



Drawing by Néstor Mora Alvarez, Courtesy of El Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH)-National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico

**The Calendar Stone at Tamtoc and  
Spatially Related Symbols of Hegemonic Power in the City**  
Michael A. McAdams, Co-editor, *Urbana: Urban Affairs and Public Policy*

About a year ago, I visited the newly opened archeological zone of Tamtoc in the State of San Luis Potosí in Mexico. I was impressed by many things at this site, but particularly by a carved stone relief near the spring at the edge of the river, which defines the perimeter of the settlement. The relief which is known as *el monolito de Tamtoc* (the monolith of Tamtoc) or *la Piedra Calendárica de Tamtoc--Monumento 32* (the Calendar Stone of Tamtoc, Monument 32—the official title) which was recently excavated (February 2005) represents a significant find on multiple levels. The featured “glyph” of this volume is a detailed drawing by Néstor Mora Alvarez of the relief of the Stone Calendar (Monument 32) which brings more clarity to its carvings than a photograph of the object. As in previous volumes, the associated ‘glyph’ is a springboard for a broader discussion of various elements of urbanism.

The relief monument is dated from 1150 to 700 B.C.E. and is linked with the Olmec culture (previously thought to be located exclusively in lower Mexico) and not the Huasteca culture (the culture associated with much later settlements at Tamtoc); changing dramatically the previous commonly perceived geographical extent of the Olmec. The central figure represents a sacrificial priest (woman/man, but predominately female with a jaguar face or mask—probably indicative of a shaman as an intermediary of the underworld thus the jaguar mask), who is surrounded on both sides by two decapitated women from which blood or water stream from them, who appear to be floating or in a transitory state. There are 13 streams from the figures, representing a 13 month calendar. The figures are standing on skulls, presumed to be a reference to the cycle of life and death. The birds in the center represent the four corners of the earth. The symbols found in this relief are archetypical ones of life (blood and water), death, sacrifice, spiritual intermediation and transcendence, which are found in Mayan religions, Christianity,

Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, and are potent, but also volatile metaphors which rest on a hierarchical authority--both spiritual and earthly. The monument being found near a main spring and related hydraulic works for irrigation at Tamtoc, presumably built by the Olmec, is not inconsequential but essential to the establishment and maintenance of power by the leaders of the village. It can be presumed that the leaders were fully aware of the audacious nature of this relief, its possible impact on the villagers and apparently felt a need to solidify their control over the populous with a daring statement.

An implied spatial message of the monolith, since it is placed near a spring and associated irrigation works, by the leaders of the settlement is that “water is the ‘lifeblood’ of our settlement and the reason that the citizens of the settlement can avail themselves to its benefits is related to our leadership in constructing hydraulics for irrigation and determining the time of planting through the calendar we developed.” This message’s vehicle is a collection of powerful spiritual metaphors that would have been known to the villagers of Tamtoc which would have cemented or sanctified the role of the leaders/priests as being the providers of one of the basic elements of city public welfare—water. The monolith also attests to the importance of women in society as the ultimate source of life and also of importance of female leadership, hence the predominately female sacrificial priest as the overseer of the process of life including time and its resources (in this case water.) Ultimately, this monument is one of a symbol of power to remind the citizens of this settlement who is responsible for agricultural prosperity—which was of prime importance to settlements in this time period. Thus, it could be similar (but more palpable) to signs in the Modern Era stating “this building was constructed through the assistance of \_\_\_\_\_ (government funding agency, non-profit agency or individual(s).)” There are many examples of water resources being linked to a particular urban power structure in the symbols of the city. In Greek and Roman cities, fountains were often constructed by wealthy individuals to link their influence to the prosperity of the city. In Ottoman times, fountains were built around the capital city of Istanbul/Constantinople by the Sultans, the Sultan’s family or wealthy individuals for the benefit to the local populations, but also to make them aware who was the source of social welfare. The most prominent example of public works related to water which are considered art work in the ancient world would be the aqueducts in areas of the former Roman Empire. They ‘speak’ dramatically to the importance of the authority of the Romans in providing for the welfare of its citizens—but not as ethereal or encompassed in mythical symbols as the linkage found in the relief in Tamtoc. The Romans were not subtle in their message of who is the power in providing for the public welfare of cities.

In the Pre-Modern city, public art often had a symbolic message to the its populous and to the outside world. It was used to convey in an urban setting messages of : the authority of a certain ruler over a city; the wealth and generosity of a wealthy citizen; a shared major event; the connection between the rulers as spiritual intermediates between the gods or the Christian/Judaic or Islamic God and earthly life; or the position of the city at larger scales. The overall message was one of myriad variations of power that the city, its rulers or prominent citizens were

broadcasting to city residents and their known world. In the Modern and Post-Modern city, public art, while it may be ‘art for art sake’, usually transmits a message consciously or sub-consciously of power or authority to its inhabitants or visitors (virtual or actual.) Examples would be: the Statue of Liberty, Washington Monument, Arc de Triumph, Eifel Tower, Big Ben and the Christ the Redeemer statue (overlooking Rio de Janeiro.) Skyscrapers are a collective symbol of hegemonic power of the economic sphere of Modern/Post-Modern cities, replacing those of royalty, religion, and government and blatantly designating them as irrelevant. It is by design that all buildings in Washington, D.C. are low rise and never higher than the Capitol Building. However, this may be anachronistic as the ‘real power behind the throne’ is reflected by the skyscrapers that are surrounding the area. Thus, we have come full circle, from an unearthed slab of carved rock with obscure symbols to our modern symbols in urban areas. The commonality is all spatially placed symbols in cities are indicators of the power structure of the particular time period and thus are important to those studying urbanism.

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