituals when people die and Chalchiuhtlicue presides over both rituals and everything in between that involves water (Dehouve 2018). Chalchiuhtlicue is also seen as a nurturing goddess due to her relation with food and drink. She provides the necessary water for the food to grow and is the base for all drinks. This makes Chalchiuhtlicue related to Chicomecoatl (see Figure 3), the Aztec spirit of maize and sustenance, due to the nurturing nature and the relation to food (Dehouve 2018 & Paulinyi 2013).

Then and Now

Although the Aztec Empire existed in the 1400s, there are bits of their culture that relate to Christian aspects. Aztec figures and modern day Christian figures are both honored and worshipped for their protections and generosity. While the rituals of how this is done can be different, some of the core values remain the same. An example of this would be the water rituals when children are born, this can be seen as a similar value and ritual for Christians when they baptise their children. The Aztec figurines of their deities serve the same purpose as the religious figures of Christianity. While the rituals can vary significantly, sacrifices or offerings are made in both cultures.

Another similarity between the Aztecs and modern day would be the use of figurines as talismans. The Aztecs would wear small figurines or sculptures on their body as a symbol of the deities protecting them. This is similar to Christians using a rosary to signify their religion and God watching over them.

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